Storytelling and the Art of Email Writing

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About the Authors

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Colin helps clients integrate powerful messaging, grassroots activism and online organizing into creative and effective campaigns. Colin served as Senior Email Campaigner for Advocacy and Elections at Organizing for America (OFA) during the health reform fight, writing for President Obama and helping to integrate online, field, press, and fundraising efforts into one national advocacy campaign. Before OFA, he served as Internet Director for Rep. Joe Sestak's 2006 congressional campaign, and then joined M+R's online advocacy and fundraising team. Colin has also spent time with the New Organizing Institute, British Labour Party, DCCC, and political campaigns at the state and local level.

Steve Daigneault

Steve puts his 15 years of experience as a grassroots organizer, communications specialist and online strategist to work for M+R clients like PBS, the American Cancer Society, and the U.S. Fund for UNICEF. Before coming to M+R, Steve served as the Managing Director for Internet Communications at Amnesty International USA, where he developed an email strategy that nearly tripled Amnesty's list in less than three years; launched award-winning campaign micro-sites; and helped grow Amnesty's online fundraising program, even in the midst of the September 2008 stock market crash. Steve has also been a consultant and strategist for the U.S. Holocaust Museum, Aspen Institute, Audubon Society, SaveOurEnvironment.org, Opportunity Agenda, and United Nations Association.

Storytelling and the Art of Email Writing

Andy Goodman is the perfect lunch speaker for a non-profit conference. He's funny, he's personable, he's engaging, and he has a valuable message for non-profits: They need to tell more stories. Human beings, Goodman says, aren't wired to respond to statistics or wonky policy details – what Goodman calls "non-profit speak." Smart organizations have to adjust by communicating in accessible language, avoiding overreliance on data, and making an emotional connection.

Goodman isn't the only one making the case for storytelling. Our clients – major national charitable non-profits and advocacy organizations who we help with online advocacy and fundraising – bring it up all the time. The argument goes like this: Major non-profits need to tell more stories in their fundraising appeals. Tell the personal story of someone whose life your organization changed, and supporters will see in real, human terms all that you accomplish. They'll be emotionally touched, connected to your issue. And they'll be compelled to give.

The argument for major non-profits using personal stories in email appeals is simple, intuitive, and persuasive. Stories are powerful. But there's a problem: Non-profits are adding stories to their fundraising messages... and they're not working.

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Four Reasons and Three Tests

In 2003, John Sadowsky and Loick Roche, two professors at the Grenoble Graduate School of Business in France, reviewed the major academic literature on storytelling and wrote a paper called, "The power of stories: a discussion of why stories are powerful." Their central four points may sound familiar:

1. **Stories are universal.** They bridge many divides – including cultural, linguistic, and age-related.

2. **Stories mirror human thought.** Humans think in narrative structures, and we remember facts and statistics far better when they're presented to us in story form.

3. **Stories shape our identities.** The stories we tell about ourselves shape who we are.

4. **Our shared stories define our social group.** The stories we share shape and define social connections in our life.

Other academic research has found a related trend: Individuals are more willing to give to save one person than to save thousands. In "The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty," Princeton University

professor Peter Singer highlights one study in which individuals who were shown a picture of a girl named Rokia and told her story were willing to give far more than when asked to help three million hungry children in Malawi.[1]

Non-profits are ready and eager jump to head-long into campaigns built around personal story themes. But here at M+R, we've seen hard data contradict brilliant theories often enough to know that testing is essential, so we put stories to the test for a major national health organization. We created two random 300K groups and pitted two versions against each other:

> **Version 1:** Written using a more general, institutional approach that outlined the organization's accomplishments and need.
>
> **Version 2:** Written using a more personal theme based around the story of one young person diagnosed with the debilitating disease the organization is working to cure.

You might guess that version 2 would raise more money – and you'd be wrong. The institutional version raised more than 4 times as much from almost twice as many donors. The average gift was also much higher for the institutional version. And this test isn't an anomaly.

For a national civil rights organization, we tested a "political" appeal – focused on the supporter's potential role in overturning a controversial law – against a version that told the story of a family affected by that law. Once again, the story version came in second, with a 20% lower click-through rate and a 25% lower response rate. A third, similar test for a major international aid organization found no statistical difference between an institutional appeal and a story-focused appeal. Stories aren't necessarily *hurting* these appeals, but they certainly aren't *helping*.

So why isn't the data saying what science says it should? We've developed a few theories that will help organizations better harness the power of stories in email appeals. So before you craft your next story-based fundraising campaign, read on.

The Personal Story Trap

Embracing storytelling means more than simply dropping a personal story into a fundraising appeal. Too many organizations have a limited understanding of what "storytelling" means – and it leads to what we call "the personal story trap."

Personal stories are only one part of "storytelling."

First of all, if you stumble upon an absolutely amazing story to tell, you don't need to know anything about "storytelling" to want to share it with your supporters. But instead, too many non-profits make such a commitment to telling personal stories that the quality of the stories themselves suffer. Non-profits ask someone to "go find a story." They begin reaching to fill a perceived need. They build processes, devote resources to digging up options – and in the end, the stories they end up with simply aren't that moving.

The second danger is that, rather than eliciting sympathy and making an emotional connection, telling a personal story can provoke the opposite reaction. Non-profit supporters and donors are smart, and they can sniff out if we're intentionally playing with their emotions. A 2005 Public Agenda study[2] found a substantial backlash when donors felt the appeal was too "slick" and intentionally exploitative.

Third, even if our reader isn't perturbed by our conscious effort to tug at their heart strings, the story may not be *their* story. I may not want to hear about another person's fight against a debilitating illness if I have my own story about that fight. Or maybe it's simply that, removed from my own psychological experience and placed in someone else's story, I don't feel the same deep emotions that drive one to donate.

By working so hard to find stories – any story – non-profits often lower our standards for what's moving. We become over-reliant on inducing tears or outrage – and our supporters know it. We tell stories about *others*, instead of putting our supporters in the spotlight. We need to take a step back and realize that personal stories are only one part of "storytelling."

Stories That Explain

To fully understand how to use stories in your email communications, it helps to think of all stories as fitting into two categories: Explaining stories, and compelling stories. Explaining stories are just what they sound like – stories that help illustrate a point, paint a vivid picture of a situation, or put a complex or wonky issue in human terms. Remember the first two reasons that stories are powerful: they are universal, and they make facts "sticky" and easier to remember. So we use stories to explain – in four principal ways.

We use explaining stories to grab the reader's attention, instead of asking for it. In a world that's moving faster every day, you only have 2-3 seconds to convince your supporter you're telling a story they want to hear. Consider this email opening:

> Nesting season for sea turtles is always fraught with danger from threats like entanglement in fishing gear and habitat degradation. **But this year, sea turtles must also face the fallout from the worst oil spill in history.**

What if we told this same story – but instead of falling back on wonky language like "habitat degradation," we used the vivid detail, rising tension, and simple language that imbues the stories we tell every day?

> Getting caught in fishing gear is bad enough. But this year, sea turtles faced a much more horrifying threat: **Dirty, sticky oil from the worst spill in history.**

'Explaining' stories show, instead of tell.

We also use explaining stories to replace – or supplement – statistics. Our instinct is to think large numbers are powerful, but more often they are hard to conceptualize and remember and don't create a human connection. What if we told a story of a single child before introducing the thousands at need, or spoke of one endangered animal instead of citing how many there are?

> When you're a starving child, it's nearly impossible to fight through a crowd of adults. Right now in Pakistan, that's one of the only ways to get food – ***so thousands of children are going hungry.***

> On a late summer day in Alaska, a polar bear and her one-year-old cub began swimming in search of sea ice to hunt for food… Nine days later, the polar bear's treacherous ***427 mile swim*** ended when she found a thin sheet of sea ice. But sadly, by the time she returned to shore from her journey, she had lost an incredible 107 pounds and her cub was gone.

Similarly, we can use explaining stories to show the human impact of the work that donors support. Instead of dryly reporting what you do and the services you provide, tell the story of what you accomplish in real and human terms, as UNICEF does here:

> When children are thirsty, it doesn't matter if a river is clouded and polluted, they'll drink from it. UNICEF's simple solutions like clean water tablets make it easy for children to access clean water anywhere, anytime.

Lastly, explaining stories that tell of past success build faith and trust in your organization. Instead of insisting to your supporters that your organization is powerful, long-standing, or credible, use a story to convince them:

> When Glenn Beck puts you "on notice," you know you must be doing something right… At least that's what we decided when he attacked Faithful America on his radio and TV shows in July.
>
> …To challenge his assertions, we created a radio ad to air in stations on his summer tour stops. Thanks to the generous support of the Faithful America community, we were quickly able to raise more than $15,000 to play the radio ad on Christian stations in NY, NJ, SC and DC.

Explaining stories show, instead of tell. They take dry facts and assertions and statistics and wonky policy and give them life, building a human connection. They aren't always even "stories" in the classical sense, they just make use of the conversational language, vivid detail, tension, and resolution that give stories power.

But explaining stories don't, by themselves, compel readers to act. For that, we need a different type of story.

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Compelling Stories that Raise Money

Why do people give? It's a question that's fascinated behavioral psychologists for years, prompting study after study and test after test, and there's no single correct answer:

We give because it makes us happy. According to a 2008 study[3] published in the magazine Science, a three-part experiment found that people who spent money on others are happier than those who spent money on themselves.

We give because it makes us feel important. Struggling families living on incomes of $20,000 or less give away, on average, 4.6% of their income.[4] Families earning ten times as much only give away 1% – a statistic social scientists have attributed to struggling families seeking a way to solidify their importance in a community.

We give because we want to be part of a success story. People want to feel like they're part of something bigger than themselves that is having a real – and tangible – human impact. Paul Slovic, a professor at Oregon University, found in one study that individuals would rather give $10 million to fight a disease that claimed 20,000 lives a year – and save 10,000 of those lives – than give the same amount to save 20,000 out of 290,000 lives.[5]

We give because others are giving. In a Newsweek piece titled "The Science Behind our Generosity," Peter Singer noted that when we see others giving, we're more likely to give.[6]

The compelling donor-centric story offers readers an opportunity to say something about what kind of person they are, and what groups they are part of. Are they generous? Important? Kind? Are they a conservationist, or a civil-rights crusader? Or just one of a hundred neighbors whose commitment saved a local library? People give because doing so offers them a chance to write their own story – and join in a shared story.

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How do we translate all this into fundraising appeals? Well for one, you can **explicitly set donors up as the heroes of a particular moment:**

> What if every week were an incredible week? A week when you felt meaning and purpose. A week when you knew you were literally changing the world for the better.
>
> That's what it's like for U.S. Fund for UNICEF's monthly Pledge Donors. Every month, they support UNICEF's programs with a modest amount. And in return, they can be confident that **with less than a dollar a day, they're saving innocent, vulnerable children** from pain and suffering.

> Your membership gift right now could decide whether we see new federal assaults on equality and new bans on same-sex couples marrying – or whether millions of couples will have their love recognized for the first time.

Even without being so direct, donor-centric fundraising appeals speak to the impact one person can have:

> Earlier today, I was with President Obama as he signed the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" into law.
>
> You were part of a defining moment in the struggle for equality. We never backed down. We never gave up. And as anti-gay leadership gets ready to take control of the House of Representatives, we'll need to bring every bit of that creativity and tenacity to bear.

> Will you sit back and let climate deniers and oil companies destroy this biologically rich, environmentally-fragile, crown jewel of our refuge system?

> I promise you, if you give today, your gift *will* have an impact on these elections. Every dollar we put to work could make the difference in a neck-and-neck race.

Or simply **tell the story of a moment – a moment of crisis or opportunity in which we are relying on the donor to step up**:

> **In the dead of the night last Thursday, the Wisconsin Assembly passed Gov. Walker's disastrously anti-worker budget.** The vote lasted mere seconds – and 28 pro-worker legislators never even had a chance to cast a vote.
>
> But it's not over. That night, the halls of the State Capitol were still filled with protestors chanting "Hell no, we won't go!" **We're not going anywhere either – because this fight is bigger than just Wisconsin.**
>
> Governors in a handful of states are already planning their own Walker-like attacks on nurses, firefighters, teachers, and other critical employees. **This fight belongs to all of us now, and we don't have a second to lose.**

Tell a story about what the decision to donate says about the reader at this moment.

Whatever the specific language, non-profits must tell a story about what it means to click a link or write a check – what a decision to donate says about the reader at this moment. We must tell a donor-centric story, where making a gift is how the donor becomes the hero.

Conclusion

Don't count on a personal story to transform your fundraising appeal. Instead, tell stories that explain your mission and your impact. But recognize that these stories aren't enough to compel someone to give. Email is, by its nature, interactive. The story we tell must be less The Great Gatsby, and more Choose Your Own Adventure.

In the story that gets people to give, your organization is not the hero. The donor is the hero.

The goal of this white paper is to lay out our specific vision for taking advantage of the power of storytelling, while adding to the overall storytelling conversation in the non-profit community. But we also have some specific recommendations for your online program.

Recommendations

1. **Make the reader the hero of the email lede.** Email writers break most appeals into two sections, with extra priority given to the "lede" above the first link. Your lede – those few initial paragraphs that grab a reader and compel them to act – is where you tell a story with your reader as the hero. Explain an urgent need and how a clear and tangible action by the reader will bring about a solution. Avoid the temptation to focus on your organization. Instead, walk the reader through how clicking a link at this moment will lead to them being the hero of the story.

2. **Make your supporters the heroes of the overarching story.** Below the fold – after the first link – present a greater narrative about what it means to be a supporter of this organization. Where did we come from? Where are we going? Why? What does that say about each of us individually and all of us as a group? Offer a shared story that people can be a part of.

3. **Explain through stories.** Employing dry and wonky language? Citing statistics more than telling stories? Using stories to explain allows you to reach your readers on an emotional as well as an intellectual level. And it makes what you have to say far more memorable.

Your organization is not the hero. The donor is the hero.

Notes

1. "The Science Behind Our Generosity," by Peter Singer. February 28, 2009. *http://www.newsweek.com/2009/02/27/the-science-behind-our-generosity.html*

2. "What Makes Donors Give," by Ruth Wooden. Chronicle of Philanthropy, Dec 8, 2005. *http://www.publicagenda.org/articles/what-makes-donors-give*

3. "The Secret to Happiness? Giving." by Elsa Youngsteadt. Science, March 20, 2008. *http://news.sciencemag.org/sciencenow/2008/03/20-02.html*

4. "The Poor Give More," by Arthur C. Brooks. Portfolio.com, February 19, 2008. *http://www.portfolio.com/news-markets/national-news/portfolio/2008/02/19/Poor-Give-More-to-Charity/*

5. "Mass Suffering and Why We Look the Other Way," by Shankar Vedantam. The Washington Post, January 5, 2009. *http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/04/AR2009010401307.html*

6. "The Science Behind Our Generosity," by Peter Singer. February 28, 2009. *http://www.newsweek.com/2009/02/27/the-science-behind-our-generosity.html*

About M+R

M+R is dedicated to helping our clients advance their missions in order to bring about positive change. We do this by helping organizations and campaigns we believe in develop smart and effective strategies, hone their messages, mobilize their members, build grassroots support, raise money, and communicate effectively with the media, the public, and decision-makers, both online and offline. Please visit *www.mrss.com* for more information.