

Create Beautiful Philanthropy Stories—Simply

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Do you ever struggle when describing what you do for work? I have two children, ages eight and nine, who tell their friends, “My dad’s job is storytelling.” Naturally they’ve been given this description to use and for kids that makes total sense. I don’t tell them that I create communication strategies and donor engagement content for nonprofit health care foundations. Meh...that means nothing to them. More importantly, I describe what I do as storytelling because there is nothing more relevant or important to anyone whose role it is to connect donors to the causes they care about.

Donors consistently report that the most meaningful way they can experience the impact of their gifts is through stories. No surprise. More books have been written on storytelling than you could read in a lifetime. Yet somehow, all the theories in the world don’t make us better storytellers.

Here’s where perspective piece authors usually start talking about the obvious. In this case, I would typically go into the importance of story structure, creating a hook, suspense, character and scene development. There are books for that. Instead, I want to focus on something even more powerful—creativity.

Let's take a deeper dive:

RULE
#1

GREAT STORIES COME FROM GREAT QUESTIONS.

"Tell me about your experience?" Please stop asking this question to patients or their families. It's thoughtless and puts them in a vulnerable position. You put the entire burden on them to be good storytellers. That's your job. The answer to this question begins with a sigh, continues without-so-much-as-a-breath (challenging for video editing) and leaves out what makes a story great. **Great storytelling isn't about retelling an event, it's about reliving it.** It's the moment-to-moment hearing, seeing and feeling that pulls us in. Here's a few creative question alternatives:

- "Take me back with you...what was the one moment you'll never forget in your experience? What time of day was it? Where were you?"
- "Who's the one person you relied on most during your health care journey?"
- "What has your experience taught you? Has it changed how you view yourself or others? If so, how?"
- "Can you spot gratitude? Is gratitude different than thankfulness? How?"

“ Take me back with you...what was the one moment you'll never forget in your experience? ”

RULE
#2

PHILANTHROPY STORIES ARE THE "NEXT CHAPTER."

Patient success stories work because nearly all of them have happy endings. For your hospital marketing team—whose job is to inspire trust in your organization—those stories make perfect sense. However, that is NOT your job as a philanthropy communicator. Your job is to inspire voluntary action and advocacy. You're selling a belief in the future, the next chapter, based on health care experiences.

So, how does this work? It starts with a fundamental question of what you're wanting to get from the story. **A philanthropy story isn't about the patient's physical care. It's about their emotional care and how it profoundly impacted how they see the world.** The typical "patient got sick, patient sought care and patient had a successful outcome" story build isn't enough. Here's an example of an applied philanthropy approach to storytelling:

"I wasn't prepared to tell my family about my diagnosis. I had a 5-year-old and a brand-new baby. The only thought I kept having was, 'Am I going to be around for them?' Over the course of the next six months, I put on a brave face. My only outlet for addressing my fear and anxiety turned out to be my nurse navigator. She texted me daily with words of encouragement. She made unscheduled phone calls to me and connected me with the foundation

who then connected me with a support group. That changed everything. I started to recognize how grateful I was. I felt hope for the first time in a long time. This was more than a new attitude. It turned out to be a new path. Today, I volunteer on the support group. I tell my story at foundation events. I still text my nurse navigator. For me, discovering the incredible power of gratitude changed my life. I might not be a doctor or a nurse, but I can still help people...that's powerful."

Can you see the difference?

RULE
#3

STORIES ARE A GIFT.

Research suggests that donors now want as many as eight non-solicitation touch points for every ask. If you think about it, wouldn't you? Yet somehow there's this little voice in our heads that suggests, "Ah, they'll love that story. I should probably capitalize on it at the end." Don't do that. Please. **Sharing a great story is your single best way to say thank you without actually saying thank you. It's your gift to them.** Let them walk away with an unpolluted experience. They know how to find you. You also know how to find them when the time is right.

In the book *Gift•ology*, John Ruhlin explains, "Radical generosity is the against-the-grain secret weapon of real influencers, and it will allow you to boost referrals, retention rates, and ROI like few other strategies. But be warned, gifts with strings attached backfire."

Perceiving stories as gifts might be a new concept to you so let's consider it another way. Imagine you've just told someone an incredible story...how do you feel? *Amazing*, right? Stories aren't just for listeners. Stories are one of the best and only ways to get to know one another on a deeper and more meaningful level. Sharing a story is relationship glue, not bait.

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Here are some simple ways to integrate storytelling into your organization:

- Record interviews and pull 30-second outtakes to share with your CEO, development team, clinicians and donors. This first-person reliving of a story now makes the story theirs.
- Be unpredictable. Think about creative ways to share stories. Start brainstorming meetings with patient stories. Send one-off emails to donors (without an ask!). Ask development officers to tell, practice and retell stories. Send mp3 players with patient or clinician stories pre-loaded to donors.
- Develop a new list of questions for donors, patients, clinicians and others that serve as a playbook. Ask for a family photo to share with other donors. Have clinicians read grateful patient letters on camera. Challenge your writers to do something—anything, different.
- Get multiple perspectives. Patients are willing to give you access to others who were meaningful in their experiences. Their friends, their families and co-workers offer outside perspectives and story nuance.
- Create a gratitude wall in your foundation office that collects stories, images and ideas. Use this wall as a safe place for interviews, team discussions and brainstorming.

A commitment to excellent storytelling is a gift to others, to yourself and to your organization. It connects you with your why and elevates your passion for the noble work you're doing. Who knows, you might even soon describe what you do for work as storytelling.

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