



PHILANTHROPY STORYTELLING: *TIME TO RETHINK YOUR APPROACH*

Perhaps you're saying to yourself, "we have great stories." Stories of sick children who've battled and won, stories of lifesaving heroics from emergency rooms and stories of grateful patients and their narrow escape against all odds. But, are these stories great marketing stories or great philanthropy stories? Is there a difference? Does it matter?

At their core, your marketing department is responsible for generating trust with your community. Trust that, when the time comes to rely on a proven treatment or cure, your hospital is best. Often, the most effective way to tell these stories is through a proven storytelling arc: patient seeks help, patient gets help, patient gets better. While these stories often engage us on an emotional level and are effective in transferring trust for the hospital, they often are difficult to translate directly into philanthropy.

What If...

We looked at the traditional health story as only the beginning of the journey? What if we told stories that took prospects and donors on a new journey? Here's what that might look like:

"When you're on a hospital bed looking up for 9 straight days, you'll remember what the ceiling looks like. The truth is, I expected the hospital to save my life. What I didn't expect were the little things they did to take care of me and my family during my stay. The doctors and nurses were amazing; they brought large white paper, crayons and tape. They actually got down on the floor and colored with my three children and taped the drawings to the

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ceiling above me. That changed everything. It put me on a new journey...a journey of gratitude. Today, I’m not just a former patient, I’m a volunteer and a donor. Those drawings are framed. I put them on the ceiling of my office as a reminder to me and everyone that walks in that—if you treat people like family, that’s exactly what they become.”

There is power in philanthropy storytelling. We must learn to look beyond the obvious, stop hitting the easy button and start looking for the story within the story. To get started, consider the following:

Ask different questions.

All too often, interviewers ask grateful patients “tell me about your experience.” Sorry... but that’s a lazy question. The answer often comes in the form of a three minute run-on sentence that ends with “and the doctors were great!” Don’t turn your grateful patients into spokespeople for your organization. The goal shouldn’t be to get a testimonial—that’s a marketing tactic. The goal should be to help your audience understand what motivates someone to give. Here are few questions that work:

- “Was there a single moment you’ll remember most?”
- “Paying it forward can feel difficult... what’s the biggest challenge for you?”
- “Was there a little thing...something unexpected during your stay?”

- “Tell me why the world looks different today.”
- “What’s something only your closest friends know about your experience.”

Tell, test and retell.

Orally told stories affect us in ways written stories cannot. According to science, one reason the brain falls in love with a good story is because hearing stories encourages the release of the hormones oxytocin and cortisol. These reactions lead to the listener being invested in the character’s plight. This connection can be so strong it can move people to action—from something as simple as hanging on the edge of their seat to something as radical as joining a movement or donating to a cause.¹ When you hear a good story, tell it to someone new. Monitor how strong their reactions are; where did they light up? Then, figure out ways to strengthen it. Retell it to someone new. This gives you the ability to find the underlying story people connect to most.

Telling a great philanthropy story can connect you with donors, physicians, nurses and leadership. It humanizes health care in a way that success stories alone will never accomplish.

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