

10 ways to make storytelling work for your nonprofit.

Presented by



Introduction

Nonprofit America has been described as one of the least understood segments of national life, yet also one of the most crucial. From multi-million dollar health systems to small operations with annual budgets of less than \$25,000, nonprofit organizations deliver much of the healthcare, higher education, social services, cultural entertainment, employment and training, low-income housing, community development, social welfare and emergency aid services available in our country. They also perform a crucial advocacy role, identifying unattended problems and bringing them to public attention. Most of the social movements that have animated American life over the past century or more operated in and through this set of institutions.*

Considering all of this, nonprofits understandably have the best stories to share. The work they do is inspiring, uplifting and often nothing short of amazing. Theirs are the real stories about real people who've struggled then succeeded, who once were sick and broken, and now are healed and whole again. Making the world a better place? You bet. America's nonprofits are doing it every day.

But many nonprofits fail to tap the enormous potential behind the power of their stories. It isn't because they don't want to share them. It certainly isn't due to some misguided false modesty. It is almost always because something is holding them back – lack of time or resources, lack of planning, or restrictive internal policies. So instead of shouting about their accomplishments, they whisper. As time goes by and opportunities go unrealized, community support goes to other nonprofits; the ones who are – you guessed it – sharing their stories.

Why is storytelling/content marketing so important?

Marketing has changed. We've entered what has been described as the **"Post-Advertising Age."** In this new era, the following conditions have changed the rules of the game completely:

- There's more information clutter than anybody imagined.
- Traditional media is challenged by changing technology and the corresponding changes in consumer habits. The old "interruption model" doesn't work anymore.
- Search engines reward businesses that publish good content.
- Emergence of user-generated media. It has become more influential than anybody could have predicted. In fact, a recent study showed **Millennials trust user-generated content 50 percent more than other media.****

That last bullet point is one of the most startlingly significant changes. The general distrust of traditional marketing methods will only increase, and as nonprofits struggle to reach younger donors, this magnifies the importance of genuine storytelling based on authentic human experiences.

Consider these broad changes in consumer media habits, and then ponder the conditions faced by most nonprofits. Expected to meet community demands with meager resources, today's

nonprofits are under intensifying pressure to perform and to demonstrate that performance. Savvy donors assert their satisfaction, or lack thereof. Board members expect performance as well, but they may misunderstand the market realities under which their nonprofits operate.

It's easy to see why change is needed.

More barriers to success

In the for-profit business world, creativity and impact are used to gain a competitive advantage. Creativity and impact cost money, and profit-based institutions can more easily shift budget dollars from traditional media placement to content marketing and a custom publication.

For nonprofits, it is more challenging. They are faced with ever-increasing competition – for awareness, for media exposure, for donors – but are subject to different rules. Executive directors go begging for pro-bono creative work or live with lackluster executions that fall far short of their potential. The accepted wisdom is that communications must be done cheaply, or donated, lest their constituents think they are being extravagant.

This mindset, that increased spending on communications is to be avoided, is common among nonprofit directors. It represents another obstacle standing in the way of more meaningful community engagement. Instead of considering the inherent value in meaningful storytelling and high quality, original content, some see only the expense. If your new content platform – whether it is a website, blog, print magazine, video channel or anything else – is providing better engagement with your

communities, its value has already been demonstrated. It is “pulling its own weight” in terms of return on investment and “return on engagement.”

Partnering up

Finally, something to consider as you weigh the advantages of a new original content platform against the cold, hard realities of next year's budget, is to make it a collaborative effort. A smart nonprofit may be able to gain the underwriting support of a corporate partner, thereby offsetting expense and creating a win-win situation: The nonprofit is able to publish a stunning custom publication, and the corporate partner gains a unique and exclusive vehicle for brand recognition.

Sharing your stories, in a platform that has impact and substance, will help all of your communities – donors, patrons, charitable advisors, volunteers and others – gain a better understanding of your mission, vision and values.

There is no doubt your nonprofit has lots of stories to share. These ten guidelines can help you to get started or to get a stalled program back on track. On behalf of all the storytellers here at CCM, thank you, in advance, for allowing us to be a part of your storytelling success.

*SOURCE: The Aspen Institute, The Resilient Sector: The State of Nonprofit America by Lester M. Salamon

<http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/nonprofit-philanthropy/archives/nonprofit-philanthropy-55>

**SOURCE: Millennials Trust User-Generated Content 50 Percent More Than Other Media, Mashable 4/9/14.

<http://mashable.com/2014/04/09/millennials-user-generated-media/>

1 Begin With a Documented Strategy.

To be effective at content marketing, or storytelling as we prefer to call it, a documented strategy is essential. There are lots of tools available to help you do this, including a 16-page guide published by the [Content Marketing Institute](#).

The CMI guide is detailed and a bit complicated, so we will boil it down for you. It's really three pieces: the Business Plan, the Editorial Plan, and Channels. Don't get bogged down with the technical aspects, as this should be all about the storytelling.

Your Business Plan:

What are your organizational goals? According to the [2015 CMI nonprofit study](#), nonprofit professionals continue to embrace content marketing. Among their top organizational goals were:

- Brand awareness (87%)
- Engagement (84%)
- Client/constituent retention/loyalty (82%)
- Fundraising (68%)

It is interesting to point out that in the 2014 study, fundraising was the top goal, at 79%. This change indicates that nonprofits recognize the importance of brand awareness – your communities understanding who you are and what you do – as a prerequisite to philanthropic calls to action.

Why are you embarking on a storytelling program? What problem are you hoping to solve? What results do you expect? What metrics will be used to measure success? For example, do you expect your content marketing to directly generate donations, or do you have other goals in mind?

Metrics:

When asked “Which metrics does your nonprofit use to assess content marketing success?”, the top metrics were:

- Increased event attendance/participation (55%)
- Website traffic (54%)
- Increased fundraising (49%)

Your Editorial Plan:

A documented editorial strategy is crucial to success. Just as a good marketing communications plan lays down a roadmap for your media relations, advertising, community events and other activities, the strategic plan will provide the “big picture” for your team. The plan will determine what formats will be used, how often content is created and published, what content may be curated (coming from other sources, but relevant to your mission), and other guidelines.

Another aspect of your plan should be how content is repurposed to gain maximum value from its creation. For example, if you publish a print or digital magazine, repurpose those stories in the form of web-optimized news releases.

Remember that “more” is not always better. It has to be about quality.

Your Channel Plan:

Some of the basic considerations for developing a content marketing channel plan include:

Situational analysis:

What do you already have that helps tell this story (an existing Web page, blog, newsletter)?

What must change for you to tell this story? (Do we need to add a blog? Do we need to create or revisit our social Web strategy?)

What must stop (if anything) for you to tell this story? (Do we need to stop using Facebook and divert our energy to a blog?)

Channel objectives:

What are the objectives for each channel as they relate to engagement of your various communities?

Metrics:

Will you establish specific goals for each channel?

Content management process:

Who will manage the content and conversation on each channel and how? For example, you may have different “managing editors” for your print magazine and eNewsletter, or a designated social media manager.

Action:

Establish your goals and begin building your strategy.

2 Think Like a Publisher.

Think like a publisher, not a marketer. You've probably heard this before, but this change in mindset is absolutely crucial to your success. Just like the "drumbeat" the experts have always said should be maintained in traditional media relations, a steady rhythm of content creation and distribution is essential. Think in terms of the calendar, not the project. Look for opportunities to create content around events, historic milestones and other potential touch points.

Storytelling works because it connects. Whether you call it brand journalism, content marketing or anything else, you must publish regularly, and in ways that are meaningful. Stories that bring your mission to life, rather than just describe it, will make a powerful emotional connection – encouraging sharing, stirring passion and converting supporters into "brand ambassadors."

Action:

Start working on your "editorial calendar." There are good stories behind your brand, and you should be telling them. Be brave, challenge the naysayers within your organization, and start making those emotional connections.

3 Establish an Editorial Policy.

Many well-intentioned content marketing experts emphasize the technicalities of Web optimization and social media, but fail to stress the obvious – there’s plenty of content out there, but quality is clearly in short supply. One of the most often overlooked aspects of the “think like a publisher” directive is that – to be effective, to engage your communities, to maintain your brand’s voice and, ultimately, your image – you must maintain quality. That begins with an editorial policy that provides important guidelines for the types of topics to be covered, who your contributors will be, the style of your writing and many other details.

A good editorial policy will allow you to stay true to your brand’s established personality. It will also allow you to say “no” to would-be contributors who would use the platform to publish overtly self-promotional content.

“I conclude that editors communicate better than admen.” - David Ogilvy

Case in point: Doctor Smith sees a feature story about Doctor Jones and wants the hospital marketing director to write about him. After all, he’s doing amazing things and has a wall full of documented credentials. When Doctor Smith calls, the first question the marketing director, in her role as managing editor, should ask is, “Tell me more about the topic you want us to cover.” Most scientists or medical professionals will understand – it’s not about them personally, it’s about their work and its results. They will set ego aside, get on board and help build a great story.

Action:

Build your editorial policy based on the personality of your brand and how you relate to your communities. The policy can be simple bullet points. Assemble your team, discuss what changes need to be made. Review the policy every six months.

4

Avoid Talking About Yourself.

A common misstep to avoid in content marketing is talking about yourself. As counter-intuitive as this may seem, it is important advice. You might think the purpose of content marketing, particularly social media, is to create and share information that speaks to the strengths of your brand and your people. Well, that's essentially true, but those who make the mistake of talking about themselves way, way too much are destined to fail. When quality content gives way to self-serving, "it's all about me" boasting, it is analogous to walking into a networking event, telling a half-dozen people how wonderful you are, then saying, "Nice to meet you, I gotta go" and walking out without learning a thing about any of the people you've just met. In doing so, you've just killed any possibility of a mutually beneficial relationship.

The consequence of talking "about" yourself is that you wind up talking "to" yourself, often using industry jargon or "brochure-eez." This is deadly, because you can't possibly expect to achieve deeper engagement if you're not speaking in common language that your communities can understand.

At CCM we say, "It's not about us, it's about you." The "you," in this case, is our clients. Make that your policy, too. Develop content around your communities and choose topics you know they care about. Only then will you achieve greater engagement.

Action:

Scan your existing content and ask, "Are we talking to ourselves?" If you're stuck in that rut, it's time to get some outside help. There are very good writers available with the expertise your work requires. If you must do the writing in-house, consider hiring a copy editor who can objectively provide the guidance needed to keep you from contracting "selfie syndrome."

5 Think Small.

Like Volkswagen said in their classic 1959 advertising campaign for the Beetle: "Think small." Instead of overwhelming your readers with global statistics describing the enormity of a crisis, tell them the story of one 10-year-old girl. By telling a story through her eyes and her experiences, you can describe how the efforts of your nonprofit have transformed her life, giving her a future she couldn't possibly have otherwise imagined.

This technique works equally well for domestic healthcare providers and global charities. Stories about positive outcomes, described in a way that touches people emotionally, are far more engaging than statistics.

Action:

Move the statistics to the sidebar and make the "small story" the feature.

6 Use Original Photography.

Let's say you've mustered the courage to tell those stories. Now, please, please, please don't wallpaper the thing with stock photos. If the story is worth telling – let's say it's about a new healthcare unit or service line and the physicians and staff who make it possible, or a volunteer that embodies the spirit of your nonprofit – it's worth actually showing these people. They are most likely your most valuable assets. We've all seen those plain vanilla hospital newsletters with page after page of stock images and a couple of mug shots of doctors. You can do better. **Using original photography will improve your connection with your communities.**

Infographics are another great way to convey a lot of information in a little space and quickly. They are very handy when the page count gets tight, or for sharing on social media. A good graphic designer can build them using illustrations or photos. (That brings us to #7.)

Action:

Think twice about downloading those dull stock images and work with a good photographer who has editorial experience.

7 Invest in Good Design.

Digital technology has enabled anybody who can click a mouse to build publications. While the well-intentioned amateur is adept at making pages, usually full of square boxes, a good art director will use skill, training and an experienced eye to create interesting layouts that make stories leap off the pages.

With all the graphic design talent that exists in the world, there is no excuse for poor design or “non-design.” Good design will help your stories reach more people by cutting through the clutter. This is somewhat subjective, but it’s not brain surgery either. There is an overwhelming amount of “visual competition” and clutter out there. Page layouts that are lively and inviting, rather than boxy and boring, will make your content much more engaging. If the design is extraordinary, further engagement and value will be achieved by gains in pass-along readership.

An investment in good design is always a wise one.

Action:

Stop “making pages” and start investing in good design.

8

Don't be Afraid to Ask for Help.

The fact is, most people are not good writers. Your marketing coordinator may be great at coordinating stuff, but may not know how to put three sentences together. And even a very good writer needs an editor – someone to keep them on track to maintain the proper voice, style and consistency. So, to maintain quality, don't be afraid to ask for help.

In 2014, 49 percent of nonprofits outsourced content creation.* Outsourcing makes sense because it allows you to allocate highly skilled resources on a “project” basis, without the expense of staff employees. It further increases efficiency by allowing in-house staff to better focus on their primary responsibilities. Considering these advantages, it shouldn't be difficult to sell the idea of outsourcing content creation to your leadership team.

*Source: Content Marketing Institute/Blackbaud 2014 Nonprofit Content Marketing Benchmarks, Budgets and Trends – North America.

Action:

Get some help and set up an editorial team with policies (see #3) and procedures that will keep you on track.

9 Remember That You Are Building A Community.

Building strong communities is an essential goal of your storytelling, or at least it should be. Communities of donors, volunteers, physicians or other healthcare professionals, patrons – the list goes on. Look at some of the most loyal and engaged communities. In cars it may be VW, in motorcycles there's no question that it's Harley Davidson, and some professional sports teams – they don't just have fans, they have dynasties.

Is it just because they make good products or win games? No. In fact, VW and Harley have both produced some real clunkers during their long histories. What distinguishes them is their ability to create genuine human experiences that nurture brand affinity. Your genuine human experiences should not be limited to photo opportunities at your annual gala.

In his book *Simple Community*, Richard Luker, Ph.D, says we get enough messages. We don't need more information and more messages; we need stories. Rich says stories from authentic community experiences are the ones that live on

in people's memories. Stories from our own lives – as people, not consumers – will “stick” when marketing messages will not.

This is precisely why one of the world's biggest brands, Coca-Cola, has converted its corporate Web presence into a “media platform” dedicated entirely to storytelling. The [Coca-Cola Journey](#) Website contains more than 12,000 videos!

Action:

Look for ways to go beyond publishing and build loyalty through real human experiences.

10

Share Real Stories About Real People.

One of our CCM storytellers, [David Chesnick](#), recently posted something on the “Smith On Branding” blog about Charles Kuralt and how he did such a great job of telling those amazing stories about the real people he encountered “on the road.”

For those who don’t remember him, Kuralt was a correspondent for CBS News. He traveled the country’s back roads with a small crew in a motor home talking to people: a sharecropper who sent nine children to college, a man who collected twine, a fellow who stood on a corner waving to passing motorists. He never condescended or patronized or tried to pull our heartstrings with cheap melodrama.

Kuralt’s Peabody Award-winning vignettes made many an emotional connection with his viewers. He found the extraordinary in the ordinary, and he allowed us to see it, too. He marveled at humanity and exalted it. You knew he felt enriched by the opportunity to meet these people, and he made you feel enriched by the experience.

[David has interviewed and written](#) about hundreds of folks for various projects over the years. Their motives for telling their

stories vary. Some hope their story will help others along their journey. Others want to thank and praise their caregivers, and some want to make sense of what has happened to them and put it in a context that will allow them to come to terms with it. Whatever their reason, they all share a common humanity and life-affirming spirit. If your content isn’t making this kind of emotional connection, then it’s time to make some changes.

Action:

Seek out the “real people” behind your nonprofit, and don’t waste another minute getting started telling their stories.

The Author's Page

This eBook began as part of a presentation by Steve Smith, our Publisher/Creative Director/Fearless Leader, to members of the Florida Public Relations Association.

Steve is an award-winning Creative Director, but he's also earned a reputation as an outstanding strategic planner and project manager. Is he a perfectionist? Absolutely. Is he tireless, virtually relentless in his pursuit of perfection? Oh yeah. You might even say he's a bit obsessive about every word and image. And, as they will be happy to tell you, our clients reap the results.

Every assignment Steve takes on is fortified by nearly 30 years of experience in the strategic management of brands, identity and image – for big brands, small companies, nonprofits and institutions, including the Adventist Health System, USF Health, Dattoli Cancer Foundation, Subaru, Uniroyal and AT&T.

Steve is a member of the Association of Fundraising Professionals and a past president of AdFed Suncoast. He led the team that created the “We CAN Florida” Alzheimer's awareness campaign. His work has been widely recognized by the American Advertising Federation, the FPRA and the International Association of Business Communicators.

In 1997, Steve started up a traditional marketing communications agency, Stephen A. Smith & Associates. He then launched **Consonant Custom Media** in 2010 to specialize in storytelling and content marketing. He considers the work he's doing with his fellow **CCM storytellers** to be the best of his career because it has helped nonprofits raise money, increase awareness and engage much more effectively with their communities.

Let's Begin Sharing Your Stories.

Thanks again for allowing **Consonant Custom Media** to be a part of your storytelling success. We wish you all the best as you begin sharing the stories of the discoveries you're making, the journeys you're taking, and how your work is making lives better.

To begin the conversation about your storytelling platform with a phone conference or in-person meeting, or to request publication samples, please call CCM at 941.309.5380 or e-mail **Steve Smith** or **Barry Rothstein**.



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