

Storytelling *for* ACTION



3 big ideas
that *nobody told you*
about using stories
to raise money

The **Better Fundraising** co.



This tiny eBook contains three massive ideas.

They are *market-tested and proven* to increase how much money you raise. They will help you get more new donors and keep your current donors around for longer. And they will even—if you let them—help you love your job and fundraising more than you thought possible.

These ideas are not fancy. They are not just for the “big” organizations and “seasoned” fundraisers. They are for you.

So keep reading. You’ll discover the 3 big ideas, a few helpful checklists, and several easy *I-can-go-fix-that-right-now’s*.

This is . . .

Storytelling *for* ACTION

- Introduction -

Storytelling for ACTION

When we started Better Fundraising, we went looking for the habits that successful fundraising organizations had in common. We looked at the fundraising materials and results for hundreds of nonprofits in North America. We found something surprising . . .

You've probably already seen the first thing we noticed; there are organizations that are lousy at telling stories, but still raise a lot of money.

And there are organizations that are great at telling stories, but they don't raise much money.

So, just "being good at storytelling" or "telling stories" isn't the magical fundraising tool it's often made out to be.



But we noticed that the organizations who were most successful at getting their donors to take action tended to have something in common.

We call it Storytelling for ACTION.

A Brief Aside

There's a ton of great material out there for how to tell your stories well:

- ✓ [The Pixar method](#)
- ✓ [Michael Hauge's three elements](#)
- ✓ [The 4 C's of storytelling](#)

You should read all of these. **You should also know that they are only half the story.**

The other half is the deep body of knowledge developed by smart nonprofits over the last 60 years.

Because most nonprofits are telling stories and *hoping* that action happens. They say to themselves, "If we tell it well, the donors will come."



You can do better. You can tell stories designed to cause action.

Here's how to do it . . .

Big Idea #1



**Your donor should have a role
—and see herself—
in every single story you tell.**

Think of it this way . . .

Each time you communicate with your donors you can give them a role in the incredible story of your organization and your beneficiaries.

Because by giving (or volunteering, or sharing), they become part of your story.

This eBook is going to assume that you are mentioning your donor *early* and *often*. This is critical.

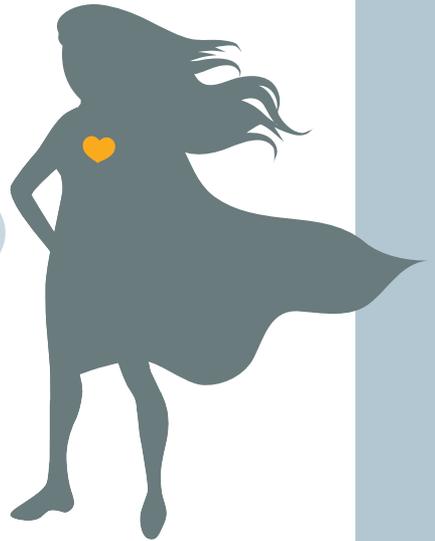
The question is, “What role do you give your donors?”

Partners
Needed!



VS.

Hero
Needed!



Which role would YOU prefer to play?



Ultimately, it's a question of focus.

In your donor communications, are you going to:

- Focus on your organization's part of the story?
- Or focus on your donor's?



If you want your donor to take action, give her a powerful role to play. Then focus on her role, not yours.

The Easy Way (do this first)

There's an easy way to focus on your donor's role and a hard way. The best fundraisers do the easy way first, and then they do the hard way, too.



Use the word “you” a LOT. Use it early and often. This simple trick makes you include the donor in everything you say and write.

- **2-to-1 Ratio:** We recommend at least a 2-to-1 ratio of “you’s” to “we’s.” That’s two of “you/you’re” for every one “we/us/our” and the name of your organization.
- **Red Pen Test:** Start with this classic test—circle all the “we/us/our” with red pen, and all the “you” with blue pen. You should see a LOT more blue than red.
- **10% Rule:** Master fundraising copywriter Jeff Brooks says your goal should be to have 10% of all the words be the word “you.” It sounds crazy, but try it and then read it out loud. You sound like someone talking directly to another person that you care about—which is exactly what good fundraising sounds like.

If you do this, you’ll notice your donor will start to appear in your fundraising materials much more often. And if your donor sees herself in your communications, she’s more likely to give a gift.

The Hard Way (do this second)

Make the action you want your donor to take—the role you want her to play in the story—be specific, compelling, and powerful.



Spoiler Alert! Asking your donor to “partner with us” or “support our work” or “send a gift so that we can help them” is not specific, compelling, or powerful to most donors.

Think of it this way, **when you tell the story of what your donor’s gift is going to do, get specific.**

Examples of the specifics we’ve had great success with:

- provide one meal
- shelter for one night
- access to an art museum for one child
- curing one person
- one credit towards graduating from college
- help one teacher

It’s often hard for organizations to get specific about what a donor’s gift does. To your organization, the specifics seem less important

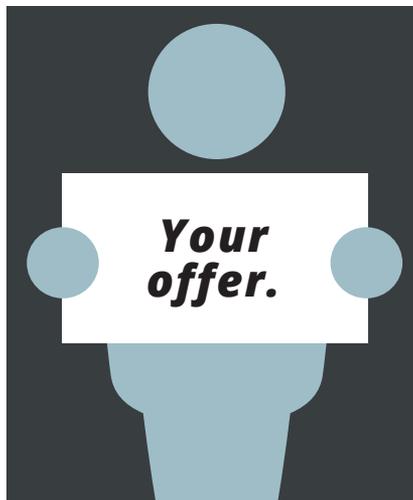
than the whole of your programs or approach. And that's true—from your point of view. You're an expert.

But from the point of view of a donor—who doesn't know nearly as much about program details as you do—the specifics are extraordinarily helpful.

That's why in all our testing an action like “Be the difference for a refugee in need” doesn't raise as much money as an action like “Provide medical care for a refugee for \$7.”

We'll talk more about this later. Just know that . . . **when you get specific about what a donor's gift does, she is more likely to take action and donate.**

When you get specific, it's called a fundraising “offer.” [Look at this page](#) to find out more.



Big Idea #2



***How you tell a story
is less important than
what story you tell and
when you tell it.***

Turns out, just telling a story well doesn't guarantee your organization anything.

It helps, but it isn't the main factor for raising money. Fundraising pros make sure they have the *right type* of story for each donor communication.

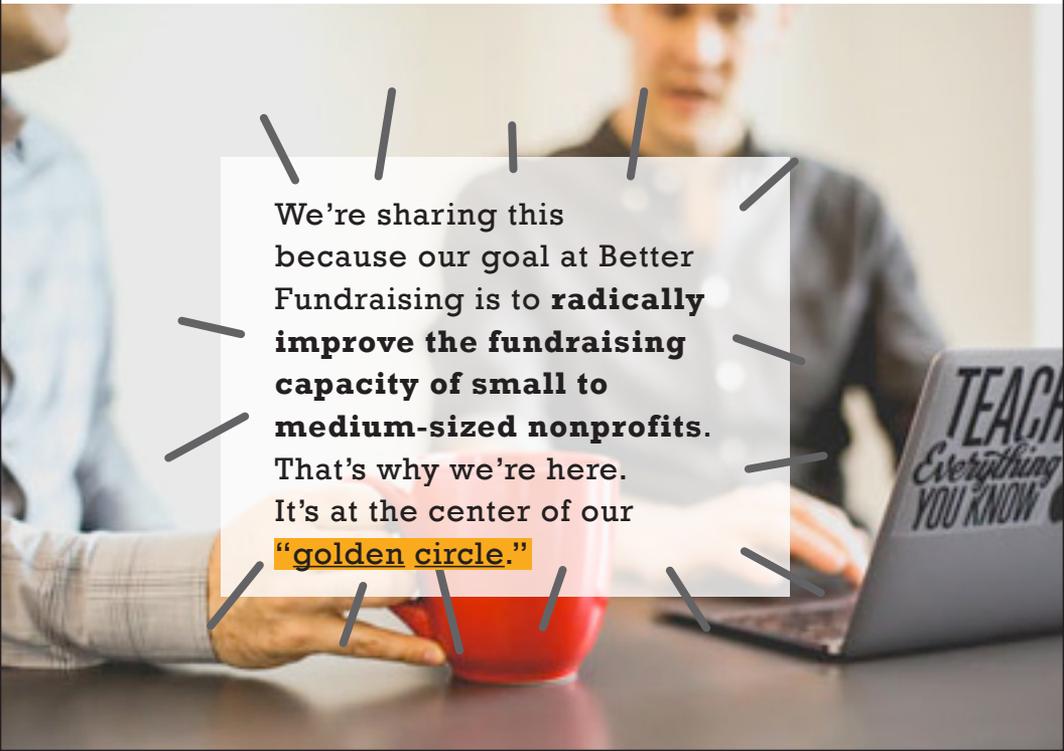
There are two main types of stories:

- Stories of Need
- Stories of Triumph

Some donors are motivated to give a gift by a Story of Need, where the donor can send in a gift to help meet a current need. Some donors are motivated to give by a Story of Triumph, when a donor sees what their gift has accomplished and wants to do even more.

Here at Better Fundraising we developed a set of internal guidelines to help our clients know which types of stories to tell and when to tell them.

The guidelines have proven so helpful that we'd like to share them publicly for the first time here . . .



We're sharing this because our goal at Better Fundraising is to **radically improve the fundraising capacity of small to medium-sized nonprofits.** That's why we're here. It's at the center of our **"golden circle."**

Storytelling *for* ACTION

**What type of stories to tell
and when to tell them**

*Are you Asking for a donation or
Reporting back to donors?*



Asking

Story Type:

Story of Need

A problem that is unsolved
A person that needs help
A story that is not complete

When to Tell:

Appeal letters
E-appeals
Fundraising events
1-to-1 Asks



Reporting

Story Type:

Story of Triumph

A solved problem
A helped beneficiary
A completed story

When to Tell:

Newsletter
E-news
Annual Report
1-to-1 Reports to Major Donors

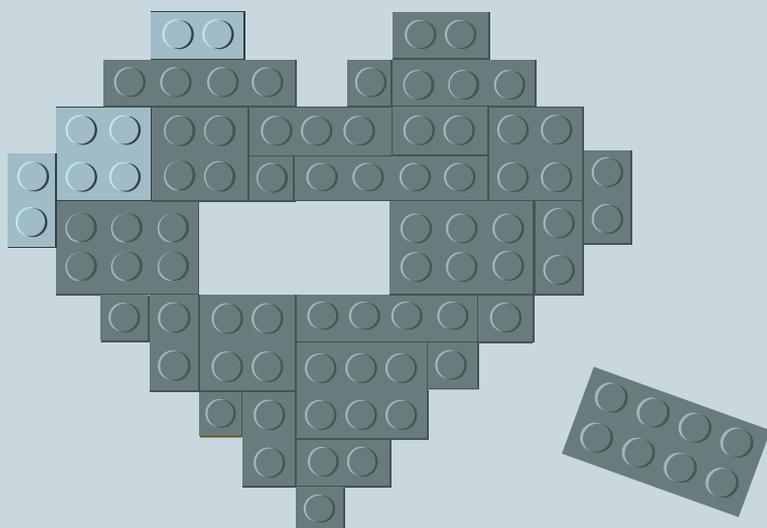
[Do not do both at the same time. You will raise less money.]

STORY TYPE #1: ASKING



When you are Asking for support, tell this type of story:

A Story of Need—where the person has not yet been helped or the problem has not yet been solved. Then, show the donor how her gift meets the need or solves the problem, and Ask her to solve it today.



The time to tell a Story of Need is when you are Asking—in appeal letters, e-appeals, at events, and in-person for major donors.

There's something important in that chart that you shouldn't miss:

Story Type:

Story of Need

A problem that is unsolved

A person that needs help

A story that is not complete

The main idea is that the type of story you should be telling is unfinished. The need still exists, or the person (or a person like them) still needs help.

Remember how earlier we talked about giving the donor a role in every story you tell? Here's how that works when you Ask for support:

When you tell a story of need, a story that isn't finished, your donor easily sees a powerful role for herself to play.

She can be a hero and meet the need!

Your goal is to share an emotionally moving need, as well as tell your donor what the solution is. Then she can imagine herself providing the solution by giving a gift. You've literally put her in a position where she can be a hero!

That's an incredible role for her to play. Humans love to be heroes.

Unfortunately, most nonprofits tell finished stories when they Ask for support. The story they share has a happy ending. The only role left for the donor to play is "supporter" or "partner" to help the organization "continue this important work."

That's why you see fundraising appeals end with the unmotivating, boring, let-the-air-out-of-the-balloon lines like, "please support our organization so we can continue this good work."

When you are Asking for support, fight the urge to tell stories that are complete or finished. Instead, do it when you're Reporting back to donors on the effects of their gifts. More on that on page 23.

All of our head-to-head testing shows that approach doesn't work as well.

**We've seen and worked with
LOTS of organizations who do
not follow these guidelines
and still raise significant
amounts of money.**



**However, every time we've
worked with an organization
and applied these rules, they've
raised even more money.**



Example Time

Here's part of a letter from a client of ours. This is the letter they sent to donors immediately prior to working with us.

When Sara and her two children moved from Florida to Washington, the last thing she expected to be was homeless. Sara was excited about a new job opportunity in Seattle, but the job fell through and suddenly she was living out of her car. Her children, 5-year-old Jasmin and 12-year-old Luke, were devastated.



Sara, Luke, and Jasmin wondered about things like; where would their next meal come from, would they ever have a roof over their head again, and how could they excel in school? Sara discovered Acres of Diamonds and made the difficult call to ask for help. Acres welcomed her warmly, and now this family resides at Acres getting help to rebuild their lives. Sara's children suffered emotionally while living in their car, especially Jasmin. When she arrived at Acres, she was withdrawn and sad. Now that she has a place to call home, Jasmin is a vibrant kindergartner who

looks forward to school and can be seen with a smile on her face. Luke is getting the support he needs to be successful in 7th grade. Through prayer and effort, Sara now has a job to provide for her family. Over time, Acres of Diamonds will support Sara and her children through The Path to Graduation programs. They will transition to independent living because of the generous support from people like you.

Will you help us continue this important work with families like Jasmin's? Simply return the enclosed card or if you prefer give us a call at . . .

See how:

- This family's problem is already solved?
- The donor doesn't have a role to play other than "continue this important work"?

Now look at the next letter the organization sent to their donors, with our help.

I have some urgent news to share with you.

Just a few days ago my phone rang and I received word that another mom and her 3 kids were in desperate need of help. Julianne had just fled her abuser. She was able to escape with her 3 kids in tow. But she had no place to go.



Stories like this one are all too common here at Acres. The need for more stable housing and resources to help homeless moms and kids is at an all-time high.

Our resources are thin right now and I could sure use your help. Homelessness does not take a summer vacation!

Your \$35 gift secures a night of safety for one child or one mom.

Can I count on you to provide 1 night, 3 nights, maybe 5 nights of safety? Every night matters and brings a mom and her kids one step closer to feeling safe.

See how there is:

- A clear need to be met?
- A specific way the donor's gift will help?
- A clear way the donor can be a hero by sending a gift today?

Both letters were sent to the exact same group of donors. The second letter raised eight times as much money.

8x

Storytelling Checklist #1: Asking for Support

Any time we're helping an organization Ask for money, we make sure every one of these boxes is checked:



Printer Friendly

- Tell a Story of Need.
- Be specific about the problem.
- Is the problem simple and clear?
- Use emotion!
- Tell the donor what the solution is.
- Tell the donor that their gift will provide the solution, and Ask the donor to provide the solution today.
- Don't tell the donor that their gift will help your organization provide the solution.
- Don't tell the donor that their gift will support your organization.
- Ask the donor to send in a gift today.

*This is the **Ask** in our
Ask, Thank, Report,
Repeat system.*

ProTip

When you are trying to get your donor to take action, present a Problem to your donor that is small enough for her to solve. Say your organization serves homeless moms and kids. Your call-to-action will be most successful if you make the call-to-action (the role your donor can play) something possible and powerful.

Example: “You can provide safe shelter for a mom and her children for just \$53 per night” will usually work better than “Send a gift to help end homelessness in our city.”

Note that this is just about the call-to-action. You can have a successful campaign to “end homelessness”—but your call-to-action should feel possible and powerful to one donor.



If you are wondering about whether the funds raised from this method are designated or undesignated, they are undesignated IF you do three specific things in your appeal. We have a white paper on the three things you need to do (and they are easy). Get in touch if you're interested.

STORY TYPE #2: REPORTING



When you are Reporting to donors, tell this type of story:

A Story of Triumph—where the person has been helped or the problem has been solved. Show the donor what the need was (the “before”), what things were like after the need was met (the “after”), and then celebrate her for providing exactly what was needed!



Stories of Triumph happen mostly in newsletters, e-newsletters, in your Annual Report, and in person for major donors.

Finally! This is where we get to tell *completed* stories—stories that show the incredible transformation that your organization causes.

Story Type:

Story of Triumph

- A solved problem
- A helped beneficiary
- A completed story

We call this “Reporting” and it’s the foundation for keeping your donors. After all, if you never tell your donors what their gifts accomplished, can you really expect them to keep giving additional gifts?

And here’s the key to Reporting well: share a Story of Triumph and give the credit to your donor.



Bragging is not the same as Reporting

In our experience, most organizations don't Report enough (especially to major donors). And when they do, they focus on what the organization did, on the *organization's* role in the story.

We call that bragging. As in, "Our programs provided holistic care to 345 people . . ."

That leads to "Ask, Thank, Brag, Repeat" instead of the far more successful "Ask, Thank, Report, Repeat." **Remember . . . focus on your donor's role in the story, not your organization's!**

Example Time

Here's part of a newsletter story—a Report—that a client of ours sent to donors a couple months prior to working with us. Notice the bragging.

The Mobile Dental Program provides free, urgent dental care to low-income children and adults who lack insurance or a realistic way to pay for treatment. The service is provided in Minnesota, Oregon and Washington. Our fleet of dental vans provides up to 30 clinics per week.



Last year with the help of dedicated volunteers, we provided approximately \$6 worth of care to patients for every \$1 invested in the program.

In 2013, our 12 Oregon Mobile Dental vans treated more than 17,000 people. These people are no longer battling the intense pain and preventing future systemic complications associated with advanced dental diseases as well as socio-economic challenges associated with severe dental problems.

Children from lower-income families are almost twice as likely to have decay as

those from higher-income families, yet they face disproportionately high barriers to receiving care. While in theory all Oregon children are covered by Healthy Kids insurance, there are many reasons why they may be having trouble accessing it, such as difficulty finding providers that will accept it.

Notice how:

- The donor is never mentioned?
- There's a lot of numbers, medical jargon and education?
- **Notice that when you run into all that detail you start to skip ahead?** So do your donors.

Now look at the next time we talked about this program. We told the story of one person who had been helped, we prominently mentioned the donor's role, and we gave the donor the credit:

Emergency Root Canal Saved Schoolgirl's Tooth!

Your kind gift helped save the smile of 14-year-old Cecelia who needed urgent dental work.

When Cecelia bumped her tooth, it seemed like a harmless accident.



Her mother thought the soreness and swelling would go away, but the pain went from bad to worse and Cecelia begged to stay home from school.

But thanks to your gift, Cecelia was able to be helped by the Mobile Dental Clinic.

It turned out that Cecelia had nerve damage and an infection in one of . . .

There are a handful of things to notice here, all of which work together to make this an effective Report. This story:

- **Focuses on a person, not a program.**
- **Quickly summarizes the need, then showed the donor how they met that need.**
 - > *We do this because eye-tracking studies show that most donors don't read the whole story.*
- Directly **credits the donor** for causing the transformation.
- The language and paragraphs are **simpler and easier to read** quickly.



Now your donor knows—at a glance—that her gift made a difference. And she is more likely to give to your organization again.

Prior to working with us, this organization didn't keep performance results for each newsletter. So, we don't know exactly how much the new version outperformed the old.

But . . .



**. . . after applying these
guidelines for 6 months their
net fundraising revenue was up**

53%

Storytelling Checklist #2: Reporting Back to Donors

Any time we're helping an organization Report back to its donors on the effects of their gifts, for each story, we make sure every one of these boxes is checked:



Printer Friendly

- Tell the completed story, including both the Need and the Triumph.
- Summarize the story in the first couple of paragraphs.
- Be specific about what the problem was.
- Be specific about the end outcome; how things are after the problem was solved.
- Tell the donor that their gift helped provide the solution and cause the transformation.
- Thank the donor.



The single best manual for how to do this is Tom Ahern's book, *[Making Money With Donor Newsletters](#)*.

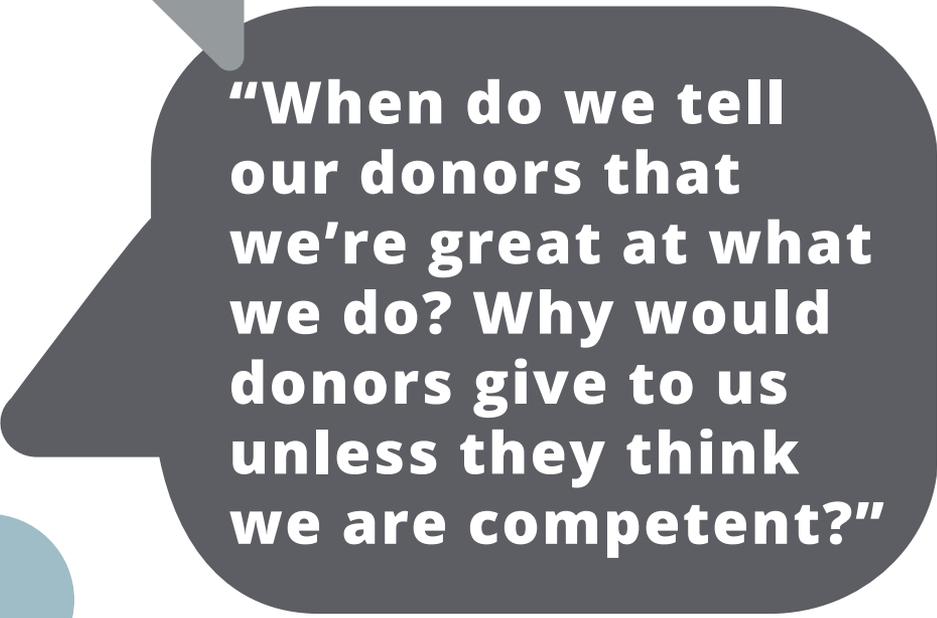
A light blue silhouette of a person sitting at a desk with a computer monitor, representing a donor or recipient.

*This is the **Report**
in our Ask, Thank,
Report, Repeat system.*

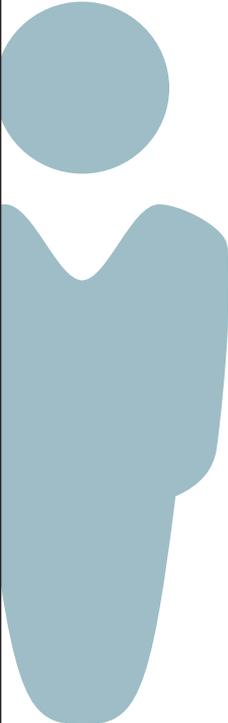


“Hey,”

our clients inevitably ask us,



“When do we tell our donors that we’re great at what we do? Why would donors give to us unless they think we are competent?”



We tell them the hard-won fundraising secret:

As a rule, donors give to make a difference more than they give to fund your organization.

There are exceptions of course; there are some major donors and foundations you should talk to about your effectiveness. But talk about impact to everybody else. We’ve helped organizations take this advice to the bank many, many times.

Big Idea #3



You have a Big Story you need to constantly tell your donor.

Your Big Story is the story your organization tells through all of your communications over time. It's the feeling a donor gets from your long-term storytelling.

And it's a simple story. It's that your donor is needed, and her gift makes a real difference.

But telling this Big Story well requires a key ingredient that most nonprofits are missing: **vulnerability**. Without vulnerability, most nonprofits accidentally tell their donors that they don't matter much . . .



Your Big Story

Your Donor is Needed



Her Gift Makes a Real Difference

We regularly look at the donor communications for a LOT of nonprofits. We spread them out across our conference room table and look for the over-arching message—the Big Story—they tell. Here's what they tend to communicate:

"We've got this covered. We've taken care of everybody we've come across. The need is enormous, we've been very busy, and it would be great if you would consider partnering with us."

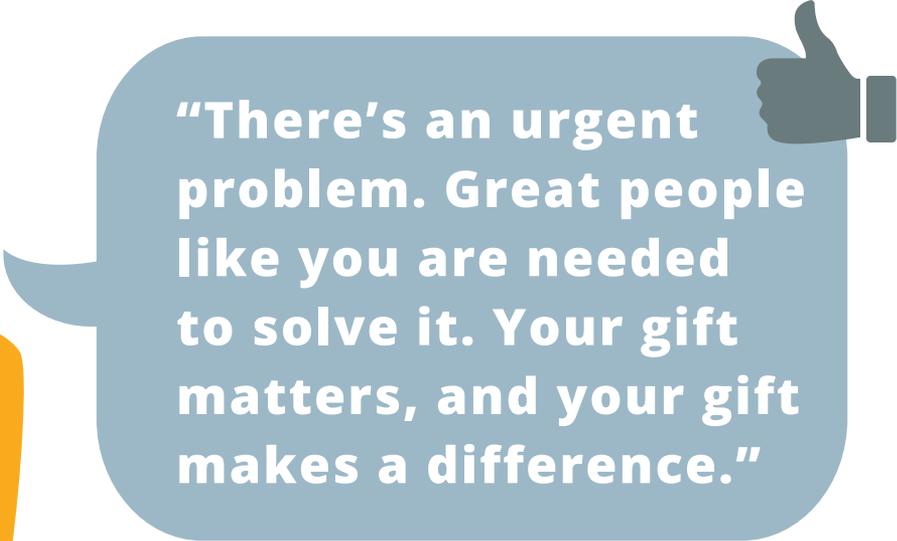


Notice how it sounds like everything is fine, and that the donor isn't really needed? How there's no vulnerability?

Like we mentioned, we've looked at a LOT of nonprofit communications. And let's face it, there's some fundraising messaging out there that . . . could be improved.

If you catch us at a low point, here's what we'll say: **Most nonprofits' communications—their Big Stories—are a lot like that guy at a party who corners you and tells you all about himself. But then at some point he realizes he should include you, so he says, "Enough about me, would you like to partner with me?"**

Contrast that against the vulnerable message successful fundraising organizations tend to communicate:



"There's an urgent problem. Great people like you are needed to solve it. Your gift matters, and your gift makes a difference."

So how do organizations send that message?
Here's a checklist for your organization . . .

Long-Term Storytelling Checklist:



Printer Friendly

- Present the Problem:** Be comfortable talking about the problem your organization is working on, and describe it with urgency, emotion and vulnerability.
- “You”:** Focus more on your donor’s role than on your organization’s role. Use the word “you” a lot.
- The Need/Triumph Mix:** Be comfortable sharing Needs in some communications and Triumphs in others. Most successful fundraising organizations have a really good mix of appeals (sharing Needs) and newsletters (sharing Triumphs).
- Don’t Complicate It:** Know that this will seem simple and repetitive to you. But your donors, who are not as familiar with the story as you are, will love you for it.



Something special happens once organizations tell Stories of Need when they Ask, and Stories of Triumph when they Report.

First, their communications raise more money. Second, their donors stick around longer, which in turn helps raise even more money.

Follow the recipe in this eBook and the Big Story you'll tell your donors is that they matter, they are needed, and their gifts make a difference.

Because smart storytellers are vulnerable when they need help, and joyfully share credit when they report successes. Smart storytellers are not just telling one particular story, they are telling their Big Story.



Ask | Thank | Report | Repeat

We developed a fundraising system (you could call it a storytelling system) called **Ask, Thank, Report, Repeat**. The system is designed to help organizations do everything we've been talking about so that their donors take action.

Because when you tell the right types of stories at the right times, and give your donor a powerful role to play, you're going to raise a lot of money.



Bonus Tip for Writers

Use verb tense to help take your donors on a journey.

Here's another internal tip our writers use as they work on donor communications:

- When **Asking** for support (appeals, e-appeals, events) use the future simple tense to describe what the donor's gift will do: *"Your gift will help . . ."*
- When **Thanking** for a gift (receipt letters, thank you notes) use the present continuous tense: *"Your gift is helping . . ."*
- When **Reporting** back to donors (newsletters, e-news) use the past simple tense: *"Your gift helped . . ."*

It's a subtle—but powerful—way of communicating to a donor that their gift matters and that it made a difference.



- Conclusion -

Storytelling for ACTION

Remember that the goal of any story you tell is to get your donor to take action. So design your individual stories, and the Big Story that your organization tells over time, to be a story that causes action.

The ideas in this eBook are tested and proven. Use them with confidence.

Your donors (and your not-yet donors) are good people. They are looking for easy ways they can do good. Get their attention, tell them a story that engages them, and give them a powerful role to play in the story.

Put your donor in the position to be a hero—then tell her when she was a hero—and she will love giving to your organization!





Storytelling for ACTION

3 Big Ideas Cheat Sheet



Printer Friendly

#1

Your donor should have a role—and see herself—in every single story you tell.



#2

Ask =
Story of
Need

Report =
Story of
Triumph

How you tell a story is less important than *what* story you tell and *when* you tell it.

#3

You have a Big Story you need to constantly tell your donor.

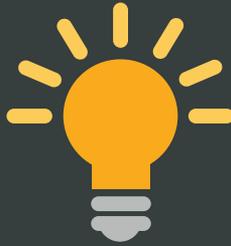


Your Big Story

Your
Donor is
Needed



Her Gift
Makes
a Real
Difference



About Better Fundraising

Better Fundraising is Jim Shapiro and Steven Screen. Jim and Steven are fundraisers. They're coaches. They're passionate about you and your success.

These proven storytellers eat, sleep, and breathe fundraising. Even if it means chasing a story to Nigeria when your wife is seven months pregnant and your house just burned down. OK, that only happened once. But, you get the point. They're committed; to you and your donors.

To find out more visit

www.BetterFundraising.com

