

How to Collect Compelling Stories to Use in Your Fundraising

And the types of stories
you should be collecting



Storytelling has become a hot topic in non-profit fundraising. It went from something that you almost never heard about just a few years ago, to the topic of numerous books, websites and conferences today. There's a reason for this change: storytelling is *extremely important* to good fundraising.

As fundraisers, we need to be carrying on a constant conversation with our donors. Sometimes this conversation happens in person or on the phone. Other times, we talk to our donors through newsletters, e-mails and snail mail letters. No matter how we carry on the conversation, a dialog like this without stories becomes stale and ultimately boring.

We need our donors emotionally involved and excited about our work... not bored. That's why we need to incorporate stories into our fundraising work.

Two Types of Non-Profit Storytelling

In my experience, when we talk about "storytelling" in non-profit fundraising, we're talking about one of two separate things.

The first is the "story" of your theatre – this is the overall story arc that is being told by your organization about your work, and includes your big picture vision and mission. This story is contained in your case for support, and should permeate everything your theatre does to communicate with donors and prospects.

The second type of storytelling that your theatre will engage in, and our focus for this article, is telling the stories of the individual people and groups that are involved with your organization. Doing this well is incredibly important, because it makes your work real and so much more compelling for donors.

That's what we're talking about in this article... how to collect amazing stories from the people you are helping and who are working with your organization that you can share with prospects, donors, and supporters of your theatre.

The Four Categories of Stories You Should be Collecting

In my mind, there are four different categories of stories you can and should be collecting to use in your donor communications:

Client Stories – The first type of stories you should be collecting are client stories – stories told by those who your theatre has helped. It could be from parents, seniors, students, teachers,

community leaders, business owners, These types of stories, told by those who know your value, first-hand, are the most compelling stories you can share with your donors.

Staff Stories – The second type of stories to collect are staff stories – preferably, stories from your program staff about the work they do and the impact it has both on your clients and on the communities you serve.

Donor Stories – Next, you should be collecting donor stories – these are stories from donors, board members and corporate sponsors about why they give to your theatre, what they most like about your mission and programs, what good they have seen done by your organization and why they think others should join them and get involved. Also included in this group of stories are volunteer stories, told by volunteers about why they give their time to your theatre, and what they have seen while working out in the field.

Community Stories – Finally, you can collect and use community stories. These are stories told by local leaders, politicians, civic and business leaders and plain old average people in your community about the impact your work has had in making the community and the world a better place.

Each of these four different types of stories can be used as part of your fundraising letters, newsletters, phone calls and in-person meetings to better tell the story of your theatre.

How to Solicit Stories for Your Fundraising Work

So – how exactly to you solicit these stories, along with permission to tell them? Here are 4 rules for collecting great stories to use in your fundraising work:

Rule #1: Explain Why the Story is Important

It is important that you tell each person you are contacting for stories why the stories you are collecting are so important, how they will be used as part of the overall fundraising work of your organization. You should also tell the person why their story, in particular, would be compelling for donors to hear.

Make sure the person knows that they have an integral part to play in the ongoing success of your theatre through the stories they are providing to you.

Rule #2: Make a Direct Ask

Don't beat around the bush... you have to make an ask (an ask for a story). If you want people to share their stories with you, you need to ask them to do so. Say something like, "Would you

be willing to tell me about your experience with our organization?” Or, “Could I sit down with you for an hour to hear about how you got involved in our theatre?”

In-person conversations are better for collecting stories than phone calls, but they are not always possible. Make sure the person leaves 30-60 minutes open for your time together. Don't be wishy-washy – give the person you are calling a time when you are going to have the conversation, and stick to it.

Rule #3: Collect More Information than You Will Be Able to Use

You won't always be able to share complete stories with your donors. You could be using the stories as part of a 30 minute in-person fundraising ask, but you could just as easily be using a three-sentence summary of the story in one of your fundraising letters.

No matter how you plan to use the story, you want to be able to pick and choose which information you present from lots of different options. I always suggest you collect far more stories than you need and that you collect more information from each storyteller than you will be able to use. That way, you can pick and choose the best information to include in your fundraising materials.

Rule #4: Ask Open Ended Questions

Finally, I suggest you ask open-ended questions so that you can find the real emotional gold in each story. For example, if you say to a former client, “We provided your son with a \$10,000 scholarship, right?” They will answer “Yes.” On the other hand, if you ask “How did we help your family?” They may talk about the scholarship, or they may talk about the hope you provided them for their children's future or how they never dreamed their kids would go to college or any one of an infinite number of possible stories.

This type of story – the emotional, heartfelt kind – is far more compelling than simple facts and statistics. Ask open ended questions to let people tell their stories, and then use follow-up questions to get to the heart of the matter.

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