



STORYTELLING OPENS THE DOOR TO SUCCESSFUL FUNDRAISING

Storytelling has a crucial role in fundraising. Master the concept and you're well on your way to success.

Storytelling is integral in every phase of fundraising. There are a myriad of ways how our work is impacted by this simple, yet profound tool for communicating. There are wondrous bits and pieces that when combined create a whole. And all are necessary.

Through my years of work, I have identified a number of axioms that are as inviolable as mathematical formulas that define physical reality. Here are five I think are crucial for anyone to succeed as a fundraiser.

Axiom 1: There is no possibility for building meaningful relationships with donors, or anyone for that matter, without storytelling. I think it's a given that fundraising is predicated on the building of significant and relevant relationships. People don't make major gifts without a feeling of ease and trust with the people representing an institution or a charity. They have to feel like they know you, and that you know them.

This is where storytelling and story listening come into play. When you as a fundraiser listen to the stories of the person you're engaged with, psychic distances shrink and authentic connections emerge. Likewise, when you reveal yourself by sharing your stories, it allows the potential donor to feel closer to you as well.

Interestingly, the Latin root for storytelling is *narrare* which means "to pass on knowledge." It's through our narratives that we can come to know others. There takes place the possibility for authentic connection.

Axiom 2: The donor's stories will tell you all you need to know about what is near and dear to them, and how to position your ask. If you listen closely to the donor's stories as you get to know them, their stories reveal their values and personal drivers. And this knowledge assists you in crafting your ask so that it aligns with what is most important to them.

Axiom 3: Listen to their story before you tell yours. One of the biggest mistakes fundraisers can make is that they sit down with a new donor and launch into the story of their organization and its needs. What they first need to do is attend to the donor and his or her world. There will be plenty of time to tell them about your organization and its important role in the world.

I know one fundraiser for the YMCA who visited with a community leader who was known to be a miser and rarely gave to anything. He dropped in on him every few weeks for nearly 6 months to just chat, and during that time never mentioned the Y.



The thing he noticed on his first visit were two framed photographs on the gentleman's credenza—one of him with Arnold Palmer and the other with Lee Trevino. No family shots at all. It was clear what this man valued, and golf was often the topic of their conversations.

After the Y fundraiser's daughter was born in the new preemie unit of the local hospital, and the newspaper had pictured them on the front page leaving with her after 6 weeks in the unit, he stopped by to visit this gentleman. There in a frame was that picture, proudly displayed with his photos of Palmer and Trevino! It was soon after that that the gentleman announced he was making a \$500K donation to the Y.

Axiom 4: Stories, not statistics, evoke the emotion and desire to help. The fact that you served 5,000 meals to hungry people in the last month, or you kept 2,000 teens off the streets through your summer camp program do not move potential donors to give. It's the stories of the people you serve, of the volunteers in your organization, and of the wondrous ways your services impact the life of your community. That's what captures the imaginations of donors, and draws them into your world wanting to be a part of it through their support.

Axiom 5: The universal resides in the particulars. Tell stories about the difference your organization made in the life of one person whose life would have taken a very different course without your assistance. People respond to the particulars of people's lives.

It's hard for me to care if you're telling me the story of thousands of people affected by a disaster. I'm bombarded by these kinds of stories every day in the news. But when I see the picture of one child starving and suffering, it's difficult for me to look away. Do this and the universal message will come through loud and clear.

Richard Stone
Story Analytics Master
I•D•E•A•S — The Innovation Studio