

Who Brands Your Nonprofit?

Who Tells Its Story, and How?

by Carlo M. Cuesta

Our identity within the sector is shaped by the stories we tell about ourselves, but it is also shaped by the stories told about us by others. As the author explains, the evolution of communication in a socially connected world has shown that there is little patience for audience constraint. Instead, audiences' contributions to and shaping of the narrative have become a necessity, and in no way is it a bad thing—opening the door, as it does, to cocreative engagement.

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NARRATIVE THERAPY PIONEER DR. DAVID DENBOROUGH says, "Who we are and what we do are influenced by the stories we tell about ourselves [. . .] We take certain events and link them together into a plot or theme. And this plot or theme about our lives then shapes our identities."¹

In his book *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw*

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Inspiration and Transform Experience, Denborough explains that self-image is deeply influenced by how we frame events in our past: “If we tell stories that emphasize only desolation, then we become weaker. Alternatively, we can tell our stories in ways that make us stronger, in ways that soothe the losses, in ways that ease sorrow.”² This process requires deep reflection, through which one is able to see his or her own storyline, discover inspiring themes, address negative assumptions, and rewrite deeply held scripts.

Organizational identity within the nonprofit sector is also shaped by stories. Unfortunately, the very makeup of the institution and the demands to prove the value, relevancy, and effectiveness of its work creates the need for a simplified narrative—one that veers away from the complexity of addressing difficult, sometimes unsolvable issues and toward a heroic journey that leads to proof of success. As these types of narratives have proliferated, nonprofit storytelling has become homogenized, with organizations making use of similar plotlines, structures, and conventions in order to express impact. But how can we strengthen our identities if we only project a one-dimensional portrait that is controlled through a single point of view?

When management at the Minnesota Orchestra locked their musicians out over a contract dispute, each side tried to control the message. Eventually, a frustrated and angry public voice began to be heard, applying a new kind of pressure to the negotiations. Town hall meetings were held and new coalitions were formed, independent of both groups. What was considered a world-class orchestra was now the subject of weekly letters to the editor in the major daily that shared the public’s side of the story and offered unsolicited opinions and strategies to both sides. Even after they settled, during the orchestra’s first concert back audience members yelled during the opening speeches, calling for the return of the orchestra’s beloved music director and the firing of the organization’s president.

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patience for audience constraint. Instead, audiences’ contributions to and shaping of the narrative have become a commonplace necessity. Particularly within the nonprofit sector, stories—and thus an organization’s identity—exist within the public domain. Through storytelling, when effectively guided, both internal and external publics are given the opportunity to lend to the creation of a meaningful narrative. A stronger bond is formed when our participants, donors, and community members—along with staff and volunteers—see themselves less as stakeholders and more as story shapers.

On a breezy winter day in Tacoma, Washington, the staff and board of Associated Ministries sat in a large circle in a church gymnasium. The day’s agenda focused on (1) deconstructing the mission; (2) aligning with impact; (3) raising voices; and (4) sharing stories. As members of the group began to articulate their experiences working with individuals and families in poverty, the stories came forth unfiltered. In one instance, a client was stuck in a cycle of bad relationships. Another was seeking a last chance at some stability for her family. In all, none of the stories had pat endings. What was revealed, in Shakespeare’s words, was “the quality of mercy.” Through subtle yet moving moments, these stories conveyed the humanity of both the story’s main character and the storyteller. It presented the challenges Associated Ministries is tasked to address, and it framed the impact of its work within the ambiguity of the lives of the people its staff and board serve. As the day came to a close, a cocreated narrative began to emerge; this larger story spoke to a deeper purpose of their work, but also to how it could be improved and become more effective at meeting need. Here, through deep reflection around mission, impact, and the power of the individual and group voice, Associated Ministries strengthened its identity—because, in the end, the larger story was owned by everyone in the room.

Harnessing the power of cocreation requires letting go. Particularly with organizational identity and messaging, there is an inherent need to control every word. Consistency is often valued over accessibility. Researchers at Harvard

University's Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations found that successful nonprofit brands have elements of democracy baked into them, trusting that the "story shapers" mentioned earlier have an understanding of the organization's core identity. If organizations want greater community ownership of the cause, then they need to allow staff, volunteers, participants, and the greater public a true opportunity for ownership.³ Here are a few examples:

- Recently, the American Craft Council led a series of conversations exploring the identity of craft in America. Participants were asked questions about their experiences making, sharing, and buying craft. What was not asked was, "What is craft?" That would have provoked a divisive argument, when the goal was to bring people together. Instead, the organization went in search of shared values, knowing that this would serve as the glue needed to strengthen a growing community of people.
- Creative Care for Reaching Independence, a Moorhead, Minnesota-based provider of services for people with disabilities, encouraged one of its care providers to make a video of clients and staff with members of the Moorhead community dancing to a Taylor Swift song and inviting the young pop star to their upcoming walk event. The result, after being posted on YouTube, went viral. The low-budget video is filled with joy. Above all, it is authentic. Creative Care's executive director, Shannon Bock, put it best: "It's our principles in action."
- On the donor wall of the Commonwealth Theatre is a creative reminder of public ownership. Sitting on rows of shelves are mason jars filled with mementos provided by supporters, symbolizing each supporter's own particular story, no one jar more important than the other and together expressing the vitality of this theater's audience.

Whereas the impact of Creative Care's "viral video" might seem like luck, the organization was able to successfully leverage the passion of its community members to cocreate a narrative

that illustrates what Creative Care stands for. In short, the organization figured out how to pivot from telling a story to sharing a story. This is an important distinction. When we share a story, we craft a context and structure to which others can relate and to which they can contribute. Telling a story creates a reaction; sharing a story creates a relationship. The former is a promotional tactic, the latter a means of making mission impact possible. Organizations that recognize the difference are able to create space for the public to engage in collaboration to shape and address a relevant and meaningful cause. In addition, as the sector addresses the challenges of measurement and proving the effectiveness of each theory of change, a narrative context that is cocreated and utilizes data as key plot points advances credibility. Within the public domain, stories are vetted and assumptions challenged, making an even stronger case for engagement.

In order to tell our own stories, we need to listen to and embrace the stories of those we wish to reach. A story is a gift, not a donor-acquisition strategy. Stories bind us together by allowing us to glimpse the other. And when we glimpse the other, we seek to understand it in all its nuances. It overtakes and ripples across our consciousness, forcing us to reconcile what we are experiencing with what we think we already know. Slotting what we do into the homogenized, one-dimensional portraits we seem almost tacitly to have decided best express our impact diminishes the story of our work and closes us off from the kind of cocreative engagement we should be doing our utmost to achieve.

NOTES

1. David Denborough, *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014), 3–4.
2. Ibid., viii.
3. Nathalie Kylander and Christopher Stone, "The Role of Brand in the Nonprofit Sector" *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 10, no. 2 (Spring 2012).

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