

Story Collection for Strategic Communication

Why Stories?

Stories are how we share our work and impact at a visceral level—they are a critical tool in our strategic communication efforts. Because stories speak to our hearts and our fundamental values, they teach us not only how we *should* act, but they can inspire us and give us the courage *to* act. In addition, stories help us remember complex information, making them an important educational tool. We also love to repeat compelling stories, thus passing along the content *and* the emotion, which over time, can change hearts, minds, and behaviors. Therefore, you can and should think of story collection, management, and dissemination as fundamental to achieving your communication goals. In this document, we offer tips and guidelines to help you embark on a strategic story collection effort.

“Storytelling may seem like an old-fashioned tool, today—and it is. That’s exactly what makes it so powerful. Life happens in the narratives we tell one another. A story can go where quantitative analysis is denied admission: our hearts. Data can persuade people, but it doesn’t inspire them to act; to do that, you need to wrap your vision in a story that fires the imagination and stirs the soul.” —[Executive Coach Harrison Monarth](#)

Key Considerations

Collecting stories may sound like a straightforward project—after all, your organization likely knows dozens of individuals affected by the issues on which you work. There are, however, important up-front considerations that will save time and energy and ensure that the stories you collect reinforce your strategic communication or advocacy goals.

Stories

Speak to our hearts and our fundamental values



Can change hearts, minds, and behaviors



Are fundamental to achieve your communication goals



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In addition, when you ask people to share what are often very personal anecdotes, you are asking them to give of themselves and to be vulnerable. This shouldn't be taken lightly, which is partly why it is so important to be strategic and thoughtful when you engage in a story collection effort.

Before doing any outreach to collect stories, consider the following questions:

- 1. Who needs to hear this story?** Your target audience. As with all communication strategies, tactics, and messages, your target audience should be front and center. To that end, the first thing you should do is *write down the target audience(s) for your effort. If there is more than one, list them in order of importance for your current effort.*

Next, **identify 1–2 messages or frames that resonate with each audience.** The frames of reference are how we organize information in our minds. They are patterns that dictate who and what is part of the story and who or what is not. It provides perspective on the issue, gives facts and messages meaning, helps connects dots for the reader, and guides responses. *For example, if you are speaking to policymakers, a key frame may be opportunity—the idea that everyone in our community should be given a fair chance to meet their potential, in which case a key message may be that housing discrimination undermines opportunity. If you are targeting parents, protecting children’s safety and well-being may be top of mind. It may also be helpful to think beyond specific advocacy positions or policy data points by asking yourself: What does this person/organization care about? What is the underlying value that drives their work? Ultimately, you will need to identify different stories that speak to what is most important to each target audience, which is why it is critical to do this thinking before you conduct interviews or outreach.*

- 2. What story am I trying to tell?** That of the storyteller. Asking people to tell their stories is ultimately not about you; it's about the storyteller, since this is a very personal process for most. If, however, you take the time to listen fully and authentically, you are likely to hear stories that reflect both your key messages *and* messages that will resonate with your audiences (which you wrote down in step 1). These are the stories that you want to use to support your broader goals. (Don't have key messages? [Learn how to develop them here.](#))

Here is an example of how this might look in practice: Say you are advocating for the passage of a housing anti-discrimination policy. A key message of your effort is the negative financial implications of discrimination on the people who experience it. You may have identified a few target audiences, including policymakers (to change the law) and the media (to raise awareness throughout the community that this unfair practice is taking place and should be stopped). For both audiences, you



need a story from someone who has had their economic security undermined or destroyed by this specific form of housing discrimination to spark empathy and drive your audiences to take action. Let's say you also know that one of the decision-makers you are targeting is particularly committed to children's issues. You will want to look for a story that also speaks to the impact on kids. These are the factors you are considering when you reach out for stories, and they will also inform the questions you ask during the interview. By *adapting the interview guide template* provided on page 5, you can more clearly identify what you should ask.

- 3. Who is the ideal storyteller?** It depends on what you want to achieve. This is largely based on your audiences and goals, as described above, but in most cases you want storytellers who represent diverse backgrounds and experiences. Common factors to consider are race, ethnicity, gender identity, location, socio-economic status, age, employment status, sexual orientation, and educational background. *Make a list of the characteristics you need* (not just want) represented in your storytellers given your goals. For example, in the housing discrimination example, you may need stories from people living in various neighborhoods to show the widespread impact of the discrimination and garner support from multiple councilmembers. You may also need stories from people who may traditionally be the "opposition" but in fact support your efforts, and whom decision-makers are likely to listen to, such as property owners, realtors, and landlords.

We know you know this, but the storyteller is the most important person here and you should prioritize their privacy, dignity, and autonomy at all times.

This may mean allowing the person to stop sharing at any point, navigating follow-up questions carefully, and fully respecting someone's boundaries about when, where, and how they share their story. This may also mean recognizing the risk of re-traumatization in asking someone to share a personal story. Consider having on-hand contact information for trained counselors to help storytellers cope with difficult feelings related to sharing their story. Also keep in mind the unique challenges faced when soliciting and using stories from children. You should have resources on hand to support kids and their caregivers in these situations, and you need to obtain informed consent from parents/guardians as well as the children themselves.

You will often be asking storytellers to share their experiences in various formats and settings, so it is important to select individuals who are able to relay their story in a succinct, clear manner. Importantly, you're looking for people who in fact tell a story when they share with you—that is, they offer details, images, and rich descriptions—rather than simply giving information. Certainly you can and should help people become more comfortable telling their stories, but a basic level of comfort is an important selection criterion.

- 4. What is the ideal format and length?** Short, to the point, and in a format that your audience prefers, not you. In most cases, you will capture stories in written format that can be adapted and used across channels. It is ideal to also capture photos, audio, and video of your storyteller whenever possible, as these visuals reinforce the emotion behind the story and make it more real to the audience (and demonstrate the story is not a work of fiction). It is also important to have visuals if you plan to use the stories on platforms like Instagram or Twitter. In terms of length, maintain one longer, comprehensive

version of the story that touches on multiple messages and frames. From there, you can pull out shorter quotes or sections, to pitch to reporters as part of your earned media strategy or to use on social media.

Collecting Stories

After you have identified the types of stories you need to collect, from whom, and in what format, it's time to prepare the stories. If you have direct access to individuals with relevant experiences, make a list of their names and contact information. If not, make a list of organizations with whom you have trusting relationships and that have access to the right individuals. Reach out to them about your project and ask for their assistance in identifying and contacting people who have compelling stories and are comfortable sharing.

- 1. Determine the best person to reach out** to each individual on the list, likely based on a combination of familiarity with the individual and staff capacity. Make sure you create a realistic timeline for outreach as a team.
- 2. Devise a script.** It could be something like, "I'm working with some colleagues here in [name of community] to pass a law that would [do X] and help prevent other people from going through what you and your family went through when [X happened to you]. Your experience is powerful and sharing your story would really help us explain to [target audience] what this feels like. Would you be willing to write down/record/videotape your story?"
- 3. Meet your interviewee where they are.** Although this might literally mean holding the interview in a physical space convenient and comfortable to the person you are interviewing, it also means taking a step back and thinking about the entire interview experience from the storyteller's perspective. What signals does the interviewer's attire send? How formal or informal should the interviewer be? How will release forms and demographic questions be perceived? Will pictures and identifying information be an invasion of privacy or harmful to the interviewee? Ultimately, the interviewer's job is to create the space for good storytelling.
- 4. Use the interview guide** you created earlier to conduct the interview either in person or on the phone. Assuming this is the first time you or your colleague is hearing the story in full, you should take notes and listen for the key messages and themes you know you will need. Consider this a "test" interview. If you are conducting the interview in person, you may want to ask if you can record to conversation just for your own benefit to ensure you accurately capture quotes and information. The use of the interview guide will also help ensure consistency in your story collection efforts, regardless of the interviewer or interviewee.
- 5. Regroup with your internal team to review everyone's interview notes.** Assess the quality of the stories you have collected with regard to supporting your larger goals. Do the stories indeed reinforce key messages? Can they be framed in a way that will support your efforts? What information, if any, is still missing? Was the storyteller open to sharing their story in various formats? Use this time to identify

A note about partnering to collect stories.

If you will be working with an external organization to identify and collect stories, be sure to have a frank conversation about expectations. For example, you should ask if your partner organization is comfortable having its clients or contacts share their stories without an organizational representative present, or if they have other restrictions on how stories can be shared after collection. Similarly, the partner organization may want to do the actual story collection, in which case it is even more important that you provide a clear, comprehensive interview guide to make their job easier and ensure you get what you need.

the strongest stories and determine next steps, such as which storyteller(s) you will ask to appear in a video or at an in-person meeting.

6. Turn the strongest interview notes into narratives with a beginning, middle, and end. In other words, **write the story!** Enlist support from your communication and marketing colleagues if needed. Share the draft with the storyteller for approval and updates, if that is part of your process, or move forward with dissemination based on your plans.
7. If relevant, go back to the storyteller and make plans to **capture their story on video or audio and take photos.** If possible, factor in time to help the storyteller practice telling the story in a concise, passionate way that emphasizes your key messages.

Interview Guide Template

Use this template as a guide to create your own interview questions—some of these questions may not be relevant to your effort and others may need to be modified. Also, think about the flow of the conversation you want to have. In that vein, consider asking the demographic questions until the end of your interview. You should always begin the interview by introducing yourself and briefly explaining why you're collecting this story (e.g., "We want to put a human face on the issue of X because we know it's harming real people and more people here in Y need to know about this"). You can keep it simple but understand that some people may need more time to build trust and comprehend why you are asking them to share of themselves in this way. By explaining what you're looking for and why—and perhaps even sharing a short story about yourself—you are increasing the storyteller's comfort level and may open the door for them to share important details they otherwise wouldn't have thought were relevant.

Before conducting interviews, consult senior leadership and/or counsel within your organization to understand specific permissions and approvals needed for this effort.

1. *What is your first and last name? Please spell them for me.*

2. *Do you prefer follow up via email, phone, text?*

3. *What is the best phone number to call you?*

4. *When is the best time for me to call or email if I have any additional questions?*

5. *What is your email address? Is that a good way to reach you?*

6. *Where do you currently live? (City/neighborhood)*

7. *If you feel comfortable sharing, what is your race/ethnicity?*

8. *If you feel comfortable sharing, what is your age?*

9. [Insert additional demographic questions here; be sure to allow people an “out” if they don’t want to share this information.]
10. *Please tell us a bit about yourself.* [Consider asking specific questions to get information that will help humanize the storyteller. For example, it may help to know if they have children or other caregiving responsibilities, how they spend their time, and what they do for fun.]
11. *Please tell us your story.* Here is where you will ask questions to elicit the “meat” of the story—what happened, to whom, when, where? How did they feel? Think of the storyteller as the protagonist in a great book—what challenge did they face? How did they cope with it? What was the outcome? You ultimately want to create a story that someone else would be intrigued to read or hear and that supports your specific communication goal. Write questions that will help you get there! A great tool to support you in this can be found here: <https://storytelling.comnetwork.org/theme/content/lesson/2>
12. *If you could say one thing to people who have the power to make a change so this doesn’t happen again, what would you say?*
13. *Is there anything else you would like to say about this experience or topic? Thank you for sharing your story; it is very powerful. Before we end, I’d like to discuss sharing your story.*
14. *Are you willing to speak face-to-face with elected officials, such as in a private meeting?*
15. *Are you willing to testify publicly, in front of [city council, county council, state legislature, etc.]?*
16. *Are you willing to appear on video or be recorded telling your story so we could play it for decision-makers? What about if we shared that video or recording online?*
17. *Are you willing to appear on camera for a TV interview?*
18. *Are you willing to speak to a reporter live in a radio interview?*
19. *Are you willing to have your story published in the newspaper or online?*
20. *Consider linking to social media.* Depending on the project and purpose (especially if you plan to use the stories in a public education campaign), you may want to have a brief conversation about social media. Ask if the person uses social media and if they are open to sharing their story on this channel and having you do likewise. If relevant, ask for their social media handles, so you can tag them when sharing their story.

At the end, share the next steps. For example, you may tell the person that your organization will write up their story based on what they told you and give them a chance to review it. If they already signed a generic release and you'll be taking it from here, you can remind them of that. Or, you may tell them you will follow up to schedule a time for them to be filmed telling their story. If you aren't yet sure what the next steps will be, offer a sincere thank you and commit to following up soon and then actually follow up!

Sources:

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- <https://www.comnetwork.org/insights/on-storytelling-in-conversation-with-andy-goodman-of-the-goodman-center/>
- <https://storytelling.comnetwork.org/explore>
- <http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/opportunity.pdf>
- Orton Family Foundation Community Heart & Soul® Story Gathering Packet, 2017 (available upon request)