

Tell Your Organization's Story

7 Guidelines to Creating Connection

INTRODUCTION

Why Is It Important to Tell Your Story?

Because Your Mission Statement Isn't Enough

Your mission statement is probably accurate, but it's not a moving and memorable story that motivates people to support your work. Mission statements are like maps: they chart where you're setting out to go, but they don't chronicle the adventures that happen along the way. You need a journalist who can capture your story and share it with a wide audience—people who will be on the edges of their seats, waiting to see what happens next.

Guess what? You're the journalist, and it's time to create the story.

Because Even Insiders Need to Know

Your donors, volunteers, and other insiders need to hear your story repeatedly to stay energized by your work and the part they play in it. Nonprofit leaders often assume that anyone who has donated, volunteered their time, or bought a ticket to an event has the whole picture. This is a mistake. It's more than likely that even your most ardent supporters don't know you as well as you might think. Keep these insiders inspired by sharing stories that demonstrate the impact of your work.

Because Stories Make You Memorable

Many organizations compete for the same donor dollars and volunteer support; that's why your story needs to be unforgettable. It should make your organization and its work stand out and be so memorable that even people hearing about you for the first time pay attention and remember.



Case Study: California ChangeLawyers

Goal: To establish the re-named foundation as an organization of sleeves-rolled-up activists creating systemic change and attract supporters and partners.

Challenge: People assumed the organization—formerly named the California Bar Foundation—was part of the State Bar of California. That misconception prevented them from being seen as innovative, powerful changemakers.

Solution: Create a new name, tagline, messages, and visual identity that follow our 7 guidelines for creating connection.

California ChangeLawyers' New Belief Message: We believe that a state as diverse as California needs a justice system led by advocates of all ethnicities and races.

So every day we invest in bright, diverse scholars to ensure that they have the opportunity to become tomorrow's legal changemakers. Because righting historical wrongs in our courtrooms, classrooms, and beyond will allow us to truly deliver the original American value—justice for all.

1 Remind People of the Problem

Don't assume that your audience already understands the problem your organization is working to solve. You need to remind them clearly and directly. Even the most everyday issues—like education, global warming, and social justice—are complex at their core. Be highly specific about the exact problem that exists for the exact population you serve. Then explain that problem in plain language.

**CALIFORNIA
CHANGELAWYERS**

FUND JUSTICE. CHANGE THE WORLD.

2 Avoid Acronyms, Abbreviations, and Jargon

California ChangeLawyers used to be called California Bar Foundation, which was often abbreviated to “CBF.” By not using the word “California,” the organization lost the opportunity to align itself with California and its unique version of social justice. By saying “California,” they name the population they serve and create a connection with those people. You can and should do the same in your organization.

Exacerbating the problem, “Bar” and “Foundation” are both examples of jargon—words that only people in the field understand. Using them excludes people, and when you're trying to raise money or attract supporters, exclusion isn't what you want. Even lawyers who understood what “Bar” and “Foundation” meant were confused, as many other

organizations use “Bar” or “Foundation” in their names, including the State Bar of California.

The name California Bar Foundation didn't set the organization apart. And, of course, it didn't reflect the organization's personality or that of its optimistic, fearless, activist membership.

3 Focus on Benefits, Not Features

Features are what your organization does. Benefits are the solutions and positive outcomes that result from those features. Benefits motivate donors; features do not.

Rather than telling people about your grants program and how much money you distribute, focus on the way your community has changed because of your grants program: the lives that have been improved, and the wrongs righted. In this example, your grants program is a feature. Changed lives and a better community are the **benefits** of that feature.

Your organization solves problems and that's what donors care about. So talk about the problems you solve, not the way you solve them. Donors do not give money to processes (features). They give to outcomes and solutions (benefits).

4 Keep It Simple

When you first engage with someone new, whether through your writing or in person, it's tempting to share everything there is to know about your organization. Successful messaging demands that you don't. Stay focused on a high-level idea and mention only those things that help convey your point. Be disciplined about what needs to be communicated, and don't overwhelm people with too much information.



5 Engage the Reader

Great communications address your audience's point of view, not the author's or sender's. When you want to get someone's attention, make it personal. Speak directly to your audience's concerns.

Consider the difference between these two examples:

California ChangeLawyers works to create a legal profession as diverse as our state in order to stop the cycle of inequity.

versus

If we don't actively invest in creating a legal profession as diverse as our state, the cycle of inequity continues.

Which example is more engaging? Which organization are you more likely to support?

6 Highlight People, Not Programs

Studies show that we are much more likely to respond to the emotional story of a person's challenge and success than to statistics proving the efficacy of the program designed to serve them. We can learn about a scholarship program, but it moves us when we hear someone describe how they used scholarship funds to complete law school and now help people in their community navigate the legal system more effectively. We know the program is successful because we have just heard a distinctive story describing that success.

There are, of course, appropriate times to share numbers. Some people need facts to reinforce what they feel emotionally. When sharing data in a story context, however, use only those numbers that truly inspire. And then frame them in a way that helps people relate to what those numbers mean.

For example, saying that 400 people die every day from a particular disease isn't nearly as frightening as saying that the number of people dying is the equivalent of a 747 crashing and killing everyone aboard every single day.

7 Be Consistent

To ensure that your story is told most effectively, create a list of sound bites—words or short phrases that staff and board members can use over and over again to tell your story. Consistent and repeated use of these sound bites, woven into the natural speaking style of the representative using them, will result in a clear message being sent through all channels.

Some sound bites used by California ChangeLawyers include:

- Cycle of inequity
- A more just and equitable California
- Efficient
- Strategic
- A legal profession as diverse as our state
- Changelawyer



Learn More

Mission Minded is a branding firm that works exclusively with nonprofit organizations.

We believe that a brand that sets you apart is essential to a nonprofit's success. Every day we guide nonprofits to uncover the big, bold idea that will attract more people to their work. Because in today's world, a worthy mission is not enough. You've got to communicate what makes you unique at every opportunity.

Our clients successfully raise more money and attract the support they need to achieve their goals. To find out how Mission Minded can help your organization, call us today at 415-990-9360.