Powerful Storytelling to Move People to Act
Elevator Pitch:
What does your program do?
It all starts with a story.
It all starts with the right story.
NPNGS
Nonprofit Navel-Gazing Syndrome
Maybe this Venn diagram will explain better why nonprofits have a hard time communicating with their audience.

- **What nonprofits talk about**
- **What donors care about**
Fundraising: how we see it

Here I am with my army of donors!
Fundraising: how donors see it

Here I am with my army of charities!
Identify your core reason for being – and then share that brand promise through consistent, emotional storytelling.
What’s wrong with this?

World Relief empowers the local church to serve the most vulnerable.

Donate Now
What’s wrong with this?

• Happy kids
• World Relief is the hero
• What does it have to do with the donor?
Make the story about the donor.

Show me how I can change the world!
Together, you and Bridget are fighting for her life

Young women with breast cancer face unique challenges. Thanks to you, Dana-Farber is ready and able to help.

Bridget Spence would be the first to tell you her fight with cancer is a long way from being won. But she also knows things could have been a lot worse. This remarkable young woman thanks you for the

“Dana-Farber’s personal touch takes the fear out of battling cancer.”

Bridget Spence has been battling breast cancer at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute for six years. Today she and her husband, Alex, and their new puppy, Daisy, thank you for all the time they can spend together.
Together, you and Bridget are fighting for her life

Young women with breast cancer face unique challenges. Thanks to you, Dana-Farber is ready and able to help.

Bridget Spence would be the first to tell you her fight with cancer is a long way from being won. But she also knows things could have been a lot worse. This remarkable young woman thanks you for the

“Dana-Farber’s personal touch takes the fear out of battling cancer.”

Bridget Spence has been battling breast cancer at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute for six years. Today she and her husband, Alex, and their new puppy, Daisy, thank you for all the time they can spend together.
When Bad Sentences Happen to Good Nonprofits

Don’t
• start with a statistic, it raises less money
• share big numbers
• share mission vision
• bury the ask or make a weak ask (“will you please consider…”)

Do
• start with a human story
• make the first sentence so good that she will want to read the second sentence.
• keep it short and sweet.
• avoid jargon
• write at the 7th grade level
“We have big numbers to share!”

36 Million

One in Six
“Your investment in public media has been extremely important in our ability to provide meaningful programming both on air and online as well as through engagement and outreach opportunities for conversations that elevate our community.”

“Don’t

“This year I celebrated my 15th anniversary with [organization] and throughout that time I have never notified our international field staff that we would be reducing their funding.”
“I bet you’ve never received a letter from someone who couldn't read.”
Build Drama

Start in the middle of the story where the drama is the highest:

• “I’ll tell you in a minute how a $20 book can transform the life of someone who is suffering.”

• “Last week I heard from a local man who told me that his tutor saved his life.”

• “The demand for our programs is greater that we can meet.”
Don’t Warm Up.  
*Cut your first three paragraphs.*

**Don’t**

“I’m writing to you from Haiti because the needs are so urgent for children here. We recently partnered with an orphanage in one or the most impoverished areas of the country…”

**Do**

“When I walked in the orphanage kitchen, I was shocked to see “I’m hungry” written on the wall in a child's handwriting.”
Direct Mail Heat Map

• Biggest Problem – assuming the letter will be read.
• You are in competition for a donor’s attention.
• No one cares about anything generational. They want to help ONE person.
• Don’t save the CTA for the last paragraph...no one gets there.
Ways our stories miss the donor.
Ways our stories miss the donor.

Not about donor action.

Success story.
Ways our stories miss the donor.

- Not about donor action.
- Journalism, not storytelling.
- Success story.
The best cases for support focus on the ‘*why*’ of the cause, rather than the ‘*how*.’
Your gift will help provide diagnostic imaging tools that can save lives, such as MRI scanners, CT scanners, ultrasound readers, photoacoustic imagers, echocardiograms, and functional near-infrared spectroscopes.
Ways our stories miss the donor.

- Not about donor action.
- Success story.
- Journalism, not storytelling.
- Not amazing.
Most weekends, Mason doesn't get enough to eat. His parents are at their jobs, and with no school lunches, he has to make do with what he can find in the house. But there's not much there. The fridge is usually empty. And there's almost nothing in the cupboards.

So lately, alone on the weekends, Mason has been eating spoonfuls of salt. It makes him sick ... but at least he doesn't feel hungry.
Utilitarian Communication

Donate
Attend
Help Us
Give More
Give Again
Inspiring Communication

- Donate  
- Attend  
- Help Us  
- Give More  
- Give Again

- Invest
- See Your Impact
- Here’s Who Your Gift Will Help
- Long-Term Partners
Inspiring Communication

Donate

Spoiler Alert! Asking your donor to “partner with us” or “support our work” or “send a gift so that we can help them” is not specific, compelling, or powerful to most donors.

Give Again

Will Help

Long-Term Partners
“There’s an urgent problem. Great people like you are needed to solve it. Your gift matters, and your gift makes a difference.”
Show the need/challenge on the appeal.

Show the success/outcome when reporting back to donors.
When you are Asking for support:

**Story of Need**

- A problem that is unsolved
- A person that needs help
- A story that is not complete

**When to Tell:**

- Appeal letters
- E-appeals
- Fundraising events
- 1-to-1 Asks

Why? So **your donor** has a **powerful role** to play!
When you are Reporting to donors:

**Story of Triumph**
- A solved problem
- A helped beneficiary
- A completed story

**When to Tell:**
- Newsletter
- E-news
- Annual Report
- 1-to-1 Reports to Major Donors

Why? So your donor sees the effect of her gift!
Work Less – Raise More!
Create Repeatable Assets

• It’s not a value to make it new every year.

• Build it once and let it run for a couple of years.

• You’ll raise more money over time.

• Brain science: the more times you see something, the more trustworthy you become.

• By the time you are getting tired of the message, the donor is just starting to recognize it.
Benefits of Repeatable Assets

• Message discipline (brand stays consistent)
• Raise more money over time
• Efficiency (frees up your time to do other things)
Examples

- Monthly donor recruitment email
- Specific campaign appeals
- Thank you card copy
- Web banners
- Offers
- Acquisition mailing
- Year-end appeals
- Social media series

Keep with effective message for as long as it works. Stop when or if the effectiveness wanes. Not when you guess they've had enough!
Long Fundraising Letters Outpull Shorter Ones

Yes, fundraisers hate long letters, but our donors love them.

Repetition and Story.

Introduction: Story.
Ask.
Why your gift is so important today.
Ask.
How much impact your gift will have.
Ask.
Story that demonstrates the need.
Ask.
Remind the donor of his values and connection with the cause.
Ask.
Another story.
Ask.
Help the donor visualize what will happen when she gives.
Ask.
Conclusion: Thank the donor for caring.
Ask again.
Ways our stories miss the donor.

1. No ask
2. Can’t afford large $
3. Giving is complicated
4. They do not buy into organization

They forget to give again
People will forget what you said.

People will forget what you did.

But people will never forget how you made them feel.

~ Maya Angelou
Maddy's parents were using drugs and fighting. It was Christmas. But there was no Christmas tree set up. No presents. No fixings for turkey dinner. No sign that Santa would appear. 5-year-old Maddy spent Christmas hiding under her bed in fear.

Thankfully, Maddy is now one of 562 children in the care of Springfield Family Services. We gave her a safe place to live and the love she hungered for.
Elevator Pitch:
What does your program do?