

BITE-SIZED MARKETING

realistic solutions for the overworked librarian

Nancy Dowd, Mary Evangeliste, & Jonathan Silberman

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**Bring Your
Library to Life
with a Story**

2

Why Tell a Story?

Storytelling is a powerful form of communication and learning. Compelling stories can effectively influence the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of your local community. Stories that do this depict transformative libraries and passionate librarians who are involved in the community and making a difference. According to the study “From Awareness to Funding,” released in 2008 by the Online Computer Library Center, “Voters’ attitudes, perceptions and behaviors, not their demographic profile, are the most important determinants of willingness to support increases in library funding.”

Compelling stories inspire and engage people and change the way people think about things. They help people understand and make sense of what they do and why they do it. Stories can help people learn, absorb, remember, and share information.

Storytelling Is Good for Your Library

Businesses use storytelling to share their vision, sell their products, and attract the best employees. Libraries can use stories too. We can attract new members, create passionate advocates, and even reinvigorate our existing members.

Stories Help People Make Sense of Facts

People usually forget facts and figures before a conversation has even begun. A good story can paint a clear picture that allows a person to feel what you are saying, and this creates a memory that will stay with them long after they have forgotten the facts.

Stories Help Libraries Be Advocates

The ability to tell a story about an organization and the programs, products, and services it provides is essential in developing advocacy and instilling a sense of community in those who use our libraries.

- ✦ Many factors affect how people view libraries and the need for their library’s funding.
- ✦ Advancements in technology have challenged the traditional value of libraries as centers for research.
- ✦ An increase in disposable income has resulted in an ownership mentality that values purchasing items over borrowing.

- ✦ A decrease in reading across the population has lowered the value of an establishment that provides free books.
- ✦ Tight budgets in municipalities have put libraries in competition for funding with such essential services as police forces.

To create support and a new vision of value, libraries need to create new stories that ring true to their communities. Stories will help you achieve that.

What Makes a Good Story?

A good story touches people. It finds the common human denominator and paints a vivid description that anyone can relate to his or her own personal experience. A good story has conflict and resolution. And most important, it is authentic and told with sincerity. A good story is also fairly short.

Are Testimonies and Stories the Same Thing?

Testimonies are written comments by satisfied customers that praise your organization and staff. Chances are that your library has collected such comments for quite a while. You may have posted them on the Web or even used them as examples of how well your library is performing. Testimonies are nice. They focus on what the library has done well or how a staff member was helpful. Stories take testimonies to the next level and show how that positive experience had an impact on a person's life.

Telling a Great Story

The easiest way to tell a great story is to break it into three phases: beginning, middle, and end. Filmmakers call this the three-act structure, and with a little adaptation of this format, you will be able to create powerful stories.

Timing

Timing is everything when it comes to telling your story. Too much time in one section will make it too slow and risk boring the listener, but not enough time will leave themes underdeveloped and can leave your listeners confused. Following an adapted three-act structure with a shorter format offers an excellent outline:

- ✦ Think of your story in four quarters.
- ✦ The first act of your story (the beginning) should make up the first quarter of the story.

- ✦ The second act of your story (the middle) should take up the next two quarters.
- ✦ The third act of your story (the ending) should make up the last quarter of the story.

So if you have eight minutes to tell your story, you'll want to spend two minutes on the beginning, four minutes on the middle, and two minutes on the ending.

Beginning: The Setup

In the beginning of the story, you can introduce the characters and briefly tell the listener what the story is about and the circumstances surrounding the action to set up the story.

- ✦ Describe the main character. This is the person who will undergo a transformation as a result of using your library. Give the listener a brief visual image of this person; share a characteristic that will help your listeners identify with this person.
- ✦ Explain why you are telling the story.
- ✦ About halfway through the beginning, introduce the specific event that causes your character to take action.
- ✦ Tell the listener about the circumstances that are driving your character to take action.
- ✦ Right before you wrap up the beginning, tell the listener that your main character has taken on a challenge to take that action. (Don't tell the outcome yet. That comes later.)

Depending on the length of your story, the beginning could be as short as thirty seconds. But it can be difficult to include all that information without running into the next section. An easy shortcut is to include brief descriptions that will let listeners quickly identify with what you are saying and let them fill in the blanks.

Set the Scene

Who could ever forget the first line of Isak Dinesen's novel *Out of Africa*: "I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills"? Well, our stories need to set the scene just like the wonderful novels you enjoy reading. The only problem is that we have only a few sentences in which to accomplish this feat.

Because you'll be talking about your community, your best bet is to use the places, phrases, and news items that the community can easily identify.

For example, “When such-and-such company laid off workers, Mary Jones was one of the fifty people who suddenly found herself without work. She never minded sacrificing her own needs, but it really hit her hard when summer rolled around and she didn’t have enough money to buy the books her two children needed as part of the summer reading list their school assigned.”

What are the easily identifiable events in your community? High-profile news items, popular destinations, community events, personal milestones such as anniversaries and birthdays, and increased property taxes or gas prices affect entire communities.

Middle: The Confrontation

The middle of your story tells about the obstacles the main character faces in an attempt to resolve the challenge you described in the beginning. This is where the drama develops. Ideally your character should face at least two turning points.

The first turning point should happen about a quarter through this section. For example, this might be when your character is about to achieve success but it falls apart.

The second turning point happens about midway through, when your character almost gives up hope of achieving success. For example, this might be when your character is at the lowest point and farthest away from finding resolve.

Ending: The Resolution

You’ve now got your listeners totally engaged. They are feeling your character’s struggle. Here in the ending all those conflicts meet, and in one final moment your character finds resolve. Applause, applause!

The ending is also where you connect the dots between your character’s success and the library. Don’t expect that people will make the connection; you must do it for them. Include phrases such as “without the library,” “because of the library,” and “because the library was there.”

The ending is also the place where you ask people to act. What do you want your listeners to do? Be specific. Tell them how to do what you need them to do. Should they go to a website, call the mayor, sign up for a program, check out a book? Make sure you tell them exactly what you want them to do.

Tips for Great Storytelling

1. Keep it interesting. Once you have a reader's attention you need to keep the story interesting by adding the details that will make it unusual enough to motivate people to want to read further. Compelling stories include surprising twists that distinguish the story from other stories. What makes your story different than all the others?
2. Don't forget to include one or two turning points. In motivational stories the main character should overcome an obstacle that leads him or her to certain specific actions. Conflict creates the drama that moves a story along and gives meaning to the character's actions. The obstacles don't always have to be enormous, but they do need to be identifiable. Think of the conflicts your customers face in their lives. Who can say that they have enough time in the day? But combine the conflict with an important assignment. For example, a businessperson whose computer crashed in the morning is waiting for an essential document for a proposal she is presenting, or a person who doesn't own a computer needs to fill out online applications for a job. Conflicts such as overcoming poverty, despair, or frustration are fairly generic and apply to a larger audience. The greater the conflict, the more rewarding is the successful outcome.
3. Connect with your audience by creating an authentic emotional experience. When your audience completes the journey with your character, they will have shared that experience. It is important to keep this journey authentic or else you'll risk breaking the audience's trust. It is always tempting to put on a better spin, to add a little overstatement, or to stretch the story to fit your needs, but the first rule of a good motivational story is to keep it authentic.
4. Keep it real. Don't try to turn a heartwarming story into a tragedy. Sometimes obstacles are small and personal. When they are told well, your audience will identify with the story, and that's what you want.
5. Make sure that the message of the story supports your library. If it doesn't, you might not be telling the right story. If you are working to create a word-of-mouth movement, the message of the story could become the piece that gets communicated from person to person, so don't be afraid to create a catchy phrase for it.

Stories for WOMM

People love to share stories, which are a vital element of effective WOMM. Chances are, though, that people will not tell your story the same way you did. They'll embellish some parts and forget details in other parts. If you are telling a story you hope will be shared, make sure that you start and end with a connection to your library. Keep the story line simple and don't use too many details. For example, if you tell your story at a meeting, include a written version as a handout. It could be on an index card. The Maryland State Department of Education designed postcards with photos of the people they have helped, and each postcard featured that person's story. Postcards are cheap to print, and you can design a different card for each story. You can keep the design as simple as a photo and text.

Iowa's Telling the Library Story Tool Kit

The Iowa Library Service Areas and the State Library of Iowa created the Telling the Library Story Tool Kit (available at www.silo.lib.ia.us/for-ia-libraries/tell-library-story/index.html) to assist Iowa libraries in explaining and demonstrating the value of their services in order to increase use of and support for libraries. Whether you need a bookmark, a template for an annual report, or suggestions for talking with policy makers, this comprehensive site has what you need.

Beyond Words

The Vancouver Public Library conducted a story contest a few years back and received more than 350 stories about their libraries. The stories are still posted online at www.beyondwords.ca. The following two paragraphs set the stage for a poignant story and demonstrate how powerful a story can be:

Walter Ernst 1931–2005

In late February 2005 my Father, Walter Ernst, began to take the business of dying more seriously than he had before. Or perhaps those tall dark feathered angels that surround all of us finally took more notice of him. Either way the end result was the same. And I quickly found myself sitting beside his bed while he spent nine days leaving the world.

As we neared the end of the shadowy stages of dying my Mother dropped a piece of paper on my lap. It was a simple request to write an essay on the impact of Public Libraries in one's life. That night we again sat and talked

around my Father's bed. We spoke about the libraries here in British Columbia and the books that have shaped us.

Everyone is always talking about how libraries have changed or how valuable we are to a community, but when push comes to shove, stories about real people are the ones that will make your point.

Story Banks

Story banks are collections of stories that an organization can use for their advocacy, promotional, and media efforts. Your organization probably already has a stack of "can we quote you" or similar complimentary statements from your customers with a line or two about how happy people were with a service you provided. That's a good beginning, but what if the media calls looking for a story about how your library is helping teens, or what if the mayor wants a specific example of how your library is helping seniors? To be truly effective, you need a method of collecting stories that includes contact information.

The Southeast Library System in Minnesota collects stories on its web page as part of its advocacy efforts. The library tells its customers why it needs the stories and how it will use them. It also provides a simple online form. Here is the library's request, from www.selco.info/resources-for-libraries/advocacy/:

We need your story! Tell us how the public library has helped you and/or your family. These stories are to be compiled in a statewide brochure that will be distributed to the people who decide on library funding issues. By filling out this form, you agree to have your name, home library, and county listed in the brochure. However, not all stories will be included in the brochure due to space limitations. If you are willing to speak with legislators about the value of your public library, then please list your contact information below (home address, phone and/or e-mail). Your contact information will be used only for this purpose. Thanks for Being a Contributor to Our Statewide Collection of Library Stories!

Steps to Creating a Story Bank

Before you create a story bank, take some time to think about how you will use the stories—to advocate for financial support, to promote a service, to create a buzz online, to bring more people into your library, to get more people to go to your website, to use on promotional materials, to pitch stories to the media or respond to stories from the media. Knowing how you will use the stories will help you decide what kind of information you'll collect, how to store that information, and how often you need to update the stories.

1. Create a story-bank web page and link to it from your homepage.

The page should tell what the story bank is, why you are collecting stories, and any parameters you've established for sharing the stories.

2. Create an online form. It is important to be able to speak with the people who offer you their stories. You may need to obtain additional information, update the story, or call to ask if a reporter can contact the storyteller directly.

The form should include essential basic information: name, address, phone number, e-mail, and an area for the person to type in the story. Other questions you may want to include are the following:

- ♦ May we publish your name in connection with your story?
- ♦ May we use all or part of your story (or share it with library support organizations) in marketing, publicity, or fund-raising efforts?

3. Keep the stories up to date. To be effective, stories need to be authentic and timely. People move; their experiences change. Ideally, you should periodically update your stories, but if time is an issue, make sure that you call the person before using the story.

Stories for Advocacy: Solving Life's Problems

Nancy pulled together a marketing and advocacy campaign for the New Jersey State Library and the New Jersey Library Association using oral, written, and multimedia stories. In the first year, they're holding a contest to encourage libraries to collect stories from their customers, create story banks, and produce multimedia productions of those stories. Libraries are being provided with a manual and training opportunities. In the second year the State Library and the New Jersey Library Association plan to use the stories for a statewide marketing and advocacy campaign. The manual and details of the campaign are posted online at www.solvinglivesproblems.org.

Story banks are crucial elements of advocacy campaigns. Politicians always want stories from their constituents. Including the addresses of those who provide stories makes it easy for you to select the appropriate story.

Quick List of Questions to Guide Your Story Contributors

- What's your most memorable experience at the library?
- Why do you visit the library?
- What have you learned at the library?
- How have librarians helped you?
- How does the library save you money?
- How has the library changed your life?
- What would your life be like if you didn't have your library?
- What is the best class you've ever taken at the library?
- What is the best program you ever attended at the library?
- Did you discover a book at one of our public libraries that changed the way you look at the world and your place in it?
- Did you meet someone significant at the library?
- Did something amusing make your day?

The Multnomah County Library: Guiding Customers to Tell Their Stories

The Multnomah County Library in Oregon includes specific questions to guide people in telling their stories. You can use this concept to gather stories for specific programs, services, or initiatives that you want to support or promote.

A selection of Multnomah County Library stories will be posted on this website and may also be used in other promotional materials. So, tell us:

- ✦ What's your most memorable experience at the library?
- ✦ Has a library book changed your life?
- ✦ Why do you visit the library?
- ✦ Why does Multnomah County Library deserve everyone's support?
- ✦ What have you learned at the library?
- ✦ How have librarians helped you?
- ✦ What's *your* story?

The Multnomah Library collected quite a few stories. I can envision the following story as a centerpiece of any presentation, but can you imagine the impact it might have when told to a group of potential funders?

I have an autoimmune disease. What this means is that I can't leave the house by myself and I can't do very much. I spend a lot of time in bed and there are only a few activities I can still do. But my love of reading has sustained me. Since I can't work I don't have money so the library has become a huge resource for me. I can put several books on hold at once and send my mom to get them for me or pick them up when I have a doctor's appointment. In other's stories I can escape my illness and experience theirs for a while. Thank you so much for your online catalog; without it, my life would be much less thrilling.

Anonymous Library: Hollywood

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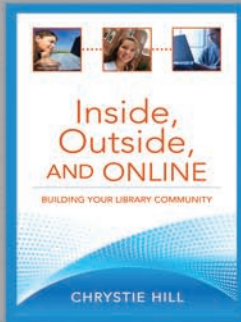
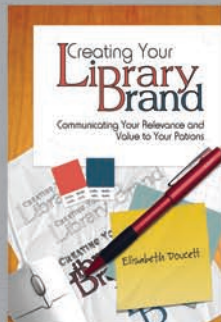
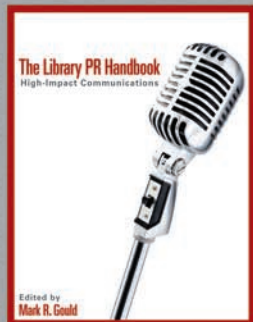


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