For more than a decade, I’ve been traveling across North America, speaking to and working closely with good causes that want to become better storytellers. As part of this work, I always visit each organization’s website to see if it’s being used effectively to tell stories. In most cases the answer is no, but over the years I’ve discovered enough pleasant surprises that I thought it was time to gather and share them with you here. What follows is by no means a definitive “state-of-the-art” survey, but if your organization is intent on improving its online storytelling, you could do worse than visit the sites included in this humble booklet.
Why does your organization do what it does? You can offer statistics, but numbers don’t tend to generate emotional responses.

That’s why I suggest you tell a story that captures “The Nature of Our Challenge” – something observed at ground level that clearly illustrates why your work is so necessary.

Wheels of Success does that succinctly on its home page...

(Please note: the name at the top of each page is a live link to that organization’s site. Some sites may have been updated since publication of this booklet.)
A woman who has been referred to us by Metropolitan Ministries. She has an older car that she loves, but she cannot afford the repairs that it needs to continue running safely. Her beloved "clunker" allows her to continue working at her three jobs (one full time and one part time). She is working hard to save enough money to move into her own home and become self-sufficient but fears the expense of car repairs will keep her from attaining her goals.

In fewer than 100 words, the nonprofit paints a picture of a woman whom we can envision and feel empathy for. The story makes “the nature of their challenge” human and compelling.
The **Global Campaign for Education** also tells its “Nature of Our Challenge” story on its site, but in a slightly different way…. 
Global Campaign for Education

In this case, a picture and first-person storytelling make it clear why the organization’s work is important and urgently required.
Does everyone who works for your group know how it got started?

In many cases, this history is a very personal story of a single founder or a highly motivated group of people. And in that moment of creation, there is often a spirit that continues to inform the work of the organization today.

The “How We Started” story of Cradles to Crayons is a good example of an intensely personal story that everyone connected with that nonprofit should know…
This true-life experience recounted on the organization’s website led to an a-ha moment for Lynn Margherio, founder of Cradles to Crayons: “What if all of these like-new or never-used children's things could find their way into the homes of other boys and girls—kids who really needed them?”

It’s a simple but powerful story, and everyone who works at Cradles to Crayons knows it. Can the same be said of your “How We Started” story?
Most organizations will share success stories on their sites, but I encourage them to go a step further:

Tell “Emblematic Success” stories – examples that not only prove you make a difference, but also illustrate the unique approach you bring to your issue.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Pinellas County does this very effectively on its site, showcasing “Real Life Stories” on its home page.
Follow that link, and you’ll arrive at an index of “Little Stories” (so named since BBBS refers to the children it serves as “Littles”).

Each of the titles in blue links to another page with a complete story. Most are fairly short – less than a few hundred words – but there is enough in each to make you feel something for the kids, the “Bigs” who work with them, and the unique approach of the organization itself.
Easter Seals is another organization where storytelling is ingrained in everything they do.

This is readily apparent on the home page of each chapter’s website, where an Emblematic Success story (in this case, “Brendan’s Story”) is prominently featured.
The Duke Endowment, a foundation based in North Carolina, is one among a growing number of grant-makers that effectively use storytelling on their sites.

While the story featured on this page is about an “evidence-based intervention,” note on the next page how the writer uses a simple narrative to pull you in…
Ultimately, this is a story about “Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy” – which can sound like daunting territory – but by beginning with such an intimate scene, the piece eases the reader into more complex material.
For colleges and universities, Emblematic Success stories often take the form of student profiles.

Proudly proclaiming, “We Are Oberlin,” the college regularly features these stories on the home page so site visitors can easily find examples of what Oberlin means to current students and alumni as well…
If you click on the home page link, you’ll find a story like this one about a non-traditional student who graduated in 2008.

In my travels, I’ve seen dozens of colleges that have collected stories and displayed them on their websites, but one of the most interesting examples I’ve encountered comes from Spelman College…
This is *not* the home page for Spelman, an historically Black college for women. If you visit the school’s home page, you’ll find a link to “The Campaign for Spelman College,” and that will bring you here.

Now you’re in the place where the school will ask you for a donation. There’s nothing extraordinary about that – just about every school has its hand out *somewhere* on its site.

But this is where Spelman does something interesting with stories...
They tell their student success stories as close to “the ask” as possible.

Just as importantly, they tell their stories in short videos that are beautifully composed, tightly edited, and build to dramatic conclusions. (At the site, click on “Meet Our Sisters” to see the video about Jasmine and Jonecia and the robot soccer contest.)

Good stories make you feel something, and I have to believe that’s a prerequisite to clicking the “Donate Now” button on any website.
When it comes to talking about the future, most good causes won’t hesitate to offer numerical projections.

“We will serve *this many* more people. We will raise *this much* more money.” And that’s fine where quantifying your goals are concerned. But numbers do not create a vision that others will aspire to.

For that, you need a “*Where We Are Going*” story. When the city of Charlotte, North Carolina wanted to envision a better future and formulate a plan to get there, the city leaders gathered together and composed four possible stories about the city’s future. **Crossroads Charlotte** is their continuing effort to address the question: which of these stories do we *want* to be our future, and what must we do now to make it happen?
Once your organization decides to tell stories, gathering them can be a challenge.

More and more, good causes are using their websites to reach out to the people they serve to ask them to share their stories.

There are many ways to do this. The David Suzuki Foundation leverages the appeal of its charismatic founder…
David Suzuki Foundation

…the who speaks directly to site visitors through a video that runs just over a minute, contains some excellent animation, and explicitly asks them to share stories of what inspired them to care for the environment.

Some of the responses (in video) are posted on the same page as evidence that David’s appeal is being heard.
Colorado Health Story

Colorado Health Story is the collective effort of several foundations and nonprofits across the state to collect 250 digital stories over the next 3 years.

The organizations that have united behind this effort are all intent on helping Coloradans get the health care they need when they need it.

This project brings that lofty goal down to ground level where real people can talk about actual experiences seeking help – sometimes finding it, and sometimes not.

(The opening video on this site combines a presentation created in Prezi with an audio track featuring the storyteller’s voice – a low-cost alternative to video that is worth considering.)
If you get into the habit of collecting stories, you’ll soon face another challenge: storing and organizing them in a place where others can easily find them.

**Storybanking** is an art in itself, and there are many good examples to learn from on the web. Among colleges and universities, one of the best examples I’ve seen can be found on...
Many colleges will assert that they work to support their students, bring a unique approach to teaching, conduct world-class research, and engage the community around them.

UBC backs up these assertions with stories…
The UBC Storybank organizes stories into four categories that match major points the university makes about itself.

Want to know how UBC works to support its students? Choose a story. Curious about the university’s relationship with its surrounding community? Choose another story.

Mission statements and lists of core values are fine things to have, but when you can tell stories about stuff that actually happened, now you’re giving site visitors something to remember.
Families USA is a nonprofit organization working to provide Americans with high quality, affordable health care.

I first learned about their storybank in 2002 and have been following their progress ever since. The organization employs a full-time “storybank associate” to oversee this resource, and has published a guide to help others create their own bank…
If you are thinking about building a storybank, I strongly encourage you to visit this page and download the free PDFs available.

(The advice is applicable to any good cause, so even if you’re not working in the health care arena, it’s still worth the time.)

Building a storybank doesn’t have to be costly or time-consuming. Trust me on this...
If the Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles can collect “Stories of Satisfaction,” I’m pretty sure anyone can do this.
Who are the best of the best? Over the past 10 years, I’ve been fortunate to work closely with several organizations that made significant commitments to improving their storytelling.

In 2003, Environmental Defense Fund convened an all-staff retreat and devoted an entire day to collecting stories. Handheld cassette recorders were passed from person to person to make it easy to capture all the stories that had been informally circulating within the organization.

If you visit their site today…
...you’ll see a link to success stories on the home page. Click on that link and you arrive here.

For EDF, the website is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to telling stories. Because of a conscious decision by the organization’s leadership, a storytelling culture has bloomed within the organization, so it’s only natural that you would see an expression of that culture online.

Another example of an organization strongly committed to storytelling...
...is Civic Ventures, which launched The Purpose Prize to recognize individuals over 60 who are changing the world.

(Full disclosure: I serve as a senior advisor to Civic Ventures, so I don’t claim to be objective.)

When Purpose Prize winners are featured on the site, their stories are told in two ways...
You can read the story that appears on the site, or you can follow a link to YouTube and see a beautifully produced 3-minute video.

Through the Purpose Prize, Civic Ventures is recognizing people who have started “encore careers”, and who are choosing to give back – rather than kick back – in the second halves of their lives.

But Civic Ventures knows that giving out prizes is only a beginning. To build a movement, they have to tell stories, too, and everyone who works there embraces this ideal.
Finally, take a moment to visit the website of the Nurse-Family Partnership. NFP is an evidence-based program that helps first-time mothers have healthier babies and stronger families.

For more than 30 years, the organization painstakingly collected data to confirm its effectiveness and hone its model, but only in the last few years has it turned equal attention to collecting stories.

That attention has paid off…
Thanks to a mandate from the very top, a storytelling culture has taken hold within NFP, and you can see that very clearly on its site.

Stories are featured on the home page, and if you click on any of the links there, you'll arrive at compelling narratives taking you deep into the relationships between NFP's dedicated nurses and the young mothers they serve.

Now NFP has both the stories and the evidence to make the most powerful case possible for their work.
Thank you for taking the time to visit these sites. I hope the best practices in online storytelling you saw firsthand will help you improve your website and do a better job of telling your own stories.

If you’d like to explore this subject further, you can order my booklet, **Storytelling as Best Practice**, from the publications section of my website. And if you’re not already a subscriber to my free monthly newsletter, **free-range thinking**, you can sign up for that on the site as well.

And always remember…
Numbers numb, jargon jars, and nobody ever marched on Washington because of a pie chart. If you really want to reach people and change the world, tell them a story.