

free-range thinking



free-range thinking is a monthly journal of best practices, resources, and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact.

A Warmer Website Welcome

When visitors land on your homepage, they may not know where to go first. So why not step out and lend them a friendly hand?

When you visit a website for the first time, what do you usually see? In most cases, it's probably a static page with a familiar mix of images, text and links. On more sophisticated sites, there may be Flash animation to catch your eye or a box where you can watch some video. But when was the last time someone strolled out in front of the homepage to personally welcome you and show you around?

Visit [Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay](#) and that's exactly what happens. At first glance, you'll see a homepage resembling so many others, but then Jason, one of the nonprofit's Big Brothers, appears at the bottom of the page and starts talking to you. His welcome is brief (about 90 seconds), informal, and filled with helpful tips for navigating the site. And since Jason appears to be standing *in front* of the homepage, the video literally stands out.

Jason is one of four volunteers whose welcome messages rotate on the organization's homepage. Big Brothers Big Sisters also recorded a personal message from a donor to strengthen the appeal on its donations page (see picture). Since the nonprofit debuted all five videos in September 2008, they have been viewed over 12,000 times by visitors to the site.

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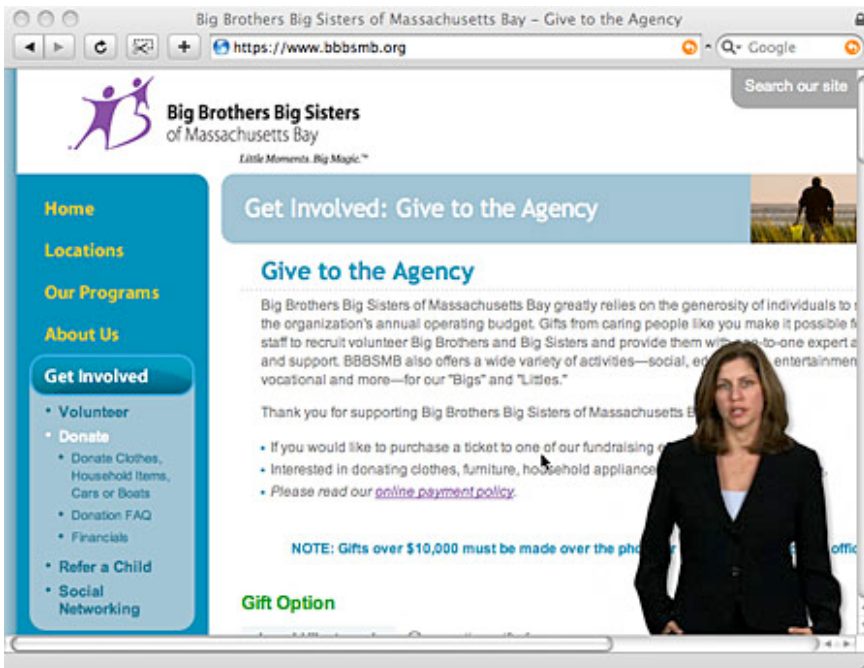
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Storytelling: Let the Un-
Learning Begin

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About Us

free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Lori Matsumoto. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about Andy's work, please visit



Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Massachusetts Bay also uses Onsite Videos to personalize its donation page.

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GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD CAUSES

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The innovator behind these distinctive videos is Brian Goss, who drew inspiration from mounting irritation. "The web can be really annoying because you have to read so much to get to the point," he says. "It's far better to just talk to somebody, and that's what video can do. So I thought: what if you could get rid of those large boxes of copy and just have somebody walk out in front of the page and talk to the visitor?"

In 2005, Goss founded [Onsite Videos](#) to give his idea a try. He cast himself as the official greeter for the new site, and responses from visitors were positive from click one. "They said, 'you're talking to me,'" Goss recalls. "They didn't say it was a *video*. They felt like it was *live*." Goss rapidly found buyers for his idea, including Microsoft, Liberty Mutual, ReMax, and many others. Wal-Mart used an Onsite Video to promote a shoe sale, Goss says, and saw a doubling in traffic to the sale page as a result.

The process of creating an Onsite Video is streamlined and can be completed in a matter of days. Clients have the option to write their own scripts or tap Onsite's staff for help. (Either way, the company strongly recommends limiting messages to 60 seconds or less.) Once the script is completed, Onsite will book a recording session in one of fifty studios in its network across the U.S. Fair warning: if you're not near a major city, this can be a deal-breaker.

The videos are recorded in front of a green screen, and clients have a choice of delivering the messages themselves or hiring Onsite Videos' actors to speak for them. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay opted to use its volunteers because of the authenticity they bring. "They may not be the best actors or actresses," says Duane de Four, new media communications manager for the nonprofit, "but you can feel their affinity for the program. That really shines through."

When the recording session is completed, the video file is sent to Onsite's Boston headquarters for coding, and within 3-5 business days it's ready to go live. And the cost? According to David Arslanian, chief operating officer of Onsite Videos, a nonprofit with moderate site traffic can record a 60-second video and cover hosting costs for a year for about \$2,000.

As Big Brothers Big Sisters' site shows, the videos can add impact beyond the home page. They can let program officers introduce new initiatives with a personal touch. Board members can explain what drew them to the organization. Volunteers can share their experiences from recent events.

And when they speak from the heart *and* from the front of the page, they will leave a distinct impression on your site's visitors. Compared to most sites these days, that's saying something.

Want to see more samples?

- www.bluepenguindevelopment.com features an Onsite Video as well as excellent advice about crafting e-newsletters.
- www.agoodmanonline.com, my site, features a personal welcome on the homepage that demonstrates a fun way to combine video and animated graphics.
- www.humanizetheweb.com, Brian Goss' other site, features links to several client sites that use video in creative ways.

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Storytelling: Let the Un-Learning Begin

Want to improve your storytelling? Getting better may begin by getting out of your own way.

In his fascinating new book, *The Art Instinct*, Denis Dutton argues that appreciating art is not something we learn so much as an inclination we are born with. And of all the arts, Dutton writes, storytelling - whether based in fact or fiction - may be the most instinctive.



"The appeal of the story is an evolved, innate adaptation," Dutton writes. "That it remains possible today to be engaged, amused or moved by a story told by a single speaker - next to a campfire, around a water cooler, or across a dinner table - show us that we are with regard to [stories] the same people as our prehistoric ancestors. Good stories compel our attention. So do good storytellers."



So why, then, do we struggle with storytelling? In my workshops, participants regularly confess that they are "just not natural storytellers," even when I know they're telling stories every day - to their friends, kids, co-workers. When they find themselves in a professional context, however, their storytelling muscle cramps up, probably because their workplace conditions them to speak in bullet points, jargon and acronyms.

"Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative" is an online class expressly designed to help public interest communicators relocate their inner storyteller. In four hours (spread over four weeks), we focus on the structure and qualities of good stories - which you often use unconsciously - and explain how you can apply them in advocacy, fundraising, recruiting and other aspects of your work.

The Goodman Center will offer this class on March 5, 12, 19 and 26 from 9-10a Pacific (12n-1p Eastern) each day and is currently registering students online. Tuition is \$500 and class size is limited to 25 students. To find out more and reserve your space, please visit www.thegoodmancenter.com.



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