

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 Bank That Always Builds Interest

Investing time now in building your storybank can ensure your people will always find the right story when they need it.

When good causes realize that storytelling can enhance advocacy, fundraising, recruitment and just about everything they do, they start looking for stories everywhere. Staff retreats are held exclusively to collect stories. Board members and volunteers are interviewed to mine their experiences. Web sites are updated with "Tell Us Your Story" pages where members and others can post their anecdotes.

Collectively, these processes can yield dozens (if not hundreds) of stories, which presents an entirely new challenge: once you've got 'em, where do you put 'em? The answer is a storybank, which can take many forms but generally serves one purpose: to provide a central repository where you can easily and quickly find a story that enlivens whatever point you want to make.

Back in February, we asked readers for best practices in storybanking so we could share them here. Many responded and we built on this feedback with new research of our own. The lessons learned are below, and through it all one message kept coming back loud and clear. If you're serious about storytelling, get serious about building your own storybank. Stories can be a powerful tool, but they can't help you if you can't find them when you need them.

Building it doesn't have to be complicated or costly.



Easter Seals collects and shares "Stories of Hope" to illustrate the different kinds of services offered to families with autistic children.

April 2009

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Put Some Spring in Your Communications

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GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD CAUSES

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If you haven't started a storybank due to concerns over technical hurdles or huge start-up costs, stop worrying and start building. Some of the organizations that responded to our request had their IT departments whip up a simple proprietary database. Others got a little fancier - with built-in content management, online collection tools, and cross-referencing with photos - but one respondent simply set up a single folder (containing categorized subfolders) on her company's intranet while another started with just an Excel spreadsheet.

Two of the best articles about building a storybank and collecting stories come from FamiliesUSA. Although the organization focuses on health care issues, its tips are applicable for any good cause actively soliciting stories. "[The Art of Story Banking](#)" and "[The Story Bank: Using Personal Stories as an Effective Way to Get Your Message Out](#)" both offer clear step-by-step guides to help you get started.

Collecting stories can also be simple and cheap.

Some organizations solicit stories by advertising in internal newsletters and mailing lists. Others send out postcards advertising the URL of their online story bank where individuals could post their own stories. Brandon Seng of the Michigan Nonprofit Association strongly endorses the online approach since it eliminates faxing, transcribing, and other time-intensive activities.

The Literacy Volunteers of Tucson used SurveyMonkey to collect information about the quality of their services from volunteers, tutors and students. The survey included some open-ended questions (e.g., "What can you do now that you couldn't do before?") and many respondents filled in these boxes with personal success stories.

Cathy Beaumont of the University of British Columbia's development office combs through various publications produced by the school and staff and tells us, "There's no shortage of material." On average, she finds two new stories per month to add to UBC's online [story bank](#).

As part of her job as a communications officer at PATH, Teresa Guillien actually goes into the field for two weeks every year and produces six or seven stories per trip. She is accompanied by a consultant (a former NBC journalist), a videographer and a photographer and travels to various countries to interview people face to face.

It's not just about fundraising.

Most organizations assume that stories support development, which is true, but we heard from many who were using stories in a variety of ways:

The University of British Columbia uses stories to demonstrate to donors the school's diversity. The Michigan Nonprofit Association uses stories to train staff and help them better understand the work of the organization. The Literacy Volunteers of Tucson uses them in volunteer recruitments and orientations "to give more humanity to the project," according to Lisa Kemper.

Jim Gangl from St. Louis County Public Health & Human Services told us his organization consisted of employees at the end of long careers mixed with younger ones just starting out. "Because there isn't much in the middle," he said, "we need stories to convey our experience."

And just this week we heard from an aquarium that was looking to tell

stories on the labels of exhibits to create a more engaging experience for visitors. You may find entirely new ways to use stories, but first you have to find the stories and keep them in a safe, easily accessible place. So build your storybank and watch it build more interest in everything you do.

To see a sampling of online storybanks:

- [League of Women Voters](#)
- [Boston Youth Environmental Network](#)
- [American Cancer Society](#) (video story bank)

To see how organizations collect stories online:

- [FamiliesUSA](#)
- [Medicare Rights Center](#)
- [Barack Obama - Share Your Story About the Economic Crisis](#)

(Thanks to Cathy Beaumont, Jim Gangl, Teresa Guillien, Lisa Kemper, and Brandon Seng for their assistance in writing this story.)

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Give Us Ten Minutes (and Get a Free Report)

Take our survey on teleconferences, videoconferences and webinars and we'll send you a full report on what works, what doesn't and why.



Given the current economic climate, everyone's looking for ways to cut costs and work smarter. That means more organizations will turn to teleconferences, videoconferences and webinars instead of in-person meetings. Makes sense in theory, *but will this really be a good thing?*

You've probably endured enough poorly run "long distance meetings" to agree these can be serious time-wasters. On the other hand, there are some organizations that are learning how to master these technologies. We want to find and share those best practices (as well as the common mistakes we should all avoid), but first we need your help.

Our nationwide survey takes only about 10 minutes to complete, and in return for your time, we'll send you a complete report with all the results. Over one thousand public interest professionals have already weighed in, so we hope you'll join them. Give us just a few minutes now, and hopefully we can save you from countless hours of boredom in the months to come!

Click [here](#) to take the survey. And thanks for your help!

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Put Some Spring in Your Communications

Three courses (including a brand new class on research) are now open for registration at The Goodman Center.

Surveys, focus groups, and evaluation forms are among the research tools commonly used by good causes, but most public interest professionals have never been taught:

- When to use qualitative or quantitative research (or both)
- How to select a research company or conduct research on your own
- How to present data to make your case

Market Research: From Information to Insight to Decision is a new 3-hour course developed to help you become a better consumer of research and manage the research process intelligently and effectively. Classes will be held on April 21st, April 28th and May 5th from 9-10a Pacific. To learn more and to register online, [click here](#).

Also at The Goodman Center in April:

Strategic Communications: Cutting through the Clutter

April 2nd and 3rd (9-10a Pacific)

Design your communications around four critical connecting points and your target audience will be more likely to listen and act.

Meetings: Less Pain, More Gain

April 22nd and 24th (9-10a Pacific)

Improve your meetings and make the most of your time every time you pull your team together.

To learn about these workshops and to register online, [click here](#).



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