



Data Proves the Power of Story

A University of Southern California study shows that health messages can have more impact when they come wrapped in a story.

The problem: cervical cancer, which is highly preventable but still claims over 250,000 lives annually around the world. The target: Mexican-American women who are at-risk for cervical cancer, in large part due to a reluctance to get Pap tests which can save their lives. The question: in motivating these women to get screened, will a story do a better job than a more traditional presentation of the facts?



Doe Mayer

The five-year USC study that addressed this question is a joint effort of the Annenberg School of Communication & Journalism, the School of Cinematic Arts and the Keck School of Medicine. Doe Mayer, who holds a joint appointment in Cinema and Communication, brought her expertise as both a narrative filmmaker and a health communication strategist to the project. She also brought a strong belief in the power of story.

"For me, understanding that story is connected to change is simple," says Mayer. "But in the world of health communication, people often say 'show me the evidence.' By doing the study in the language of research, we're able to provide evidence that will convince the policymakers and the donors that money would be well spent to make story a critical part of the argument."

To compare the target audience's response to a story versus a more traditional, non-narrative presentation, the USC team --- Professors Sheila Murphy, Lourdes Baezconde Garbanati, and Jeremy Kagan as well as Mayer --- created two short films. Each film ran eleven minutes, featured Mexican-Americans, and contained the same 10 facts regarding cervical cancer's cause, prevention and treatment.

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Data Proves the Power of Story

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The narrative film, entitled "The Tamale Lesson," portrays a multigenerational family of Latinas preparing food for a Quinceanera. The facts about cervical cancer are woven into the dialogue as the oldest daughter describes the dangers of forgoing screenings. She even demonstrates an exam procedure on a chicken the women are preparing. (See for yourself [here](#). Warning: you will never look at chicken the same way again.)



A scene from "The Tamale Lesson"

"It's Time," the non-narrative film, uses a traditional talking heads approach featuring real doctors and health professionals sharing the same 10 crucial facts about cervical cancer. Potential patients are interviewed about their resistance to being screened, and a patient is shown receiving a Pap test. (Watch an excerpt [here](#).)

To test response to the films, 254 women who self-identified as Mexican-American were randomly selected and then surveyed for their level of knowledge, attitude and behavior relating to cervical cancer and prevention. Half of this group then viewed the narrative film while the other half watched the non-narrative film. (The two films were tested in the same manner on 236 African-American women and 268 European-American women to compare how much the viewers' identification with characters in the films would affect their response.)

All participants were surveyed several weeks later and then again at six months to see if there was a measurable difference between the two approaches. "For all three groups," Mayer reports, "the narrative was more effective than the non-narrative in producing the desired behavior: getting or scheduling a Pap test."

Predictably, the difference was most striking among the Mexican-American participants: 74% had Pap tests or made an appointment to get one after watching the narrative film, versus 60% for those who had watched the non-narrative film. The differences were similar though less pronounced among African-Americans (64% versus 57%) and European-Americans (57% versus 52%), but it was still a clean sweep for storytelling.

The implications of this study on health communications are clear. The style in which information regarding health and wellness is communicated can be just as important as the information itself. If narrative has a demonstrably greater power to help us absorb information and take needed action, it should be considered for communicating the most important information.

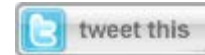
"I never want to say 'here's the answer,'" Mayer adds, striking a cautionary tone, "but I do think narrative is an important piece of the puzzle. I'm hopeful this study has demonstrated the rigorous evidence needed to convince policymakers to be more attentive to the use of story."

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- Message creation and delivery
- An easy-to-use template for campaign design



Classes will be held on September 4th and 11th from 11a-12n PT (2-3p ET) each day. Tuition is \$250 per student and discounts are available for organizations that register 3 or more students. Learn more and register at [The Goodman Center](#).

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- The 7 qualities that make stories memorable
- The 9 most common mistakes in storytelling and how to avoid them
- The 6 kinds of stories you must tell, and how to tell them for advocacy, development, recruitment and more



Our next set of classes is scheduled for September 5, 12, 19 and 26 from 9-10a Pacific (12n-1p Eastern) each day. Tuition is \$500 per student and discounts are available to organizations registering 3 or more. To find out more and reserve your space, visit [The Goodman Center](#).

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- The five most frequent mistakes (and how to avoid them)
- How to structure presentations to ensure your audience learns more
- Why PowerPoint should never be used as a presentation and a handout
- Techniques to help you deliver talks with greater confidence



Classes will be held on September 23rd and 24th from 11a-12n PT (2-3p Eastern) each day. Tuition is \$250 per student and discounts are available for organizations that register 3 or more students. Learn more and register online at [The Goodman Center](#).

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Since *free-range thinking* first appeared in August 1999, I have been writing more and more frequently about the value of storytelling in public interest communications. The best of these articles from 1999 through 2012 are now collected in one place: the 6th edition of "Storytelling as Best Practice." Find out more and order your copy online in the redesigned [Resources](#) section of our new website.



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