

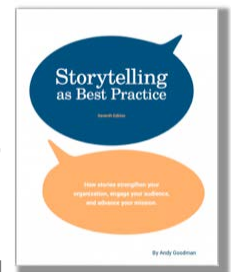


A Story Booth Has its Own Story to Tell

As firm believers in the power of storytelling, we are always on the lookout for innovative ways to capture, craft and disseminate stories. So you can imagine our excitement when we accidentally stumbled across this [video](#) describing a story booth that was popping up all over the campus of Vanderbilt University. Impressed by an attempt to capture "authentic personal stories in real time and in your voice," we contacted the University to find out how the project was going. Like a good story, the tale they told us had plenty of twists and turns, as many downs as ups, and a few lessons worth learning. [Full Story](#)

Storytelling as Best Practice - 7th Edition Now Available

Storytelling as Best Practice debuted in 2003 as a compilation of articles from this newsletter, and as I have continued to write about storytelling, we have regularly updated and expanded the booklet. For this seventh [edition](#), however, we've completely redesigned it, organized the articles into three sections, added more stories and provided a comprehensive index - but the basic purpose of the book is unchanged. In all likelihood, your organization has stories that can help people understand what you do, how you do it, and why you are worthy of support. This booklet can help you improve how you tell those stories to create a more cohesive culture internally as well as to engage more people in your work. If you haven't purchased a copy within the past three years, we think you'll find this newest edition a valuable addition to your library.



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Amy Wolf

Back in 2010, Amy Wolf, then a public relations officer at Vanderbilt, often worked with alumni relations and admissions staff to create videos that showcased university life and programs. After feeling like the polished pieces she had been putting together weren't capturing the raw stories she heard around campus, Wolf got an idea. Inspired by [StoryCorps](#), she decided that Vanderbilt needed to build its own mobile story booth, and she envisioned a companion website where the unedited stories could be watched and archived.

In 2011, Wolf teamed up with Elizabeth Long Lingo, the Director of the Curb Creative Campus Initiative, who had been searching for a way to use storytelling as a teaching tool on campus. After Long Lingo was able to secure \$10,000 in initial funding, over a dozen campus partners came on board. "This was the first-ever completely grassroots project that brought together almost a dozen diverse groups across the university," Wolf told us by email. "It was not a mandated project - it grew and evolved creatively."

The technical requirements for the booth that the group eventually settled on were very ambitious: it had to capture well-lit, high quality video with good sound; it had to be entirely self-sufficient and user-friendly; and perhaps most critically, it had to be easily portable. Since Wolf and her team couldn't find a ready-made booth meeting all these specifications, they decided to design and build a fully customized model of their own. As that was in the works, they rented a booth with a video kiosk in order to test their programming (this booth is the one featured in the promotional video).

Early uses of the rented booth were promising and showed interest across the campus. At an alumni event, a sign posted on the outside of the booth asked alums to tell stories about how Vanderbilt had shaped them. The booth was so popular that some people waited more than two hours to use it. The Assistant Dean of the Ingram Commons, a live-in learning community for freshman, used the story booth with a group of first-year students to examine the topic of failure. And an engineering professor decided to make the construction plans of the custom booth into a senior design project.

The pilot period was also filled with surprises and challenges. While the original impetus for the project was for PR purposes, the booth didn't turn out to be a great tool for collecting stories to share with the public. Part of the reason for this was because most of the groups that used the booth were collecting stories to be circulated internally.

In addition, setting up the booth around campus with posted prompts actually wasn't a very effective way of getting people to tell their stories. Of the 11 videos currently on Vanderbilt Story Booth's website, only one features someone telling a story. (Scroll to the video at the bottom of this [page](#) to see for yourself). Which brings us to lesson #1 for others considering a similar project: most people aren't going to tell a great story just because they've pressed "record."



A Vanderbilt student uses the booth

While automating the booth has freed the organizers from having to facilitate the storytelling on each and every occasion, it has left users essentially on their own. The resulting videos, while personal, do not contain stories. An interview format or simply more specific prompts (e.g., Tell a story about a time you felt valued in the Vanderbilt community), would help to ensure that stories rather than thoughts are shared.

Another obstacle was the technology itself. "Technical problems with the kiosk were a huge issue," Wolf recalled in her email. "Right when we'd get momentum, the kiosk would break. That was an issue with our vendor that happened numerous times. We were forced to rebuild momentum over and over again. I honestly think this was the most difficult to overcome."

Which brings us to lesson #2: capturing and sharing raw and authentic stories needn't be an expensive or complicated process. In our November 2013 [issue](#), we profiled a successful story-collecting initiative at the YMCA in Rye, New York, where a story booth was made out of gym mats. No matter if an organization is hoping to collect stories in written, audio, or video format, capturing good stories is more about prompts and interview skills than it is about technology. And in this day and age, using resources like smart phones or tablets to collect stories can be a straightforward and relatively cost effective way to document them without experiencing the technology headaches that Vanderbilt had.



The custom-built story booth

After a series of engineering problems were resolved, the custom story booth finally made its debut on campus in May of 2014. And this is perhaps where the most important lesson about this project comes into focus. Unlike the others, this lesson is not in the booth itself, but in the people behind it. Wolf remains a passionate advocate for storytelling, but she, Long Lingo, and others from the original planning group have moved on, leaving the booth in new hands. From our experience working with universities, nonprofits, foundations, and other institutions, we know that building a storytelling culture is a delicate process that requires constant attention and enthusiasm.

"I truly hope that a creative student or someone else within the [University] will see the amazing potential of the Story Booth and run with it," Wolf told us, and we share that hope. If your organization wants to get serious about collecting stories, just remember this: it's more about the who than the how.

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