



The Road to Action: See-Feel-Do

Good storytellers paint vivid pictures with their words because they understand a fundamental truth about their audience: if they can see the story in their mind's eye, they will be able to *feel* it in their heart. Then - *and only then* - will they be ready to *do* something in response. Nonprofiteers often tell stories to elicit a "do" - join, give, sign, march - but all too often their stories fail to meet the first requirement. Unable to see, the audience is unlikely to feel and even less likely to do, and an opportunity is lost. It doesn't have to be that way.

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Consider this introduction of a teenage woman taking on the challenges of motherhood. Having read literally hundreds of nonprofit stories, I can assure you it is typical of the language used by organizations large and small working in this field:

The client, who was 17, was struggling to keep up with her one-year old son. He was extremely active and was into everything he could get his hands on. By the end of the day, the client was very frustrated and distraught.

Structurally, the story is off to a good start. We have a protagonist (the client), we can infer what she wants (to be a good mother), and we understand the challenge facing her (an extremely active child). The abstract language, however, prevents us from seeing the characters, setting and action. Now, contrast that introduction with the following version, which uses exactly the same number of words:

Karen, 17, struggled to keep up with Marco, who had just turned one. He would frequently climb all over her, open her purse, and dump its contents on the wood floor. By day's end, Karen often had tears streaming down her cheeks.

Doesn't this version *feel* different? Consider all the changes that contribute to that feeling: introducing the characters as Karen and Marco (instead of "the client" and "her son") humanizes them as only names can and helps the audience identify with them.

Abstract terms that don't conjure images have been replaced with specifics that help the audience visualize. "Extremely active," which is vague, is brought into sharper focus with an image of Marco climbing all over Karen. "Into everything" becomes a purse that is emptied on the floor - you can almost hear the keys and loose change rattling on the hardwood. And rather than simply telling us that Karen is "frustrated and distraught," the second version show us "tears streaming down her cheeks" and lets us draw our own conclusions.

"Abstract concepts, generalities, and conceptual notions have a hard time engaging us, because we can't see them, feel them, or otherwise experience them," writes Lisa Cron in her excellent book, *Wired for Story*. "What all this boils down to is," she adds, "the story is in the specifics."

Stories can be the most powerful tool you have to engage an audience and move them to action. But keep in mind that people will not act if they don't feel something first, and it's hard to feel what you cannot see.

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