

THE GUIDE TO
NONPROFIT
STORYTELLING

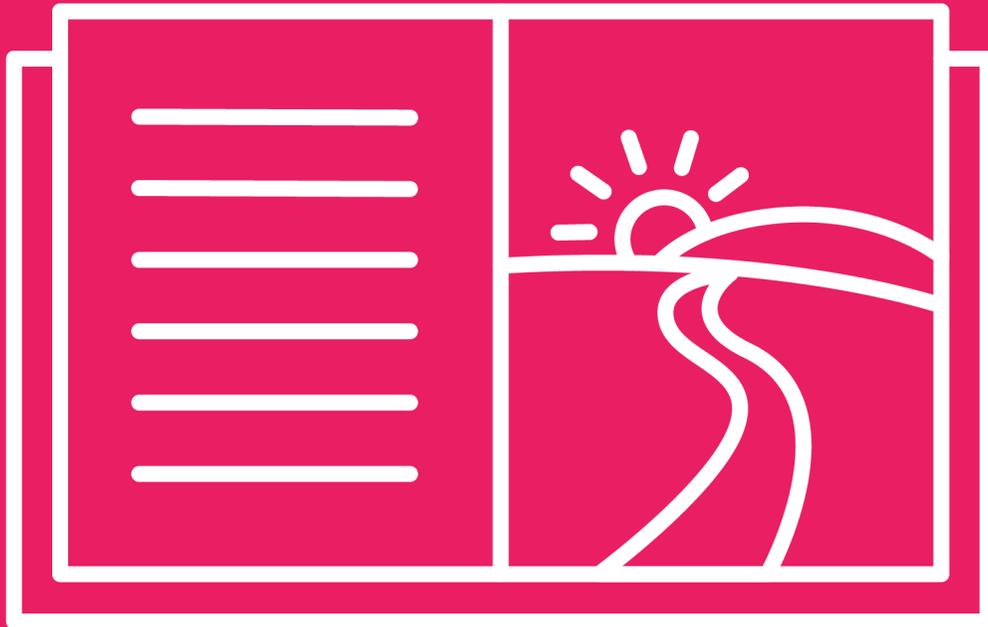


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Introduction

Everyone is a storyteller. Even people who don't think of themselves as creative or artistic are storytellers. From infancy, we gain knowledge and connect with others by sharing stories. From children's books with moral lessons to family members telling us about their day, stories help us understand the world and each other.

Similarly, nonprofit organizations must rely on stories to connect with their audience and build a community around their mission. Through storytelling, nonprofits can illustrate problems, articulate solutions, and forge emotional connections to attract supporters.

To help you discover and share your organization's story, we created this guide on the essentials you need to know. We'll start with why storytelling matters in marketing and move on to the elements that make up good stories and the different ways to tell them. Finally, we'll give some practical tips on how nonprofit organizations can mobilize their staff and supporters to capture the inspiring stories unfolding around their causes.

No matter your cause sector, organization size, or personal background, you have the ability to tell a great story. Read on to learn how.

1 | Stories and Marketing

Why Storytelling Matters

Stories are how human beings learn and make connections. Just think about how we teach and engage small children. We tell them fairytales to learn life lessons, we read them books to help them develop their language and critical thinking, and if you give them a few simple toys, they often will create a whole world and story with them. Stories activate our imagination and help communicate ideas in ways that truly resonate with the audience. Stories bring facts and ideas to life.

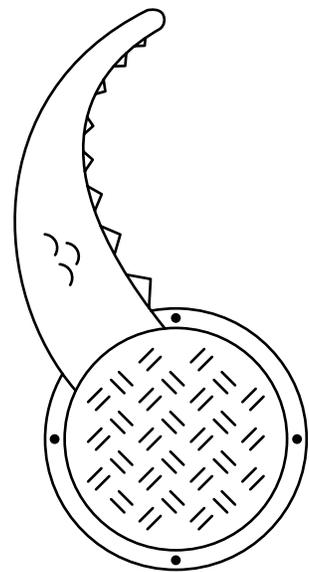
Part of why stories are so powerful is that they can be easy to understand and remember. That's why urban legends never seem to die.

If someone said in passing, *"You know, alligators live down in the sewers,"* would you believe it or even remember it?

While this simple statement might pique your interest, if it's told in the form of a story, the idea becomes more real.

"A friend of my cousin had a pet baby alligator. But when it started to grow, his mom made him flush it down the toilet. Last week, he was trying to get his keys out of a gutter when he saw an alligator down there, fully grown!"

Urban legends usually sound something like that. The story easily adapts to be about anyone living anywhere. Even when it's about someone you've never met, someone who may not even exist, stories have a way of sticking with you. They often give you someone to identify with and make you wonder what you would do in a similar situation. This ability to pull an audience in and make them connect with an idea is an essential tool for advertisers and marketers.



The Rise of Storytelling in Marketing

Stories have always been an integral part of marketing. They help brands explain their role and relationship with the public. In many cases, ads position their products as a turning point or solution to a character's problem. And if the viewer has the same problem, they are motivated to buy the product. Whether its through advertisements, product packaging, or their online presence, brands can show people what problems they solve for and why the audience needs their goods or services.

For example, in the 1970s, Wisk laundry detergent ran a campaign to help people get rid of "ring around the collar," a stain that sometimes shows up on men's shirts. If you look closely, you can see there is a simple character arc to this 30 second ad.



1 The woman is packing a bag of freshly laundered clothes.



2 But then she sees it, the "ring around the collar."



3 She is frustrated because she has tried several different methods to clean the stain.



4 But then she uses Wisk and it helps solve her problem.



5 With the shirt clean and the ring gone, she finishes packing the bag and can move on with her life.



6 In the end, the ad ties the character's positive outcome back to the product."

© Watch the full 30 second Video

Although stories have been an element of marketing for decades, their importance has grown in recent years, in part because the public is so well-versed in advertising strategies. Many people are acutely aware of when a brand is trying to appeal to them, but a truly engrossing or relatable story helps overcome any boredom or skepticism.

Another reason for the growing popularity of storytelling in marketing (for both nonprofits and for-profits) is that a great deal of audience communication has moved online. In the past, organizations and brands would have to purchase advertising space from media outlets or work with reporters to try to get coverage. Now, with social media, blogs, and other online platforms, organizations can create and distribute stories at will.

Organizations aren't the only ones who now have an easier time telling their stories. The internet has also afforded individuals the opportunity to easily express and amplify their opinions. This has added a layer of complexity to former push-marketing strategies. Through social media and online review sites like Yelp, anyone can relate their experience with a brand or organization. Like all businesses, social impact organizations can now promote these experiences and share positive stories submitted from the public. Of course, they must contend with negative experiences too.

In today's world, the ease of storytelling and communications gives your organization a chance to grow relationships with your supporter base. But to strategically build your audience, it's important to understand the current landscape and what this means for nonprofits.



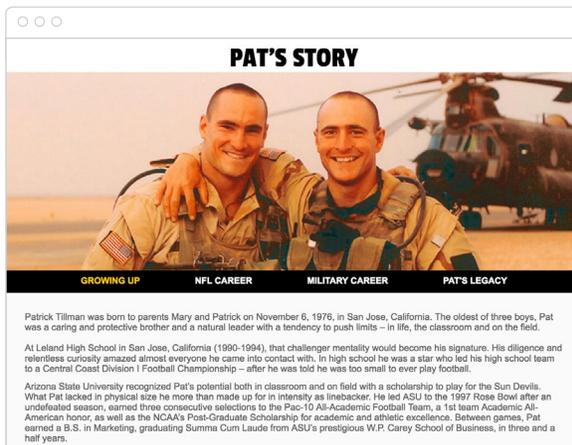
World Wildlife Foundation can create and upload a YouTube video and then distribute it to their Twitter followers at their convenience.

Marketing for the Modern Nonprofit

Regardless of their size or budget, nonprofit organizations are well-positioned to take advantage of story-based marketing. Every organization has a founding story, every nonprofit professional has a personal story of how they connect with their cause, and social impact programs create new stories every day.

Some of the most well-known social impact organizations have used the power of stories to attract supporters and influence the public to contribute toward important causes.

Some, like the Pat Tillman Foundation, leverage captivating founding stories, while others like Splash use stories to show the impact of a program or initiative.



The Pat Tillman Foundation tells the story of their namesake, a football player and soldier killed in Afghanistan.



Splash uses an animated story to explain how the filtration systems they provide help children stay healthy.

Whether you're a startup nonprofit or a global organization, telling an effective story can bring your work to life and help donors make the emotional connection that so often drives giving.

To truly resonate with your audience, though, you need to do more than simply tell a story. You need to tell it in a way that strikes the right chords, and contains all the right elements.

2 | Elements of a Story

As powerful and influential as stories can be, at their core, most are composed of a few simple elements. In this chapter, we'll cover the different parts of a story and how they work together to weave a tale that captivates your audience and moves them to take action.

Beginning, Middle, and End

Stories have a beginning, middle, and end. This may sound obvious but it's a vitally important arc to understand.



- **Beginning** – When the story starts, the character faces a set of circumstances and likely has a desire or goal.
- **Middle** – In pursuing their goal (which may be something as simple as survival), the character faces challenges and takes actions.
- **End** – By the close of the story, the character's life has changed in some way. Their actions and experiences during the story have changed their situation.

A story can demonstrate how your organization makes the world a better place. It shows the audience how things were, what your nonprofit did to change that, and how things are now.

Characters

Your characters are the key to connecting supporters with your story. They give the audience someone to care about and root for, or conversely, a “villain” to root against. Whether it’s a television commercial, a narrative blog post, or a Disney movie, stories nearly always have a main character.

Part of the reason it’s so important to focus on an individual, or main character, is that audiences connect more with a single person than they do with a large group of people. Researchers have found, for example, that people are more likely to donate to a nonprofit when their appeal focuses on one child in need, as opposed to a group of children.¹ This is because potential donors can learn the individual child’s name and make an emotional connection, whereas it is much harder to create that personal attachment with an entire group of children.

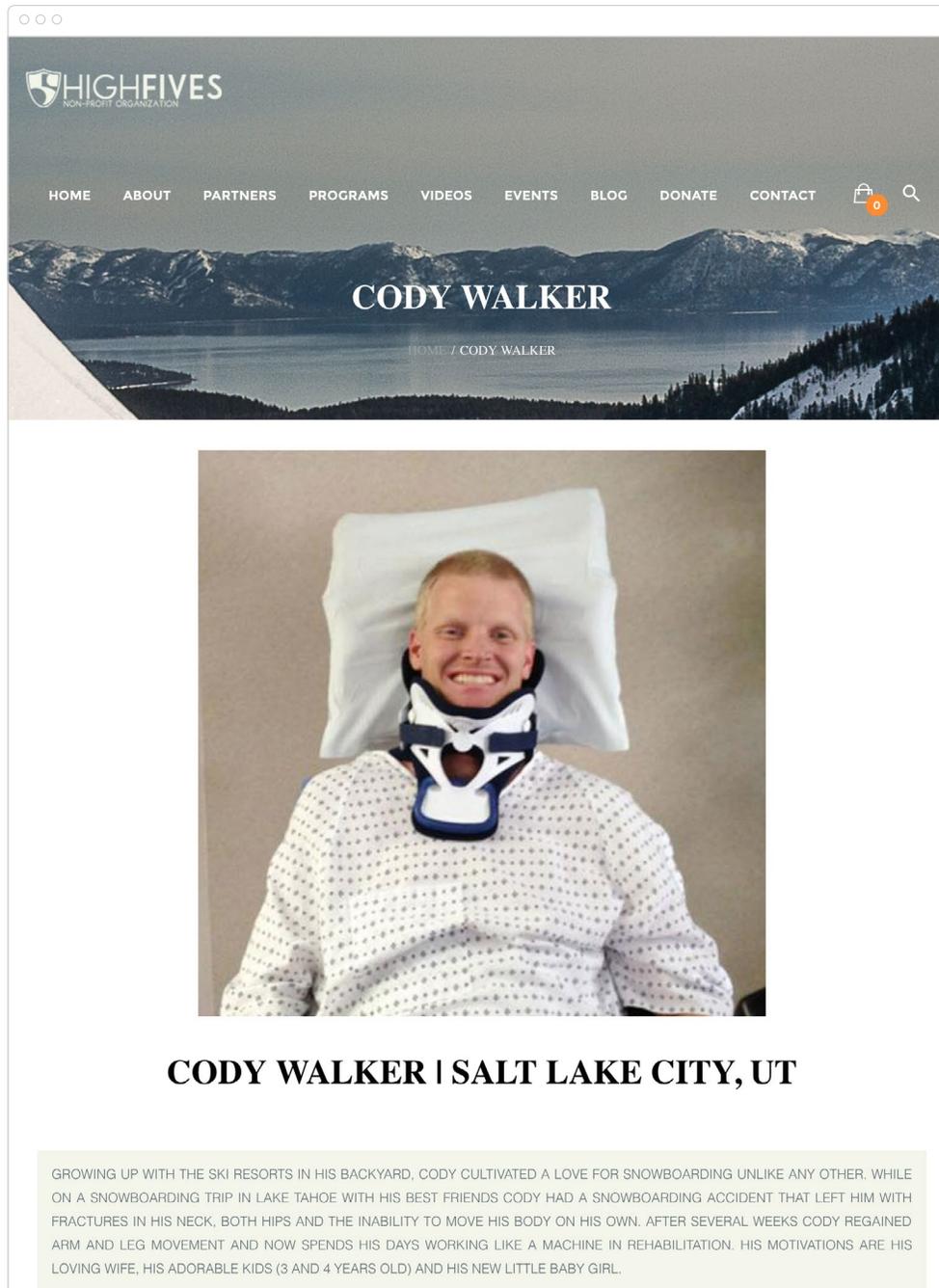
Perhaps Mother Teresa said it best,

“ *If I look at the mass I will never act. If I look at the one, I will.*”

– MOTHER TERESA

¹ The Science of Giving: Experimental Approaches to the Study of Charity, “The Identifiable Victim Effect: Causes and Boundary Conditions.”

When it comes to storytelling for nonprofits, your main characters will often be the people affected by your cause. For example, the High Fives Foundation raises awareness around injury prevention and helps mountain sport athletes recover from major injuries. Their website introduces athletes like Cody Walker, who is working hard to regain movement after a snowboarding accident.



The image shows a screenshot of a website for the High Fives Foundation. The header includes the organization's logo and a navigation menu with links for Home, About, Partners, Programs, Videos, Events, Blog, Donate, and Contact. Below the navigation is a hero image of a mountain landscape with a lake, overlaid with the name 'CODY WALKER' and a breadcrumb trail 'HOME / CODY WALKER'. The main content area features a photograph of Cody Walker, a young man with a neck brace, wearing a hospital gown. Below the photo is the title 'CODY WALKER | SALT LAKE CITY, UT' and a text block describing his snowboarding accident and recovery journey.

HIGHFIVES
NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION

HOME ABOUT PARTNERS PROGRAMS VIDEOS EVENTS BLOG DONATE CONTACT

CODY WALKER

HOME / CODY WALKER



CODY WALKER | SALT LAKE CITY, UT

GROWING UP WITH THE SKI RESORTS IN HIS BACKYARD, CODY CULTIVATED A LOVE FOR SNOWBOARDING UNLIKE ANY OTHER. WHILE ON A SNOWBOARDING TRIP IN LAKE TAHOE WITH HIS BEST FRIENDS CODY HAD A SNOWBOARDING ACCIDENT THAT LEFT HIM WITH FRACTURES IN HIS NECK, BOTH HIPS AND THE INABILITY TO MOVE HIS BODY ON HIS OWN. AFTER SEVERAL WEEKS CODY REGAINED ARM AND LEG MOVEMENT AND NOW SPENDS HIS DAYS WORKING LIKE A MACHINE IN REHABILITATION. HIS MOTIVATIONS ARE HIS LOVING WIFE, HIS ADORABLE KIDS (3 AND 4 YEARS OLD) AND HIS NEW LITTLE BABY GIRL.

When supporters meet Cody and read his story, it shows them that their contributions help real people overcome their injuries.

When introducing your main character, be sure to include some identifying details about the person (with their approval). This not only makes the story more genuine to your audience, it also gives readers little attributes to connect with on a personal level.



In this Instagram post, Special Olympics New Jersey featured a participant with his name and how long he's been playing basketball. Viewers of this post get the chance to know the real people they're supporting.



Similarly, More Than Me introduces their audience to a girl named Precious who was honored for her academic achievement. By noting that she has overcome the loss of her parents in the Ebola epidemic, More Than Me shows the individual challenges their students face.

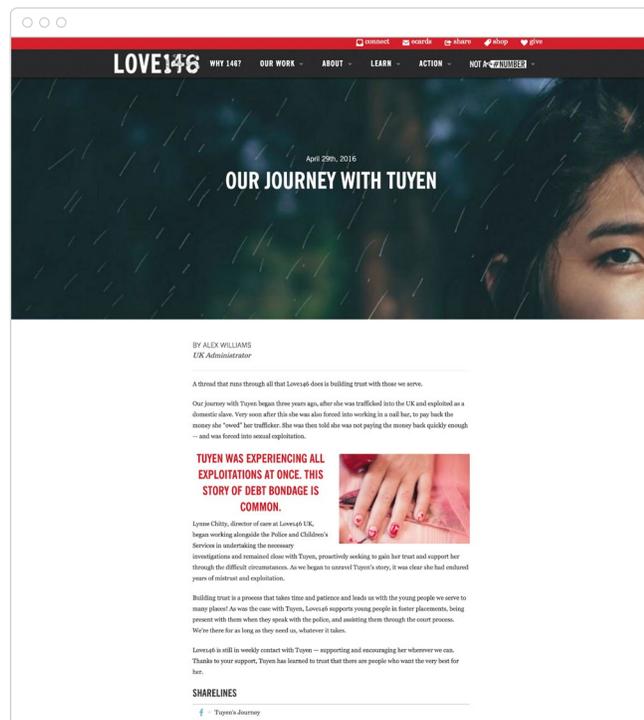
It also pays to keep in mind that psychologists have shown that people express more sympathy and emotional connection to those similar to themselves.² For example, with More Than Me's Instagram post, someone who has lost their parents might read Precious' story, identify with the message, and be moved to get involved.

² The Science of Giving: Experimental Approaches to the Study of Charity, "Sympathy Biases and Sympathy Appeals: Reducing Social Distance to Boost Charitable Donations."

The Challenge

Every main character faces some problem or difficulty. Because nonprofit organizations help solve some of the world's toughest problems, it often seems as though there are a never-ending supply of challenges to discuss. The issue for organizations then becomes the need to balance this inherent negativity with positive elements to keep from overwhelming readers.

Many nonprofit organizations attack very serious issues. For example, Love146 rescues and supports victims of human trafficking. The stories this organization must tell can be dark and disturbing, but they find a way to share them honestly and in ways that still project hope. A blog post about a rescued girl named Tuyen recounts her history of exploitation, but the story focuses on how Love146 worked to build trust with her, even after she moved on to a foster family.



On one hand, you must show donors why their support is needed. To motivate people to donate or get involved, you have to make them understand why your cause matters. Conversely, you must show donors there is hope for improvement and take care not to, well...bum them out. To avoid this, be sure your stories exude hope and include how your organization is going to be part of the solution.

Setting

The setting of a story can influence the overall tone and reception of the tale. It can also give your audience a better understanding of the challenges your characters face. Setting can be conveyed through a verbal or written description, a video, or even a still photo.



Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO) helps to renew Nairobi, Kenya's slums by empowering and educating girls. This photo not only shows the neighborhood of Mathare, it also conveys how their school for girls is a bright and inspiring resource amid the slum's pervasive poverty.

To give a sense of setting, you can appeal to any of the senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste, or smell. All of these help the audience imagine and connect with the situation.

For example, Oxfam includes pictures and uses a testimonial to describe the parched land and convey the devastating effects of drought and climate change in Guatemala. Just a few words or images can make a problem more real or relatable to your audience.



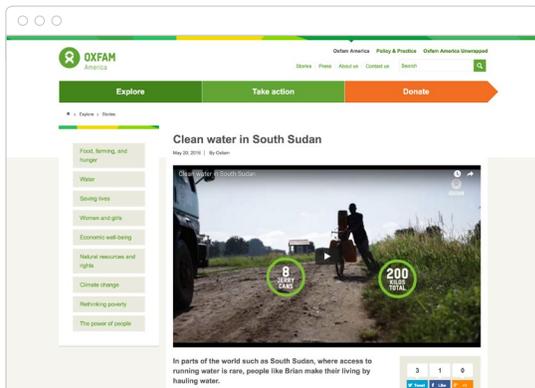
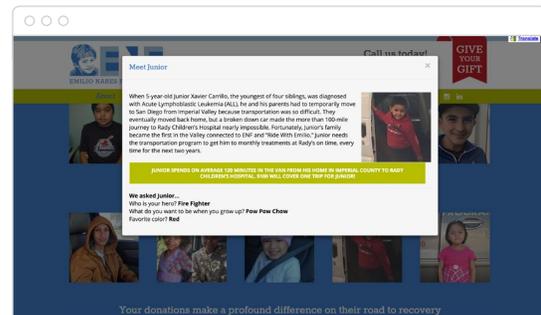
"At the hillside home of Sofia Tista Sis, 37, in El Aguacate, the talk turns to the severe challenges of trying to make it in a climate that seems to be changing.

*'About five years ago, it wasn't like this,' says Sis, looking down at the **hard, dry land** falling steeply away from the house where she was born. 'In the last three years, it's as if we're going backwards.'*

Calls to Action (CTA)

It's important to remember the purpose behind nonprofit storytelling is to mobilize supporters to donate, fundraise, and advocate for your cause. Be sure to close many of your stories with relevant CTAs. The decision to donate is dependent partly on emotion, so when you tell a great story that gets the audience to connect and care about your cause, you need to give them the opportunity to act on those feelings.³

Ideally, your CTA will be directly related to the story you tell. In the Patient Stories section of their website, the Emilio Nares Foundation provides information about a child named Junior and follows up by letting donors know what a \$100 donation will provide for him.



In a video, Oxfam shows how their work to provide clean water in South Sudan changed the life of a man named Brian. With this story fresh in their mind, readers are invited to donate and help more people in similar situations.

While most people intuitively know how to relate an anecdote or experience, nonprofit storytellers should also keep these powerful elements in mind. Like baking a cake, telling a story is a lot easier when you know all the ingredients.

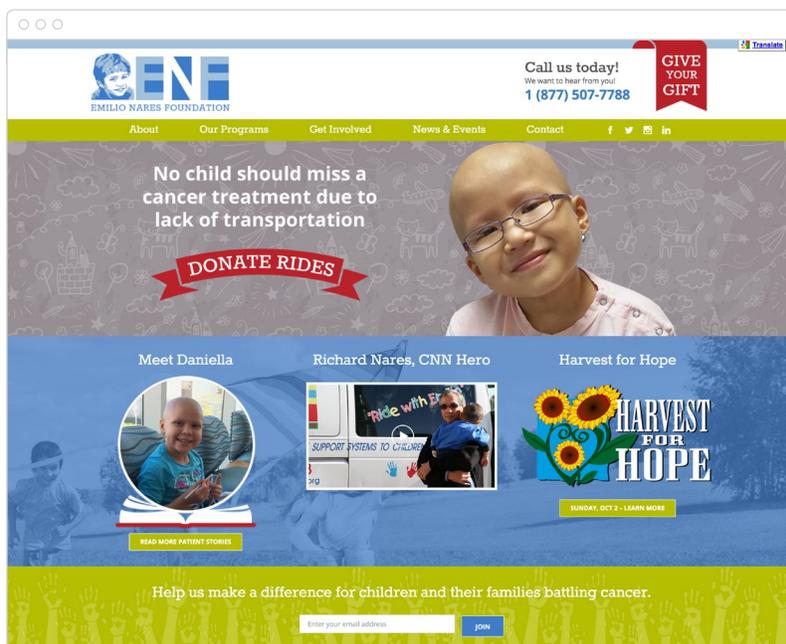
² The Science of Giving: Experimental Approaches to the Study of Charity, "The Identifiable Victim Effect: Causes and Boundary Conditions."

3 | Mediums and Tools for Storytelling

As crucial as it is to include the core elements in your story, the way you convey it is just as important. Nonprofits have access to many different mediums for storytelling, each with its own benefits, limitations, and best practices. To make the most of your communications channels, learn how to draw your audience in through multiple tools.

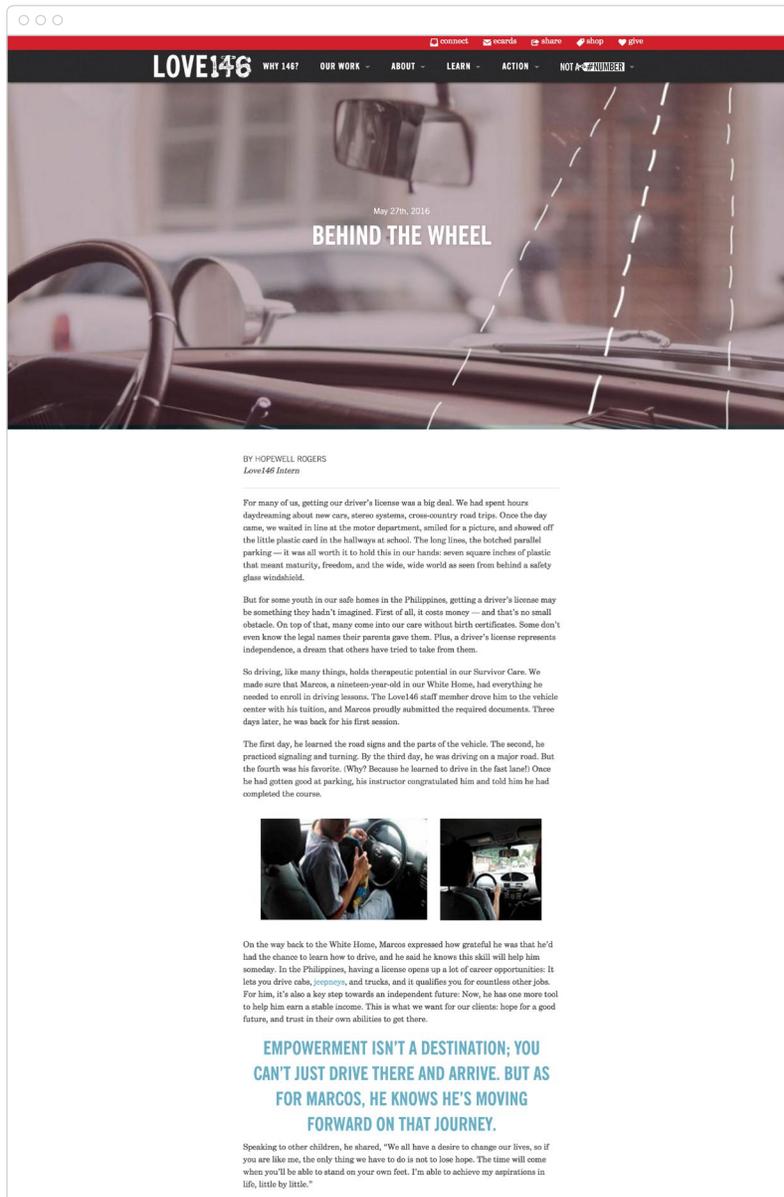
Your Website and Blog

Your organization’s website is the medium over which you have the most control. Each page is a chance to tell a story and help users connect with your cause. You can offer different stories on different parts of your site, or even carry one main story across several pages. Organizations often use their website to give supporters the big picture of the cause, but your appeals can be strengthened by using this space to highlight detailed, individual stories as well.



The Emilio Nares Foundation, which provides transportation to and from cancer treatments for children in need, features one patient’s story on their homepage. Before visitors to the site even click on the story, though, ENF gives the girl’s name and shows her smile.

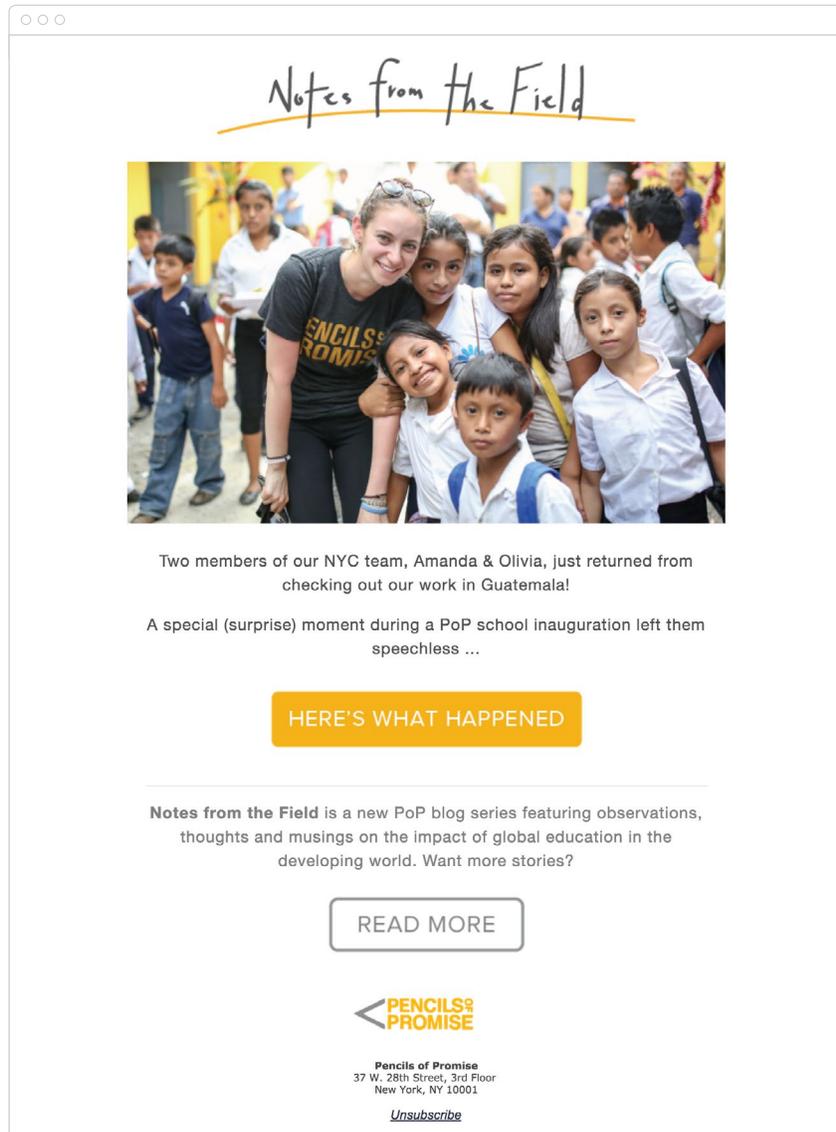
Your blog is another great place to highlight individual stories. Blog posts usually include more detail and can be used to provide a deeper dive into your organization's work. Link shorter-form content pieces to your blog posts to give your audience the chance to learn more.



This blog post by human trafficking organization Love146 tells the story of Marcos, a young man living in one of their children's homes in the Philippines. The post explains how much learning to drive meant to him as he regained his freedom and became more independent. Love146's blog gives them space to share individual stories such as these on a regular basis.

Stories Through Email

Email is another important storytelling medium. It should be more condensed than your blog or website, but you can also use it to give a taste of what's to come and link out to a full story. You can even create a series, and tell a story through a sequence of emails.



This email from Pencils of Promise gives a few details from staff members' experiences in the field and teases a surprise from their trip to Central America. The call to action entices readers to find out what happened.

possible 

Three Major Milestones: Rebuilding with Resilience



Our team recently crossed three major milestones: We re-opened a health clinic, took over management of a hospital hub, and implemented our Electronic Health Record at this hospital—all in one of the regions worst hit by the earthquakes earlier this year.

This is an achievement that is part of a global conversation: proving with resilience, important partner support, and a dedicated team, there is a way to build healthcare back better in low-resource settings around the world.



SEE THE BEFORE & AFTER



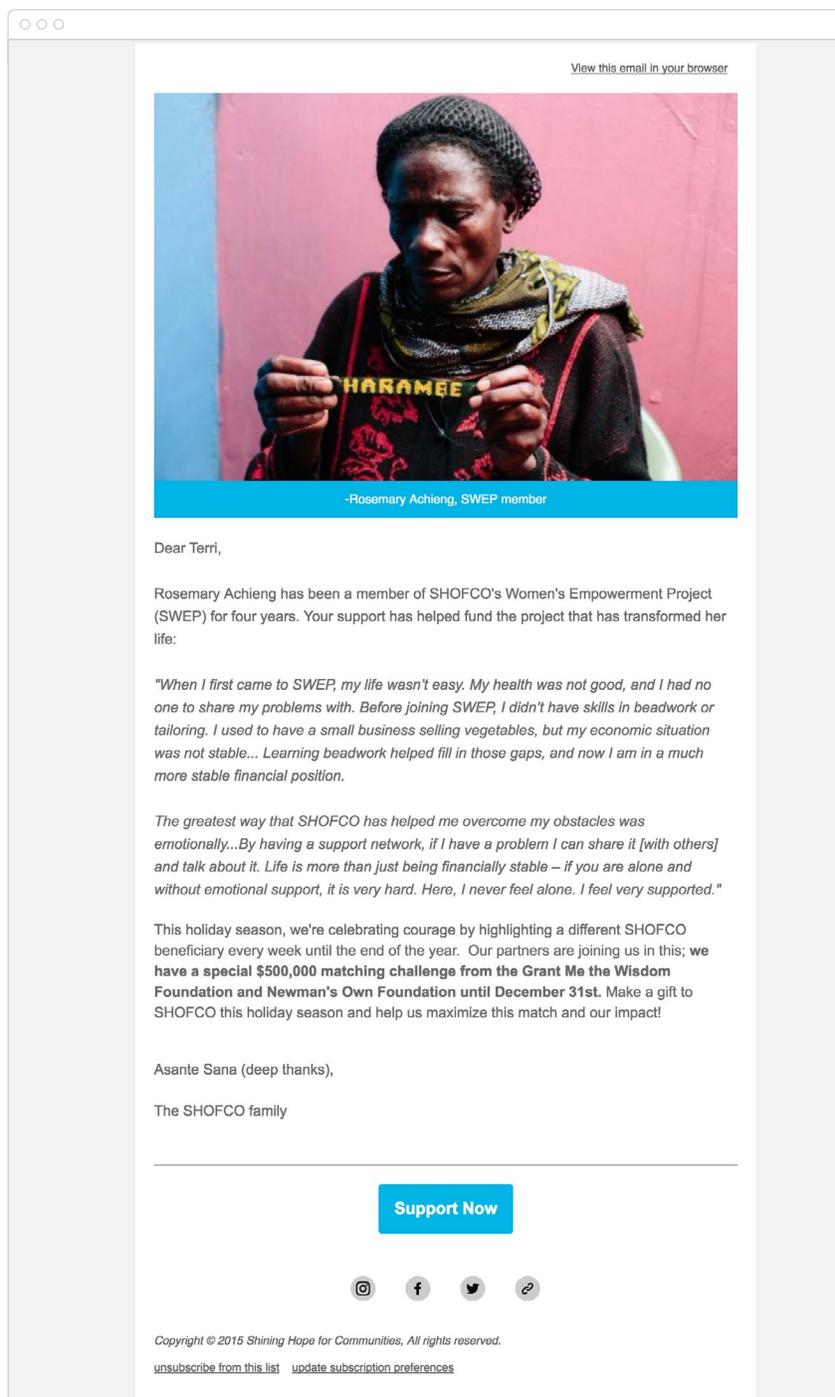
SEE THE EHR

[View this in your browser.](#)



Possible | 30 Broad Street, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10004 | [Update subscription preferences.](#)

To show donors how their support made a difference in Nepal after the devastating 2015 earthquake, Possible uses a few images and sentences to convey how far the organization and its rural hospital has come.



Emails can also be used as a place for your beneficiaries to tell their own stories. SHOFCO gave a member of their Women's Empowerment Program the opportunity to explain how the service helped her gain a support network and become financially stable. Ask the people who benefit from your programs to tell their stories and it will give your supporters a direct connection to your impact.

“A few days ago, I stood in the Love146 Round Home in the Philippines and held a precious baby in my arms. She is the youngest survivor in our care. She is one. A baby. One. Year. Old. I have no words, other than:

THIS HAS GOT TO STOP. AND WE WILL NOT REST UNTIL IT DOES.


 Rob Morris
 Co-founder & President
 LOVE146 

There are days, like these, when doing nothing is just not an option.

You might think “my small contribution wont help much.” It’s not true.

At Love146, our funding is as dependent on small individual gifts as it is on big donors. Many small donations are part of what makes Love146 stable and strong.

Your \$5, together with thousands of others’ \$5, makes for a lot of \$5s! Pretty soon it becomes \$5,000. Maybe even \$10,000. All of a sudden, your small contribution is helping to sustain critical prevention work and holistic care for survivors, like this baby.

Today is the day to show up for this little survivor and the many other youth we serve.

GIVE \$5 TODAY **GIVE \$5 MONTHLY**

As this email from Love146 shows, even a short anecdote can make your cause more real and compelling. Email is an especially versatile tool because it allows you to tell a story through text, images, and even video.

Video to Convey Your Cause

With the growing accessibility of smartphones, cameras, and platforms like YouTube, more and more nonprofits are using video to tell their story. Video can be an especially powerful tool because it allows stories to unfold right before your audience's eyes. It can also be adapted to a number of different platforms. You can feature a video on your website, share it on social media, and even send it directly to donors in an email.

Pencils of Promise has produced several excellent videos that show how the schools they build change lives and communities. In one video, eleven-year-old Juana Christina tell the story of her village in Guatemala. She explains how the village's seventeen founding families built the classroom where she learned to read, but goes on to describe how the building is now dilapidated and unsafe. We then see her help break ground on a new school the community is building with Pencils of Promise.



“ But today, we have a new hope. With Pencils of Promise, we have a chance to build a new school, a safe school. And for the first time, I think my dreams will become real.”

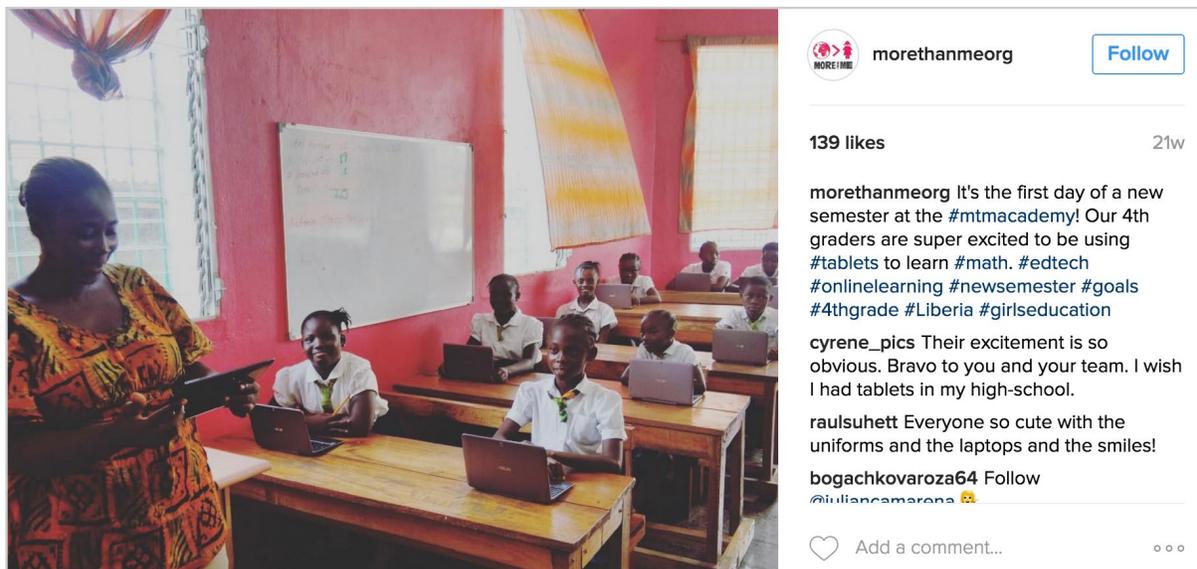
– JUANA CHRISTINA

This example shows how video allows you to introduce a character, set the scene, show the challenge, and offer a solution that leads to a hopeful future.

Social Media Stories

One relatively new component of story-based marketing is social media. While we sometimes think of social platforms as somewhere to throw a quick picture or appeal, they can also be used to tell stories that delight and touch your supporters.

Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms, in part because of the storytelling power of pictures. Along with a caption that gives a little context, an image can show how a character overcomes a challenge or reaches a happy ending.



In this post from More Than Me, we get a peek into the first day of a new semester at the organization's school for girls. The image shows us that the students are excited and engaged and the caption implies that the tablets are a new addition to their classroom. It's a simple but effective story about girls starting a new semester and using a new tool to learn.



You can also use social media posts to attract people to read or engage with a longer story, as Miriam's Kitchen does in this tweet. Here, a picture helps the audience connect by showing the people at the center of the story.



Human Rights Campaign used text and video in this Facebook post about a couple that has supported the cause for many years. The post gives insight into the experience of supporters as well as those affected by the cause.

With so many channels and mediums for storytelling, nonprofit organizations can strategically choose the most effective methods for communicating with their donors.

4 | Where to Find Your Stories

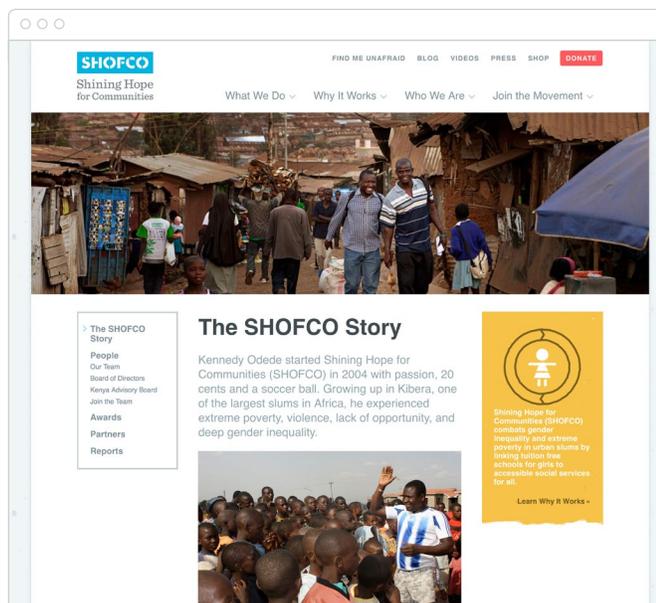
Stories may be an integral part of everyday life, but that doesn't mean collecting and sharing them is always easy. Social impact organizations must prioritize effective storytelling if they want to truly reach supporters and incite action. The good news is that most nonprofits are already a part of compelling and inspiring stories on a regular basis. By mobilizing your team and community to uncover and communicate these stories, you can create an engaged supporter base brimming with enthusiasm for your cause.

Types of Nonprofit Stories

There are several types of stories that come up again and again in the nonprofit sector. While every organization has different tales to tell, you can use these categories as a jumping-off point for your own content creation.

FOUNDING STORY

Most nonprofits have an interesting or inspiring story around how they started. On their website, Shining Hope for Communities features the story of how a young man from an impoverished neighborhood began the organization.



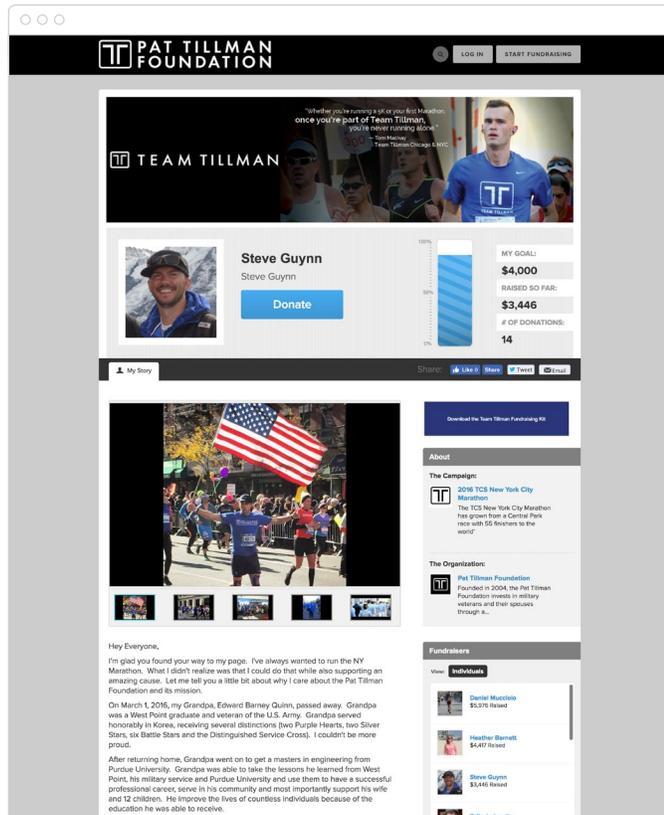
INDIVIDUAL IMPACT STORY

To convey your impact and give supporters an opportunity to personally connect with your cause, you can give an in-depth look at someone who has benefitted from your work. The Dyslexia Institute of Indiana created a video in which they tell the story of how one family was changed by their adaptive education support.



DONOR/FUNDRAISER STORY

One of the keys to attracting donors and fundraisers is to show them how great the supporter experience can be. Collect testimonials from these groups to highlight in your communications. It's also a good idea to encourage peer-to-peer fundraisers to explain how they connect with your cause on their fundraising page.



VOLUNTEER/STAFF STORY

Another powerful strategy to engage your audience can be to provide an inside look at what it's like to work with your organization. Similar to an organization, staff members often have their own story of how they became involved in the cause.

Staff members are also well-poised to tell everyday stories and anecdotes that show the impact you're making. Social media is an especially good place to share these small victories.

**Special Olympics**
June 8 at 12:45pm · 🌐

Three years ago Brad was asked to organize a unified flag football game at [The University of Alabama](#).

Today, as we celebrate reaching 1.2 million unified teammates, we take a look at what Brad has learned these last few years from [Special Olympics College at UA!](#) #PlayUnified



What playing unified has taught me

The following post is written by Brad Gardner, a student at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. Three years ago I was asked to organize a unified flag football team at the University of Alabam...

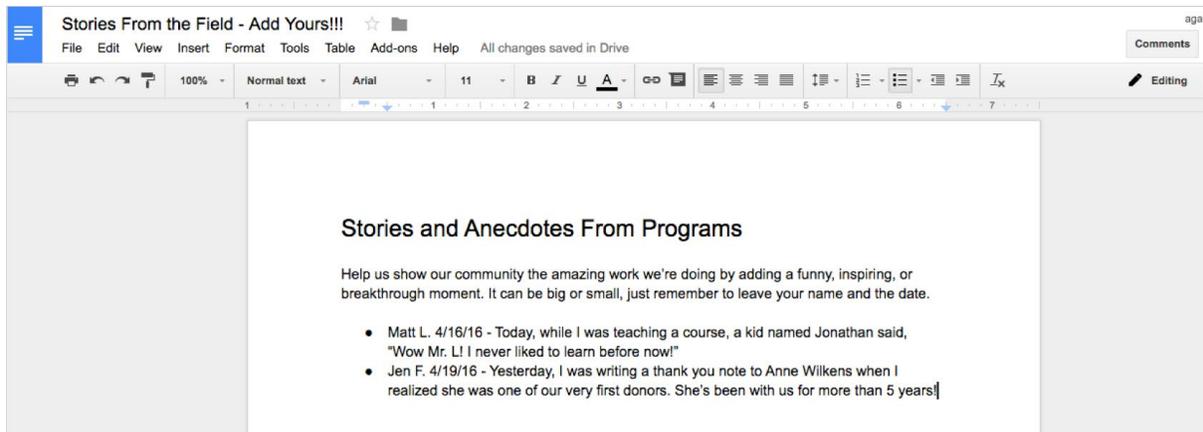
SPECIALOLYMPICSBLOG.WORDPRESS.COM

👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

Collecting Stories

Once you're aware of the types of stories you'd like to tell, your marketing team can begin collecting the necessary information. This is why marketers must be in sync with their coworkers in programming. The first step is to communicate to the programs team that you want to know about what is happening in the field in order to fuel your communications strategy. There are several steps you can take to encourage collaboration and the sharing of stories.

- Create a shared document where different team members can add anecdotes and notes about their experiences.



- Ask each programs team member to email their most interesting experience of the week to the marketing team.
- Give your programs associates some quick photography tips for capturing inspiring moments.
- Make an effort to gather feedback and stories from any beneficiaries of your programs. They can give you an inside perspective on how your organization makes an impact.

Share Supporters' Stories

While it's important for your nonprofit to communicate its story to your audience, sometimes your audience will tell the story for you. Fortunately, social media makes it easy to share these stories with your entire supporter base.



This tweet from a company called Gap Intelligence thanks the Emilio Nares Foundation for coming to speak at their office and shows how the organization is reaching out to the community.



Pencils of Promise loves to share their supporters' experiences to demonstrate how simple and rewarding it is to get involved. They re-promote posts like these to show their audience that regular people can make a difference and feel great about it.

Wherever, however you work, your organization has lots of stories to tell. Use these story types and strategies to find and share the experiences that will delight your community and prompt them to act.

Conclusion

More than ever, marketing means telling your story. And social impact organizations have some truly inspiring tales to tell. With an understanding of the key elements of a story and the mediums through which they can be told, you can show your audience why your work matters and how your nonprofit is making a difference. Every organization has important stories to share and it's up to you to tell them.



Classy

How to Construct a Story from Start to Finish

Walk through the steps of telling an effective impact story with one of Classy's latest infographics.

[Read Now →](#)