

amENABLE

ONCE UPON A CAUSE

Storytelling Strategy
for Nonprofits & Churches



**Storytelling is
powerful —
and we know it.**



We all have that friend who can keep a room full of people on the edge of their seats with a story about a trip to the grocery store. **Storytelling is powerful—and we know it.** Stories remind us where we've come from and keep us moving forward through the frustrating days and long nights. For church and nonprofit leaders, there are specific stories that keep you grounded in the “why” of what you do—whether it's the one about the redemption of the world or the one about the kitten who found her forever home.

At Amenable, we're creatives, not neuroscientists or psychologists. But we've read up on the science of storytelling, and we think the results are pretty compelling.

American neuroscientist Paul Zak found that character-driven stories consistently create oxytocin in viewers' brains. The result? **Character-driven stories can do everything from reinforcing your argument to creating listeners who are neurologically predisposed to help others.**

There's no doubt that stories change us—and the people within our organizations' spheres of influence. But when it comes to actually running your organization, how does storytelling fit into your strategy? Most would say it's a great add-on, but we think it might be one of the best things to invest in. Don't believe us? **Keep reading.**

Story & Strategy



If you run in church or nonprofit circles, you've probably already heard a lot about the merits of storytelling. If you need more convincing, we've got more for you in a minute, but before that, let's talk about how story and strategy work together. Many churches and nonprofits have issues not with the concept of telling stories, but with the ways that story and strategy intersect with each other.

Why do we have such a hard time with these two seeming opposites? We tend to isolate story and strategy. This is probably what leads us to fall for the common misconception that the path to persuasion is

either made of cold, hard facts or emotional manipulation and stretching the truth to fit your own needs. While an easy fix is to just say that everything should be held in balance, we're here to say that story and strategy shouldn't have to perfectly balance each other out. Rather, we like to think of them as complements. **Take this example...**

Meet Maria. She has an infectious smile and you can probably catch her sporting her favorite yellow hoodie. She's also a bright high-school student in our community. She has two parents who both work hard—more than full-time—to make ends meet and support Maria and her three brothers. There are a lot of students in our community in a similar situation. It turns out that 63% of middle and high school students' parents work multiple jobs to support their families.

Oftentimes, this means Maria's parents can't be around when she gets off of school. Maria thinks back on her life as it was only a few

months ago, saying, “Don't get me wrong—everyone likes having free time from school to hang out or do things we like. But I got a little bored and at times I ended up hanging around the wrong crowd just because I figured ‘Why not?’”

When Spark the Arts started a program at her school focusing on giving students the opportunity to learn about the arts, Maria was hesitant. She never really thought of herself as creative. But she asked the same question—“Why not?” Her friend, Andrea, had recently been going and couldn't stop talking about it. Maria decided to come one Tuesday afternoon—and she hasn't looked back since. Spark the Arts gave her opportunities to learn

all kinds of skills from ceramics to cooking to music.

“It doesn’t feel like school,” says Maria, “but I’m learning all the time. And we have time to do our homework together too, which is way more fun than doing it alone like I used to.”

Spark the Arts lets our students keep learning by giving them a dedicated space to develop practical skills, hone their creativity, help them with school, and create their own future. Over the past two years, we’ve seen so many students who want to keep learning and growing and now have a space to do that. For every 10 students in our program, nine of them have been able to explore more than one new skill or activity while also improving their grades. And—in case you were wondering—Maria was one of those students.



In this example, we have a simple story about Maria. However, statistics about the community at large and the program's impact were woven in as part of the story, showing how Maria isn't an anomaly, but one representative example of many stories of change. **Good storytelling reflects real-life impact.** So, the greater your impact, the easier it will be to find good stories.

If you're interested in learning more about building a strategy story, check out **this guide** from Harvard Business Review.

Benefits of Good Storytelling



What are the practical benefits of telling good stories? Readers can understand the need for your organization, relate to you better, and be more easily moved to action. Okay, okay—we've all heard these before. But specifically for churches and nonprofits, there are two benefits in particular that often get overlooked.



Stories Stick (Out)

We hate to break it to you—but to people on the outside, many churches and nonprofits sound alike.

Check out these mission statements for three nonprofits aimed at ending food insecurity:

“End global hunger by 2030...”
(World Food Programme)

“End childhood hunger in America...”
(No Kid Hungry)

“End hunger and poverty...”
(The Hunger Project)

While each of these quoted mission statements is abbreviated, it can show how vastly different organizations can easily sound the same. But each of these organizations relies heavily on storytelling, which sets them apart from each other in the minds of their audiences. From their mission statements, they don't seem entirely unique from each other.

As a reader, it can be difficult to remember exactly who trains locals to spearhead changes in their own communities, who offers global emergency food assistance, and who is focused on policy changes regarding food insecurity in America. **Telling stories about real people being impacted by your organization helps your mission to stick—and stick out—in the minds of your readers.**

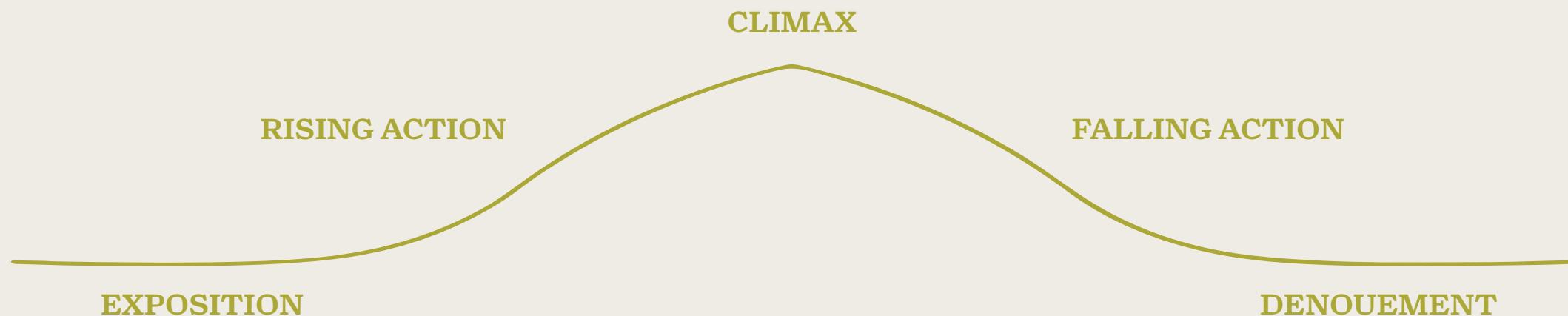
Committed to the Cause

Storytelling is a great space for your volunteers. Oftentimes, they're the ones most committed to your cause. They're the ones willing to offer up their skills, to support or pray for your work, or to give up their Saturday mornings and just show up. They've often got fresh eyes for the importance of your mission, making them some of the best people to tell your organization's stories.

And, sharing volunteer stories not only relies on the people who are committed to your cause, but it can even renew their support for your mission in a fresh way.

What Makes a Good Story?

There are a few basics when it comes to good stories. What makes some of them come alive while others are eventually forgotten? While there are many tips and tricks for keeping and sustaining attention through your stories, it comes back to the narrative arc—and high school English class.



Look familiar? This is called the narrative arc and every good story has one—from Macbeth to Finding Nemo to the crazy account of your trip to the DMV.

Everything started off as expected. You got there twenty minutes before they opened because you're such a resourceful and brilliant guy, but there was already a line. Classic, right? Nothing new here. In the exposition, you introduce the main character—yourself—and you set the scene—the DMV. The line is slowly moving and you're finally inside the building an hour later. Then, out of nowhere, you realize that the pregnant lady in front of you is going into labor. She looks at you with pleading eyes and you know it's up to you to deliver the child. Is this the craziest thing that's ever happened on such an average day? Or is it just the inciting incident in your story? Who knows? It's possible to get lost in the

plots and sub-plots and sub-sub-plots—we won't talk about when you started to pass out mid-delivery—but good stories typically stay focused on the rising action all the way till the climax. You might not have renewed your license, which was the original plan, but you helped deliver baby Danny at the DMV. You've kept in touch, and you see Danny every once in a while. And you've got a great story to tell because of it—except this one might be a little fabricated.

You'll probably find that if you ask the right people, good stories come. We've put together a more thorough guide to the components of good stories over on the Amenable Blog. Check out our post on [How to Tell Nonprofit Stories that Create Emotional Impact](#) as well as Harvard Business Review's [Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling](#).

How Do We Start?

So you want to tell stories?
Here are some basics to get you started.



What

You can't always expect to stumble upon good stories. It can take some effort, so the first step is to start the search for good stories. Ask around—people who've been impacted by your church or nonprofit, such as your staff, volunteers, or others in your community. It might be a good idea to have a designated space for peoples' stories, whether it's a physical file or a virtual home like Google Drive.

According to Springly, there are four types of nonprofit stories. This looks a little different for churches, but many of the principles are the same.

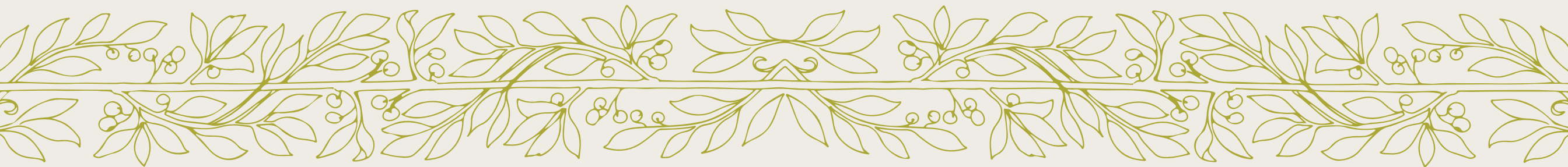
Founding Stories are the stories that tell people who you are as an organization. If you are the founder, you can share what personally led you to begin your nonprofit or church.

Individual Impact Stories are stories that highlight specific people who have been impacted by your church or nonprofit. This is the most common type of story.

Donor Stories can look like accounts from your financial supporters or stories that specifically show the ways that fundraising has made a direct impact.

Volunteer Stories showcase the day-to-day work that your church or nonprofit does by highlighting the work of specific individuals.

BTW: It can take a while to find enough people willing to share their experiences, so the sooner you begin collecting stories, the sooner you'll be able to share them!



Where

Just like you might choose different types of stories for different purposes, when you're developing a storytelling strategy you should consider how it can change every pillar of your organization. While using them for marketing purposes may seem intuitive, are there ways that stories can change other areas as well?

Here are a few examples to get you started.

Operations. Can you tell stories that give people a glimpse of your day-to-day work from the perspective of staff or volunteers?

Communications. Can you tell stories that stand out in your audience's mind and create a genuine connection?

Volunteer Engagement. Can you create a renewed sense of purpose for your volunteers by sharing the impact of their work?

Community presence. Can you tell stories that build a greater sense of trust with your community at large?



How

Getting even more practical, you'll want to think through the best ways to share your stories on a logistical level. This will require a deep understanding of both the people you serve and those who you'd consider to be your "audience."

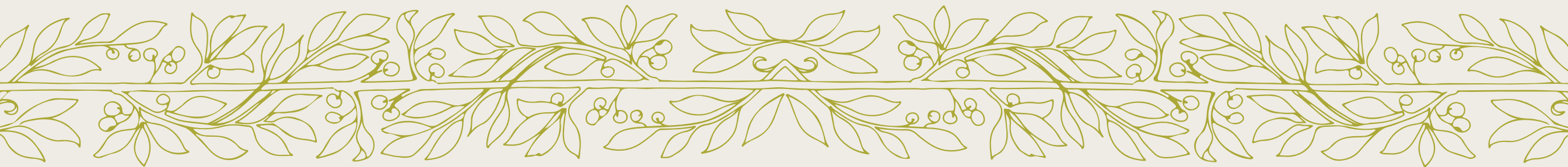
Here are a few unique ideas to get you thinking:

An **educational podcast** that interviews people who have interacted with your organization.

A **new social media platform/campaign** specific to storytelling such as a takeover by beneficiaries, volunteers, or donors.

A **storytelling event** where people could share their experiences in front of a live audience.

A **blogging platform** where people can access different stories in a centralized “hub”.



There isn't a right or wrong platform when it comes to telling stories—only those that are more and less effective. So have some fun with it and be willing to experiment with what works best!

Once you've collected your stories, chosen your strategy, and picked the tools to share them, **it's time to jump in!** Gather your storytelling team together (for tips on creating a dream team made of volunteers, check out **this resource!**), assign roles and communicate tasks/deadlines, and you're ready to go!

Appendix



Common Challenges

Confidentiality issues

A lot of nonprofits work with people in vulnerable situations, and careless storytelling can easily cause more harm than good. Here are a few best practices for storytelling that honor and prioritize the people you serve. First off, remember that **your client should be your first priority—always**. While in some situations it may be okay to directly ask your clients to share, if you have any reservations related to confidentiality, it's probably better to start off with stories from your staff or volunteers. It'll give you practice crafting

stories while helping you (and your readers) understand your organization's benefit in a more holistic way. After establishing this basis, you can extend the offer for clients to come to you with their stories. Also keep in mind that their families, caregivers, or others in their circles may want to contribute! Second, don't hesitate to change names or edit pictures—especially when it comes to peoples' safety. Finally, meet with your team to make sure everyone understands your ground rules for storytelling and confidentiality.

Who is the hero of your story?

We love to talk about ourselves—it's human instinct. It can be easy to start telling a story about your client and then transition to talking all about your organization—especially when you believe in your mission! But make sure to keep the people you're talking about front and center. You don't have to downplay your role, but keep in mind that the people you work with are the real heroes of the story. **When individuals' stories are told well, they'll naturally want to know more about your organization.**



Short-term thinking

When it comes to telling stories, it can be tricky to not fall into short-term thinking. Maybe you've got a moving story from one of your clients. It'd go great on a direct mailer asking for year-end donations. So you type it up and send it off and wait for the donations to roll in. Not only does this type of thinking not fully honor the people you serve, but it's also not strategic for your organization because an impactful story can be isolated to one project—**the best stories are told more than once!** Here are a few questions to help you think through your storytelling strategy:

Is our telling of this story self-serving?

Where does this story fit in our audiences' long-term journey with us?

How can we expose our audience to this story in the future—not just to gain some extra cash today?

Resources

constantcontact.com/blog/nonprofit-storytelling

thestorytellingnonprofit.com/blog/why-non-profits-cant-seem-to-tell-great-stories

hbr.org/2003/06/storytelling-that-moves-people

hbr.org/2014/07/how-to-tell-a-great-story

hbr.org/2023/02/your-strategy-needs-a-story

wfp.org

nokidhungry.org

thp.org

hbr.org/2014/10/why-your-brain-loves-good-storytelling

sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-simple-power-of-the-slow-reveal

springly.org/en-us/blog/nonprofit-storytelling

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