

ONCE

UPON

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TIME

How storytelling can motivate donors to support your nonprofit without being asked

BY PAUL LAGASSE



What makes donors feel good about you and your organization? Veteran fundraiser and author Ken Burnett (www.kenburnett.com) likes to talk to colleagues about a chemical called oxytocin. Discovered in 1952, oxytocin is a natural hormone used by doctors to safely induce labor. A little over a decade ago, oxytocin was also found to generate feelings of trust and cooperation in people. When he read about this discovery, Burnett saw a potential application for fundraising. “If we only could work out how to release the right chemicals in our donors’ brains, we’d be more successful,” he would tell fundraisers. Then, with a laugh, he would add, “The secret of success would be to take out a syringe of oxytocin and squirt it up their noses!”

Fortunately for fundraisers, science has since discovered a less invasive method of invoking feelings of generosity within the brains of donors: storytelling.

Dr. Paul J. Zak, professor and director of the Center for Neuroeconomic Studies at Claremont Graduate University (www.cgu.edu) in Claremont, Calif., author of *The Moral Molecule: The Source of Love and Prosperity* and president of Ofactor Inc. (<http://ofactor.com>), is the scientist who first discovered the emotional benefits of oxytocin and recently demonstrated that character-driven narratives cause the brain to produce the hormone (“Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling,” *Harvard Business Review*). “When you want to motivate, persuade, or be remembered, start with a story of human struggle and eventual triumph,” Zak writes. “It will capture people’s hearts—by first attracting their brains.”

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Zak’s discovery did not surprise Burnett, the managing trustee for the Showcase of Fundraising Innovation and Inspiration (www.soffi.org). Shortly before Zak’s findings were announced, Burnett released what he considers his most important book, *Storytelling Can Change the World*, a handbook for building lifetime relationships with donors through the power of compelling narrative. Science, it seems, has finally caught up with Burnett, who has been trying to convince nonprofits about the power of stories for years. “The book is the core of my philosophy of what’s wrong with fundraising,” he says. “We have to move from persistent asking to consistent inspiration. And storytelling is brilliant at doing that.”

Changing the World, One Story at a Time

In *Storytelling Can Change the World*, Burnett argues that there are only two types of stories: those that inform and entertain people and those that rouse them to action. Fundraisers, he says, too often rely on the former while avoiding the latter. He illustrates the distinction by using a story of his own. Imagine two Roman senators, Caius and Marcellus. Both are master orators. Caius presents indisputable facts and persuasive evidence using reason and logic, inspiring his audience to applaud his skill. Marcellus, on the other hand, arouses passionate emotions and paints vivid narrative scenes, inspiring his listeners to rise out of their seats willing to follow him wherever he points.

Fundraisers, Burnett argues, need to emulate Marcellus. “We don’t want our stories merely to move our readers

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HOW STORYTELLERS TELL STORIES

BY JEFF BROOKS

Uncle Herb, the family storyteller, kept three generations spellbound at the dinner table. We'd sit and listen long after the kitchen chairs became noticeably hard and uncomfortable.

You'd come away from an Uncle Herb story session thinking, "He's had such an *interesting* life." But, in reality, his life was ordinary. He was a decent man who raised a good family in the American Midwest. He served in the Army but never saw action or left the country. He had a long career as a machinist at a series of midsize factories you've never heard of.

Most of his stories were ordinary events that had happened recently—"just last Thursday" or "the week after Christmas." They were anecdotes about his encounters with friends and co-workers—funny, strange or telling exhibits of human nature. The kinds of things that happen to all of us, but most of us don't polish them into stories.

Uncle Herb's secret wasn't a rich, picaresque technique. With his meandering narratives, Uncle Herb was a straight-line descendent of cave-dwelling storytellers, those who kept the clan entertained around their fitful campfire while saber-toothed tigers prowled the darkness outside.

If you're willing to borrow some of Uncle Herb's time-honored techniques, you can tell powerhouse colloquial stories that grab donors' attention and prepare them to take action.

He Pulled the Listener Into the Narrative

Uncle Herb punctuated his stories with asides directed at specific listeners. He'd lean over, rest his heavy hand on your shoulder and say, "You'll love what the cop said to me next." And sure enough, it would be something that especially tickled you.

Uncle Herb understood that all listeners to every story tell their own inner narrative. They evaluate the story they're hearing. They consider its meaning and significance and explore how it supports (or affronts) their values and beliefs. When Uncle Herb knew you, he'd find something in his story that he hoped would click with you, and he'd point it out.

Addressing the listener (reader) this way enriches his or her experience of the story. It grows more relevant and meaningful because it connects with the listener's inner narrative. It also guides the listener's interpretation of the story. You're saying, "This is why the story I'm telling matters to you."

You aren't Uncle Herb, facing a small circle of relatives or friends you know personally. But most donor audiences share values and beliefs. You can make decent guesses about what in your story draws them in and makes them part of it:

Not everyone can look into the eyes of a great ape and appreciate the mind that's so nearly like yours and mine. But you can. That's why I believe you're one of those rare people who understands the importance of helping the apes.

He Was in His Stories, but Not Too Much

All of Uncle Herb's stories were told in the first person. But he was never the star. He was usually an observer, a foil or a straight man. Because he was in the story, he was able to add color.

Flowery language wasn't in his toolbox, so he made his descriptions rich with firsthand observations. Instead of just telling us it was cold, he would say, "My fingers got so cold I couldn't bend them!"

He inserted these comments judiciously, so he didn't turn the story into a monologue about himself. That wouldn't have been as interesting.

Here's how you might do the same in a fundraising story:

I've been in that same forest preserve and listened to the calls of the gorillas echoing through the mountain mists. Let me tell you, it gives me goose bumps just to think about it now. Those amazing animals really do have a connection with you and me.

Telling stories in the first person, rather than the third person, is a good choice in fundraising.

The Structure of His Stories Was Clear

You always knew where you were while Uncle Herb's stories unfolded. He made sure of that, often by telling you what the climax was going to be: "Let me tell you about the guy at the hardware store who poured an entire gallon of pink paint over his head." Knowing the climax of the story, you could watch it unfold.

If you've ever squirmed through a speech or sermon where you had no idea whether it was going to last another five minutes or 30, you know how important a clear structure is for the listener. With your fundraising stories, give your readers signposts of the structure:

When the great silverback hunkered down in the brush a few feet away from Marika, she thought it was the most exciting moment of her life. It was about to get a lot more exciting.

His Stories Ended on Time

Even Uncle Herb's most complex and involved stories didn't seem long. You never started wondering, "How much longer will this last?"

He kept them short but complete.

How long should a fundraising story be? I can only answer with the answer Abraham Lincoln is said to have given when asked, "How long are your legs?" Honest Abe said, "Long enough to reach the ground."


His Stories Were True

Uncle Herb's brother Hubert was also a storyteller. In some ways, he was even better than Herb. But eventually, everyone discovered Uncle Hubert's fatal flaw: His stories were made up.

There's nothing wrong with fiction. Sometimes, it rings truer than truth. But when you hear an amazing tale that seems to be true and then discover it's fiction, you feel taken. It's a lie.

The lack of reality was what gave Hubert the early advantage over Herb. His stories were more exciting and more tightly structured. But, eventually, everyone would sniff out that they weren't true. They regarded his stories as not worth listening to, despite his craftsmanship.

Fundraising stories have to be true. If they aren't, you're toying with people's emotions. That's uncool as well as unethical. And your falsity will be sniffed out just as surely as Uncle Hubert's always was.

Note: This article is an excerpt from *How to Turn Your Words Into Money: The Master Fundraiser's Guide to Persuasive Writing* by Jeff Brooks (Emerson and Church, 2015). Reprinted with permission of Emerson & Church Publishers. 

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to applause,” he writes. “Rather, we want them to leap to their feet, passionate, angry, impelled and determined to make change happen.” How do you do that? According to Burnett, the stories that rouse audiences to their feet are

- about the reader, not the cause;
- interesting, surprising or unexpected;
- believable, real and accessible;
- gripping;
- simple, visual, memorable and friendly; and
- capable of grabbing the audience’s emotions.

Storytelling also offers a solution to a troubling paradox revealed by many donor surveys: Donors report feeling a sense of satisfaction and achievement when they give, but dislike being asked. A good story, Burnett says, encourages people to give without feeling as though they have been asked in the first place. “The two ‘i’s’ in fundraising should not stand for ‘interruption’ and ‘irritation,’” he emphasizes. “They should stand for ‘inspiration’ and ‘information.’ And storytelling is key to that.”

What Makes a Story Great?

Fiction storytellers are taught from an early age to “write what you know” and to “show, not tell.” Both of these admonitions apply to nonfiction storytelling as well. “The most important person in a story is you,” Burnett tells fundraisers who come to him for advice. At first glance, this may seem to contradict the fundraising mantra of focusing the story on the donor and not on the organization. In practice, however, the two perspectives are not just complementary but also necessary. In a well-told story, you are serving as a proxy for the donor. “It is in effect saying, ‘I was there, and I saw this, and believe me, if you had been standing there beside me, you would understand this too,’” Burnett explains.

An effective eyewitness story exudes authenticity. “It’s a lot harder sell when you have to repackage other people’s stories,” Burnett says. He advises people not to write their stories down too quickly after they happen. A story full of raw, fresh emotions tends to come across as false and insincere. At the other extreme, over-editing can have the same effect, although it can sometimes be difficult to balance the need for review and approval up the chain with the need to preserve what makes the story compelling. (“I like to believe that the customer is always right,” Burnett observes, “but I wish that the customer wouldn’t always rewrite!”)

Regardless of the writing and review process, the goal should be to craft a story that reads as though it was created more or less spontaneously. “You can still script a story,” Burnett says, “but the best stories retain an element of improvisation.”

A successful story is also tailored for its audience. As legendary advertising copywriter David Ogilvy put it, “If we don’t understand them, how can we expect them to understand us?” When writing stories, fundraisers can and should draw on their extensive knowledge of donors and the community to craft a tale that will resonate with them. To share a story is to give donors something of value that stands out from everything else that comes in through their inbox and mailbox. Your generosity in offering a story to a prospective donor is more likely to lead to that person wanting to share something with you in return.

How to Tell Great Stories

“There are three rules for writing the novel,” the author Somerset Maugham once wrote. “Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.” The same holds true for nonfiction stories. However, in *Storytelling Can Change the World*, Burnett distills some valuable tips and techniques that he has picked up in his more than 30 years as an advertising copywriter and fundraising consultant.

Critical among them is to trust your readers. “Writers everywhere quickly learn that their job is not to tell the whole story, to etch in every detail of characters, places, impressions and actions,” Burnett writes. “Much better instead is to leave it to the reader’s imagination to fill and color in the gaps.” This is especially true for nonprofit storytelling, in which writers are often tempted to buttress their case with impressive facts and figures that only end up smothering the story. “Stories stick,” Burnett emphasizes. “Statistics don’t.”

You can avoid data dumping by taking the time upfront to think about what the reader will want to get out of your story. To help writers put themselves into the minds of their readers, Burnett recalls a lesson from playwright David Mamet. For every scene in a drama, Mamet taught, a writer has to ask three questions:

1. Who wants what?
2. What happens if he or she doesn’t get it?
3. Why now?

Even then, it may be difficult to hear the beating heart of the story the first time you sit down to write it. Experienced writers know that the best stories

require multiple drafts. Newbery Award-winning author Shannon Hale (www.squeetus.com) has likened the first draft to shoveling sand into a box from which she will later build sand castles. Feedback and testing are important for improving drafts. Do not be afraid to ask people to read each version and tell you what works for them and what doesn't. However, when you do, stress to your readers that you are not seeking rewrites, approvals or sign-offs at this stage. Draft stories are vulnerable to well-intentioned meddling, which inevitably hurts the story more than it helps.

A great story is an investment. The more work you put into crafting your story upfront, the more durable, and thus cost-effective, it will be for your organization. Burnett recalls how, when he was working with the international nongovernmental organization ActionAid (www.actionaid.org), fundraisers were concerned that a film about the organization and its mission that they showed to prospective donors had become overused and was no longer an effective motivator. However, testing quickly revealed that the film's effect was just as potent as when it had first appeared. It was the fundraisers themselves who were getting tired of it simply because they had shown it so many times. As a result, ActionAid's fundraisers continued to show the film to great effect for many more years, generating gifts that otherwise might have been lost had the film been retired early.

Meet Beryl and Clive and the Life-Stage Fairy

Last year, Burnett blogged about why he believes that fundraising could be "on the verge of a golden age" ("Some keys to fresh fundraising success"). Burnett points to the fact that many affluent countries are seeing a steady growth in the number of active older people who are looking for meaningful things to do in their retirement years. They also may be facing tough financial choices as they try to safeguard their funds for their own and their children's futures. With care, Burnett says, fundraisers can help retirees find happiness and meaning through the support of causes that they care about while also providing the assurance they need that their hard-earned money is being used wisely. However, he also warns that such prospects are unlikely to be swayed by glib sales pitches. The way to their hearts, Burnett believes, is through stories.

In *Storytelling Can Change the World*, Burnett weaves a lighthearted tale of his own to demonstrate the way that stories can influence affluent retirees. He introduces us to

Beryl and Clive Broomhead, a couple who, after being happily married for 35 years, have begun to feel dissatisfied with the humdrum routine of their retirement. "It's time we changed the wallpaper of our lives," Clive tells his wife. "Not cure cancer or anything. But do something useful, make a difference."

At that pivotal moment, Beryl and Clive are visited by the Life-Stage Fairy, a gossamer creature whose mission it is to help people discover how to become world-changers. The Life-Stage Fairy is willing to grant Beryl and Clive their wish for a fulfilling retirement, but on one condition: They must do something to make the world a better place. As the Life-Stage Fairy prepares to leave Beryl and Clive to ponder whether to accept her terms, she foretells the arrival of a shining knight (or damsel) who will guide and protect them along the path of donorhood if they so choose. That person is, of course, you, the fundraiser, armed with the stories that will move and persuade them.

According to Burnett, it is up to you to make sure that the Beryls and Clives of the world, as well as the lives they might change, all live happily ever after. 📍

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Resources and Additional Reading

"Advice: How Do You Know Your Stories Are Making a Difference?"
<https://philanthropy.com/article/Advice-How-Do-You-Know-Your/231157>

The Moral Molecule: The Source of Love and Prosperity by Dr. Paul J. Zak (Dutton Adult, 2012), hardcover

"Some keys to fresh fundraising success" by Ken Burnett
www.kenburnett.com/Blog53Threemega-opportunities.html

"Storytelling: A powerful and inexpensive tool for increasing employee engagement"
https://charityvillage.com/Content.aspx?topic=Storytelling_A_powerful_and_inexpensive_tool_for_increasing_employee_engagement#.VOORm_krKmu

Storytelling Can Change the World by Ken Burnett (The White Lion Press, 2014), paperback, 272 pages

"Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling" by Paul J. Zak, *Harvard Business Review*, Oct. 28, 2014
<https://hbr.org/2014/10/why-your-brain-loves-good-storytelling>