

# BEYOND TESTIMONIALS: HOW TO UNEARTH GREAT MEMBER STORIES



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Every member has a story, but most people aren't polished storytellers. An author and expert on business storytelling offers advice for turning raw member stories into tales that inspire.

Last spring, a [Tumblr dedicated to corporate brands' lazy social media efforts](#) showed us the potential pitfalls of a seemingly innocuous request: "Tell us your story." For associations that ask members to share their stories on a social media hashtag, it's a sign of [one-way, minimal-effort engagement](#).

Stories can be powerful, though. We're hardwired to respond to them, and stories are how we passed along our history for eons without writing systems. So it stands to reason that stories from members must be of

some use to associations, right?

*If your story isn't crafted to support the key point in the call to action, then why use it?*

Indeed they can, but, as Lori Silverman explains, a useful story isn't just any old anecdote or idle rambling. For stories to make an impact, to move others to action, they must be well crafted. And that takes work.

Silverman, owner of Partners for Progress and coauthor of several books on business storytelling, including *Business Storytelling for Dummies*, chimed in with a [comment to my Membership Blog post](#) last May, to echo my skepticism about quick “tell us your stories” social media requests. “At best, you get testimonials,” she wrote.

But is there anything wrong with testimonials? Well, they aren't bad per se, but testimonials typically don't rise above the level of mere information, Silverman says. If you want to inspire other members to do something—join, register for an event, or volunteer, perhaps—you need a good story.

“Stories are about meaning making, not sense making,” Silverman says. “Because well-constructed stories impact listeners physically, mentally, emotionally, and at the level of the human spirit, they allow us to infer all kinds of meaning. That is what really sets story apart from other forms of narrative.”

There's just one problem: In her years of helping organizations and leaders hone their stories, Silverman says, “I've not yet met yet a raw story out of someone's mouth that is well crafted.”

This is where you, association professional, must work your behind-the-scenes magic to make one member's story meaningful to others. Silverman shares some tips.

**Start with a story prompt.** A good prompt comes in two parts. First, the opener signals you're looking for a story, not information. The word “about” is key to getting more than just info: “Tell me a story about ...” or “Share a memory with me about ...” The closer must be highly specific to the situation you want a story about, so the listener can easily identify one or two stories to share. “Tell me about your day” is too vague, Silverman says. “You have to get really specific. You have to say, ‘Tell me about the highlight of your day,’ or ‘Tell me about something that happened to you today that was very surprising,’ or ‘Tell me about a moment today when you said, ‘I'm fed up with XYZ.’”

**Actually, start with why.** Before you craft a prompt, you should know how you will use the stories you receive and how you want people to respond to them. (This is something “tell me a story” brand tweeters seem to forget.) Says Silverman: “If your story isn’t crafted to support the key point in the call to action, then why use it?”

**Get the right story for the right audience.** Knowing your goals for a story also means knowing your audience and its particular segments. Different types of stories will be meaningful to different people. In an article she coauthored for the California Society of Association Executives in 2011 [PDF], Silverman outlined seven types of stories, ranging from “Founding” stories to “Memorable Member Experience” stories to “What We Stand For” stories. A member experience story, for instance, could illustrate how one member found value in a particular association program or benefit.

### FOSTER STORYTELLING IN PERSON, TOO

Storytelling has been overrun by charts and data in many of our meetings, conferences, and events, Silverman says. Conference speakers (volunteer presenters, especially) should be coached to tell more stories and avoid using PowerPoint charts as a crutch. And a quick way to boost the value of informal roundtable discussions at meetings is to seed them with story prompts, rather than just a stated topic. “We need to design events so members can share stories with each other while they’re at the events,” Silverman says.

**Follow up to fill out the story.** Particularly when asking for stories in an online forum, it’s wise to get the member’s contact info and permission to follow up with more questions, to develop the raw story into something fully engaging. It will likely need some vital elements either introduced or amplified, such as conflict, sensory information, drama, contrast, and additional info that reflects key themes or calls to action. Your work will be cut out for you. “Most times when people tell it out loud, they tell the end of the story before the beginning of the story. It’s like telling the punchline of a joke before you tell the joke,” Silverman says.

**Resist the urge to add data.** Data is a big deal these days, but it will likely lessen the impact of a story on its audience. Research suggests we make decisions with emotions before we apply logic to them, and it’s well known in fundraising that appeals with identifiable victims raise more money [PDF] than those with large-scale numbers. (Hence the term “poster child.”) Silverman is adamant that data just gets in the way of a good story: “I’m either going to use a story at the beginning to capture people’s attention so that, if I do need to show them data, I’ve got their attention. Or, I’m going to storify the data, meaning I’m going to look for the story that’s hidden in the data about a singular person and tell that story.”

You can test the value of stories yourself: Think about the last conference you went to. What do you remember most clearly—the data point you saw during the second breakout session of the first day or the connections you made with colleagues in the hallways or over dinner? Or, think about the last renewal invoice you got from an association; did you know whether you wanted to renew before you even opened it, or did you break out a calculator to see if you got your money's worth in the previous year? You'll likely realize the power that experiences have over your purchasing decisions. And great storytelling, more than numbers or information or short testimonials, Silverman says, can convey and evoke those experiences in your members' minds.

How does your association gather and use member stories? Or, better put, tell us a story about how storytelling has improved your member engagement or recruitment and retention performance. Please share in the comments.

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