

## 5 Quick Tips on How to Find a Good Story for Your Next Fundraising Letter

*Have you ever struggled to come up with an outstanding idea for your fundraising letters? Or wondered how you could develop a stronger and more favorable response to your direct mail appeals?*

Whether your goal is to reach current or lapsed donors, or a targeted list of prospects, 5 Quick Tips on How to Find a Great Story for Your Next Fundraising Letter is designed to give you practical information:

- on when a true story or testimonial can lead to better results for your appeal
- on how you can unearth these stories through the resources of your organization

Since 1985, VDM has worked with hundreds of nonprofit clients across the United States, including hospitals and allied healthcare institutions, museums, social service agencies, and cultural and arts organizations. These quick tips are drawn from VDM's experiences providing comprehensive fundraising and marketing counsel to a wide array of nonprofit organizations.

### **Quick Tip #1: Why Use a Story**

Two central issues work together to make a true story or testimonial an effective part of a fundraising appeal.

The first is that people are more often spellbound by a great story. Think about it. Magazines with the highest circulations, such as *People Magazine*, tell the stories of people's lives. Some of the most popular daytime TV shows, like *Oprah*, focus on real-life concerns through a true story. The most popular features on *National Public Radio* are often the stories that have us turning up the sound and listening more intently to our radios. The same is true in a fundraising letter. Simply put, an excellent story holds our interest.

The second factor at work is that a good story brings the mission of an organization to life by personalizing it. For example, it's hard for most of us to grasp that millions of children around the world are devastated each year by malnutrition. Or that hurricanes cause billions of dollars of damage to homes in our country. Or that a college needs a new \$30 million building. But when we hear the story of a child with cancer, a family who's lost everything in a frightening hurricane, or how a new college building will touch a student's life, we can relate more easily to the situation. And we are more likely to respond with a contribution. A good story humanizes and personalizes what bricks, mortar, equipment and other capital needs mean to an organization or institution's future success.

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### ***Quick Tip #2: What Makes for a Compelling Story***

An excellent story has an “I get it factor” for your targeted audience. In other words, the story should help us understand what the issue is and how a donation will help address it.

In essence, a strong story weaves together:

- a situation or concern
- the mission of your organization
- the positive difference a donation will make

In addition, what helps reinforce the “I get it factor” is when the story relates firmly to people’s understanding of life. We can sympathize with how heart-breaking it would be to lose a child to a terrible illness. College alums can picture a new generation of students walking across the campus of their alma mater. Museum members can imagine the excitement of being among the first to see a new exhibit.

But a word of caution. A story shouldn’t raise a red flag that would inadvertently stop someone from contributing. For example, if the letter talks about a youngster hit by a car while riding a bike on a rainy evening, some might question why the parents didn’t show more precaution about letting their child bicycle on a dark, wet street. This could unintentionally illicit a lower response rate.

### ***Quick Tip #3: How to Get a Good Story from Within Your Organization***

The website, newsletters, marketing materials and press releases of your organization can be excellent resources for stories.

You might also consider speaking with your major gift officers or other staff members throughout your entire organization about someone who’s directly benefited from your programs and services. Another excellent source is to review the thank you letters your organization has received. People who take the time to send a letter of gratitude often have a great story to tell about how you’ve impacted their lives or the lives of someone close to their hearts.

Please note: if your organization complies with a strict confidentiality practice about disclosing information on those aided by your organization, you or a staff member can easily contact these individuals to see if they will sign a confidentiality waiver. Most people are honored to have their story told.

#### ***Quick Tip #4: How to Get a Good Story from Your External Resources***

A wellspring of wonderful stories can be obtained by asking for them from those who've benefited from your organization's programs or services.

For example, one hospital unearths this information by placing preprinted cards in several waiting areas that simply read: Do you have a story to share? Please tell us about your hospital experience. At the bottom of the card is the request for name, address, telephone number and email.

Or you might consider a regular feature on your website or in your newsletter that asks people to share their experiences with your organization.

Once you obtain this information, we suggest you keep it in a regularly updated file. This way, when a fundraising appeal draws closer, you'll have an outstanding story almost ready to go.

#### ***Quick Tip #5: Who Should Sign the Letter***

A letter is one of the only forms of communication that starts with the word "Dear" near the top of the page. Even if the letter begins with "Dear Friend," the stage is set to express an important concern in a personal manner.

With this in mind, when donors and prospects receive a letter from the president or chief executive officer of an organization, they expect to hear wonderful accolades about what's being accomplished and why a donation is needed. But when a letter comes from a nurse or patient at a hospital, or a classmate from a school, or a fellow member of a museum, or from someone who's been assisted by an agency, the appeal takes on a different, often unique and more personal tone.

Of course, there are exceptions to the rule. A board president might be called upon to write about a dire emergency situation that affects lives or the services that the organization provides to help those in need. The chief executive officer might share how he or she became involved with the organization. But again, it's a story waiting to be told.

The point is, all these quick tips reinforce that a strong fundraising letter is one where one person writing to another person with a compelling story brings to life the need for support.

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## Checklist: Ways To Unearth Good Stories

These are potential things you might do on a regular basis to find and maintain a strong file of relevant stories for your fundraising appeals.

Look for stories in your organization's:

- newsletters
- website
- press releases
- marketing materials

Speak with your organization's:

- major gifts officer
- other staff members

Ask staff members to share with you the thank you letters sent by individuals and families who directly benefit from your organization.

Request on your website and in newsletters for people to write or email you about their experiences with your organization.

Place cards in your public areas that ask people to share their experiences with your organization.

For additional information on how to employ an excellent story in your fundraising appeals, please speak with your VDM representative or contact us by email at [jbetz@vdmmail.com](mailto:jbetz@vdmmail.com) or 781.935.9990.