

# Tell Your Organization's Story

## 7 Guidelines to Create Connection

## INTRODUCTION

# Why is it important to tell your story?

### Because your mission statement doesn't.

Your mission statement is probably very factual and accurate, but then it's not a moving and memorable story that motivates people to want to support your work. Mission statements are like maps—they chart where you're setting out to go, but they don't chronicle the adventures that happen along the way. You need a journalist to meet you at your destination who can capture the story and share it with a wide audience of people, people who will be on the edge of their seats waiting to see what happens next. You're the journalist, and it's time to create the story.

### Because even your donors and volunteers don't know the whole story.

Your donors and volunteers need to hear your story repeatedly to stay invigorated about your work and their role in it. Nonprofit leaders often make the mistake of assuming that everyone who has made a donation, volunteered their time, or bought a ticket to an event has the whole picture about everything their organization does. This is a mistake. More than likely these supporters don't know you that well. It's almost impossible to keep up with all that you do, so keep donors and volunteers inspired by sharing stories that demonstrate the impact of your work.

### Because a story makes your organization memorable to existing and prospective supporters alike.

Being memorable is important, as many organizations are competing for the same donor dollars and volunteer support. Your story should make your work stand out among similar organizations and be so memorable that even people hearing about you for the very first time pay attention and remember you after the story ends.



## Case Study: California ChangeLawyers

**Goal:** Establish the re-named organization as the sleeves-rolled-up activists creating systemic change in order to attract supporters and partners.

**Challenge:** People assumed the organization—formerly named the California Bar Foundation—was part of the State Bar of California which was holding them back from being seen as innovative, powerful changemakers.

**Solution:** Create a new name, tagline, messages, and visual identity that follows the 7 guidelines for telling your story.

**California ChangeLawyers' New Belief Message:** We believe that a state as diverse as California needs a justice system led by advocates of all ethnicities and races.

So every day we invest in bright, diverse scholars to ensure that they have the opportunity to become tomorrow's legal changemakers. Because righting historical wrongs in our courtrooms, classrooms, and beyond will allow us to truly deliver the original American value—justice for all.

# 1 Remind people of the problem

Don't take for granted that your audience already understands the problem your organization is working to solve. Be clear and direct. Even the most basic issues (education, global warming, social justice) are complex at their core. Be very specific about the exact problem that exists for the exact population you serve. Then speak and write in plain language.

**CALIFORNIA  
CHANGELAWYERS**

FUND JUSTICE. CHANGE THE WORLD.

# 2 Avoid using acronyms, abbreviations, and jargon

California ChangeLawyers used to be called California Bar Foundation, which was often abbreviated to “CBF.” When using the acronym and not saying, “California,” they lost the opportunity to align with the California brand of social justice. Naming the population you serve creates connection.

The words, “Bar” and “Foundation” were insider jargon that, though understood by their lawyer stakeholders, meant that they were often confused with the State Bar of California and many other organizations with “Bar” and “Foundation” in their names. It didn't set them apart. And, of course, it didn't reflect their vigilantly optimistic, fearless, and activist personality.

# 3 Focus on benefits, not features

Features are what your organization does. Benefits are the solutions and positive outcomes that result from your features. Benefits motivate donors; features do not.

Rather than telling people about your grants program and how much money you distribute, focus on the way your community has changed because of your grants program: the lives that have changed, and the wrongs righted in your community. Your grants program is a feature. Changed lives and a better community are the **benefits**.

Your organization solves problems. Talk about the problems you solve, not the way you solve them. Donors do not give money to processes (features). They give to outcomes and solutions (benefits).

# 4 Keep it simple

When you meet someone for the first time, whether in print or in person, it's tempting to share everything there is to know about your organization. Successful messaging demands that you stay focused on a high-level idea and mention only those things that help convey your point. Be disciplined about what needs to be conveyed, and don't overwhelm people with too much information.



## 5 Engage the Reader

Great communication addresses the receiver's, not the sender's, point of view. When you want to get someone's attention, use the second person "you" and speak directly to that person's concerns.

Consider the difference between these two examples:

*California ChangeLawyers works to create a legal profession as diverse as our state in order to stop the cycle of inequity.*

versus

*If we don't actively invest in creating a legal profession as diverse as our state, the cycle of inequity continues.*

Which example is more engaging? Which organization are you more likely to support?

## 6 Highlight people, not programs

Studies show that we are much more likely to respond to the emotional story of a person's challenge and success than to statistics proving the efficacy of the program designed to serve them. We can learn about a scholarship program, but hearing someone describe being able to continue law school in the pursuit of justice makes us cheer for them and all that they've accomplished. We know the program is successful because we have just experienced someone's success.

There are, of course, appropriate times to share numbers. Some people need rational data to reinforce what they feel emotionally. When sharing data in a story context, however, use only those numbers that are truly surprising. And frame them in a way that helps people conceptualize what those numbers really mean.

For example, saying that 400 people die daily from a disease isn't nearly as frightening as saying that the number of people dying daily is the equivalent of a 747 crashing and killing everyone aboard every single day.

## 7 Be consistent

To ensure that your story is told in the most effective way possible, create a list of sound bites—short phrases that staff and board can use over and over again to tell your story. Consistent and repeated use of the sound bites, woven into the natural speaking style of the representative using them, will result in a clear message being sent through all channels.

Some sound bites used by California ChangeLawyers include:

- Cycle of inequity
- A more just and equitable California
- Efficient
- Strategic
- A legal profession as diverse as our state
- Changelawyer



## Learn More

Mission Minded is a branding firm that works exclusively with nonprofit organizations.

We believe that a brand that sets you apart is essential to a nonprofit's success. Every day we guide nonprofits to uncover the big, bold idea that will attract more people to their work. Because in today's world, a worthy mission is not enough. You've got to communicate what makes you unique at every opportunity.

Our clients successfully raise more money and attract the support they need to achieve their goals. To find out how Mission Minded can help your organization, call us today at 415-990-9360.