



Near Neighbours' Toolkit Telling Your Story

Using Words & Images to tell Decision Makers about your Project

Everyone enjoys a good story, especially one that reveals the reality of a situation and highlights the lives of the people involved. Simply telling your project or community's story can be as important if not more important than long, complicated plans and proposals which only some will read.

Faith groups that have learnt how to tell their story well will have a competitive edge in the increasingly crowded world of fundraising, and are more likely to be representative of the views and aspirations of the people they serve. This is particularly so if you weave into your story the important messages of the care you take in enabling the people you serve to tell their stories themselves. Using parables and stories to convey messages is still just as relevant today in this technological society as in the past and is a common feature of the scriptures of all faith traditions.

If you want the support of people and organisations, you will need to:-

- Communicate your issues and explain what your activity will deliver.
- Tell them about yourselves so they can clearly understand your plans.
- Convey the energy, inspirations, passions and personalities of the people and the project you are promoting, as a contrast to the formal detail the decision maker requires.

Why Tell Your Story?

The main reasons for telling your story are:

- To convince the membership of your group
- To reveal your plans to your community
- To seek any necessary permissions
- To gain resources
- To reveal that you have effective policies, procedures and safeguards

And, the most important of all...

For you to confidently explain to others about the issues that motivate your activity.



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Example Story One:

We are a very small church in Bloggsville that is struggling to pay our way and maintain our buildings that are in a poor state of repair.

Our increasingly ageing congregation is worried about the future and can't be expected to come up with the money we need to keep things going. Our church hall has faced a decline in use over many years. We don't know anything about fundraising, but decided to ask you for help to save the roof from collapse.

The Brownies who use it for two hours on a Monday night are losing members because of the state of the building, and we have occasional lettings to other community groups. Will you help us with the £80,000 our builder says it will cost?

Does this message inspire you?

How to Tell Your Story

Successful projects convey their story by using the **3Ps**, which are:

Presentation Convey your information in a motivational and stimulating way to the highest standard you can afford and deliver. This may involve verbal and printed communication, plus any other format that successfully meets the need for information from the people you are trying to convince. Projects involving children and young people, for example, often successfully use electronic communication, art, music and drama to portray their message.

People It is vital to highlight the people who are involved in your activity and its impact on their lives. Most faith based work, even that on buildings and the environment, is ultimately for the benefit of people, and demonstrating this will help convince others of the real worth of your activity.

Using photographs about your activities with the permission of individuals and groups, plus brief descriptions of peoples background and role can be invaluable.



Passion This is the element that tips the balance between your project or activity succeeding or failing. Passion, as demonstrated by the energy, care and dedication of yourself and the people that make up your group or project, may be the special element of interest that makes the difference between you and the next group, when communicated to an external decision maker.



What's in a story?

Read the two example stories sent to a funder from the same project—which one impresses you the most?

(They are based on a real life example that initially failed to gain funds, but was eventually successful)

Example stories one and two are truthful messages about the same people, church, hall and community, but what a difference each story sends to the reader.

Example Story One: suggests the church community and its buildings are in decline and it is only the Brownies meeting once a week that are a positive note, but even they are under threat. The message offered is generally negative and doesn't provide much hope that the project is worth supporting. Not surprisingly a funder faced with a limited pot of money and a number of applications from communities with similar issues, may be swayed by the applications that read more positively about the opportunities they have.

Example Story Two: is much more interesting, but runs the risk of overselling what is, below the surface, a fairly low base to start from. However, it does suggest a willingness to tackle things and showing a quote from a real person involved, at least demonstrates they are prepared to change for the better. This more positive message shows the potential for what might be achieved, and suggests local people are willing to use their own resources to achieve the project, giving added value to anything a funder provides.

Other messages can also be unintentionally conveyed as in example story one which relies on the assumption that the builder mentioned knows what he is talking about and has given a fair quote. In fact, most agencies with any experience of building projects would immediately hear alarm bells, and would prefer to read that the project has at least three quotes from different sources, and possibly that an architect has been involved as well. Always use the positive message of demonstrating that you have taken steps to ensure you know what the proper cost is, and that your people will do their bit towards the fundraising effort, demonstrating their ownership and support for your plans.

Use an Elevator Pitch

Decision makers are busy people so when you meet one or speak to them on the phone you will have to get a crystal clear message over to them swiftly.

An "Elevator Pitch" is a concise, carefully planned and well-practiced description about your group or activity that your mother would be able to understand in the time it would take to ride 4 floors in a lift, or as Americans say, an 'elevator'.



Example Story Two:

St Bloggstans Community Church is determined to improve our church hall for young and old alike, and we are approaching you as a funder who shares an interest with us in supporting the community of Bloggsville. After many years of active use, St Bloggstans' Hall, which is in the centre of our neighbourhood, needs improving and, as local residents, we are taking on the challenge of developing it to be fit for purpose in the 21st Century. We aim to provide, under a newly refurbished roof, a warm, welcoming and safe environment for local people. In wanting to make the building fit for use by our wider community, we have an active vision for growth, and as Mrs Edith Stanley, 85, our oldest member recently said: "We don't have much money, but what we have can be used to start a fund for the £80,000 for the new roof, for if we don't invest in our young people, we can't expect much for the state of our community in the future.

Is this a more positive story?

Six questions your "Elevator Pitch" should answer:

1. What is your activity or service?

Briefly describe what it is you do/want to do. Do not go into overlong detail.

2. Who are the people or communities you serve?

Briefly discuss who you are delivering the activity or service to. What locality will you serve?

3. Why is your activity needed?

Briefly state the needs of the individuals and communities you serve for the work you plan.

4. Who is behind your activity?

Tell them a little about you and your group's background and achievements. If you have a strong committee/advisory board, tell them who they are and what they have accomplished.

5. What resources do you need?

Mention buildings, people, equipment you will use to achieve your plans

6. How much money do you need?

Demonstrate that you have worked out the costs accurately with a clear figure of what you need.

What your "Elevator Pitch" should ideally contain:

1. A "Hook"

Open your pitch by getting the decision makers attention with a "hook." A statement or question that gains their interest to hear more. "I would like to tell you about my community that is working together and solving our neighbourhood problems"

2. About 150-225 words

Your pitch should be no longer than 60 seconds.

3. Passion

Convince them your group has the energy and dedication to make things happen

4. A Request

At the end of your pitch, you must ask for something. Do you want their business card, to schedule a full presentation, to ask for an application form or referral? "We have a compelling two page proposal that I would like to send you".



Aspects of Story Telling

Decision makers are not generally experts on your particular community. They may think they have some knowledge, but the real experts are the people who live and work there. Therefore, decision makers need to hear from them what the real issues and facts are about your place and people, and this is why telling your story well is so important. The following categories suggest some of the basic information you might use to tell your story:

Demographic Numbers & Types of People

Many groups quote statistics on the categories of people that make up their community and these can provide a useful benchmark. Using community statistics in your applications may allow you to qualify with a funder for consideration, but on their own this won't be enough, it is then how you interpret these figures by demonstrating the reality of people's life experiences that can make the difference. Rather than just saying 'we have 164 people on low incomes', for example,

quote some of the 164 people as they say what living on a low income means to them and the challenges they face.

Culture - The Way We Live Much of what goes on in your local community is culturally unique to your people and place. This is the most dynamic selling point that only you have, but be aware of using negatives such as ‘we have the worst...’ or ‘compared to others...’ There will always be at least one other community that will be worse off. Instead, highlight the talents, needs and aspirations of your people, through their language, traditions and events. By all means talk to a funder about difficult community circumstances, but do so with a positive message that reveals your project’s determination to turn them around.

Imagery - Pictures & Words ‘A picture paints a thousand words’ is a true saying, and a strong photograph or piece of art, of or by local people, is one of the most effective ways of telling a story. This can also be extended into poetry and prose by local people, about their community and the conditions they experience in it. Always ask the permission of the individuals involved to use their images but be sensitive to their culture and faith traditions. It is particularly important in relation to children, young people and vulnerable adults but is a good courtesy for all.

Case Example

The photograph on the right is one successfully used by a project to gain funding, what does it say to you?

The story behind this picture is of a worship space and car park with a donated piece of land next door to build one on. However, a car park is not the most exciting thing to ask a funder to support, and advice was that they would struggle to get funding on this basis. They needed a car park because visitors to the building, many of whom were disabled, had to be dropped off outside on the busy and dangerous main road.

They included this picture in their two-sided application letter, and a grant making trust gave them most of the money they needed, saying: “We didn’t really need to read your application as the picture said it all!”

Where possible, show positive images of people and not just buildings alone. If appropriate, try and get them to smile on the photos you use, ideally showing people of different ages and from a variety of backgrounds. Always ensure your photos have good contrast, as funders will often photocopy your application in black and white for their decision makers to have a copy each. If the contrast is not good, when photocopied in black and white, the picture will be indistinct and you will lose the impact it would otherwise make.



Anecdotes & Real Stories

Quoting local residents and users of services is an extremely effective way of getting a message across of what real people think about your plans and activity. Remember to ask their permission and involvement in the process, and best of all get them to meet with the decision makers you are trying to convince, after all they are the people you are working for. Always state what you will use their quote for and to whom you are to send it, don’t assume that because they gave their permission for one type of use it will be acceptable for other uses.



Environment – Where We Live

The environment is a very broad category, but telling your story about the physical impact of your surroundings can be important. This can include people's fear of crime because of poorly lit streets, the planting and green space in the area, or even the wildlife around your groups building. Remember someone sitting in a remote office that doesn't know your community will need to be able to interpret your living environment from the written/pictorial submission you have provided. Involving local people in developing and understanding their environment can be an incredibly positive activity that helps them explore issues beyond their own immediate lives, and this is a great encouragement to many funding sources

Faith - Our Beliefs & Practices

Decision makers for faith-based activity will want to hear the story about the practice of faith activity in your plans. Like other funders they will have their specific interests. Some will want to hear the story about your worship activity, others may be more interested in how you interact with your community, while others may be more concerned with the social make up of your worshippers. Be sure your story talks the particular language of the funder or decision maker and don't make the mistake of using 'faith' language to secular funders who might not understand. A Church of England Bishop, once described a church employed community worker as 'a diocesan, non-stipendiary, externally funded, lay worker'. Not surprisingly he was asked for an interpretation of what this actually meant (and also what a Bishop is and does!)

Including - Sharing with Local People

Always share your story with your wider community, as well as your faith community, not forgetting commissioners of services, management committee and advisors, or whoever else might be seen as a stakeholder in your activity. Don't just assume that others know what you are about. Once all have added to the message and agreed with it, they are more likely to own it and support you in using it. This gives both you and your applications for support greater legitimacy and confidence in what you are relaying. Funders and decision makers will respect this as the confidence and experience you have in 'telling your story' will become obvious to them and be an encouragement that your plans are worth supporting. Don't forget to celebrate what you and your stakeholders have achieved together!

Chronology - History & Timescale

Always keep a scrap book of the activity of your group, saving quotes, pictures, newspaper cuttings and reports. Keep a time-line of developments with dates, names and events included. This will help you to tell your story of development and credibility to decision makers. It will also help you to review your progress as a group and learn from the things you have done together.

Architecture - Buildings & Places

Some buildings have a wonderful visible story themselves in their heritage and architectural merits, but increasingly even the funders of listed buildings want to know what impact the 'bricks and mortar' will have on the people using them. Local people might be supported to reveal the history and current issues of the built environment, and the effect it has on their existence. We need to tell a story about a 'living building' that is used, loved and consequently sustainable, through the voices and activity of the people using it.



Safeguarding- Keeping People Safe

The safeguarding of children, young people and vulnerable adults should be important to all but particularly to faith groups as we follow our scriptural teachings on the care of those we are called to serve. Most funders who regularly support work in communities will see the inclusion of safeguarding good practice procedures in your stories as proof of understanding that the safeguarding and other policy manuals don't just 'sit on the shelf' in your office.



Terminology – Understandable Words

As previously suggested there can be different 'language' styles in various types of work, and while it is not always essential to be an expert in the specific terminology for your particular work, it can help to use a good balance of such words when telling your story to people of that particular 'language'.

For instance, in older people, you will be at pains to use terms that show you involve them in decision making. But be warned 'holding stakeholder peer reviews to ensure sustainable delivery and outcomes within a beneficiary participatory framework' might sound grand, but can also be seen as a lot of waffle that hides the actual reality that you might only be paying lip service to really involving elderly people in commenting on your work for them. To keep up with the current language used in your type of work, it can be good to read journals and magazines on the subject and pick up the type of terminology commonly used. The likelihood is that funders with an interest in your project delivery will also read and understand such terms but in general avoid acronyms and techno speak and just use simple plain language.

Using Good Words - Avoid the four 'V's

In the book 'Writing Good Fundraising Applications' by Mike Easton and Michael Norton four 'V's to avoid in your writing are identified. Here we have adapted their message to particularly consider the problems Faith groups might face in their writing:

Verbicide - Avoid Jargon & Acronyms

There is no guarantee that the person assessing your written information has the same detailed knowledge of the subject as you and this is particularly so with faith terminology. On the other hand they may be an expert and spot any lack of understanding you have of the terms you are using. Therefore if you use initials or acronyms, always use the full words the first time and bracket the initial afterwards e.g. 'European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)'. As already suggested various work will have its own language and jargon, for instance, faith-based funders might cope with you talking about your 'spiritual mission', whereas secular funders might not fully comprehend such language. Ensure you think beyond your own understanding of what you write so your story is understandable to others. The simplest way to do this is to ask someone not immediately connected to your own faith or group to have a look at it and see if it is understandable to them.

Verbitis - Don't Use Words like 'Desperate', 'Unique' or 'Major'

The writer Somerset Maugham once said: "The world is quickly bored by the recital of misfortune and willingly avoids the sight of distress". Using finite words like 'unique' can be off-putting and even boring to readers particularly if they know the statement you are making is not entirely accurate. One national funder said "If I had a £1 for every community that has written to me and said 'We have the worst teenage pregnancy statistics or we have the greatest level of unemployment' I would be extremely wealthy, most such claims just don't stack up". Only one project or faith community in any place can ever say it has the worst poverty or is unique in any way, so the rest of us can't make a similar claim with any justification. While it is important to accurately state the need for your work

and the factors that necessitate it, be careful not to use too many negative descriptions, people of faith in particular should be keen to portray the people they work with in truthful and positive terms. Most funders will be interested in a positive message that gives them some encouragement that you are going to take on the challenges you face and use any money they invest in you in a productive way. Developing a culture of positive storytelling that doesn't hide the issues, but reveals the energy and passion of what you are about is generally a good idea. The quote below suggests the shameful reality of using negative and labelling language about people.

"I used to think I was poor. They told me I wasn't poor, I was needy. Then they told me it was self-defeating to think of myself as needy, I was deprived. Then they told me that underprivileged was overused, I was disadvantaged. I still don't have a dime, but I have a great vocabulary."

Jules Feiffer

Verbosity - Don't Waffle, Keep It Short & Simple (K.I.S.S.)

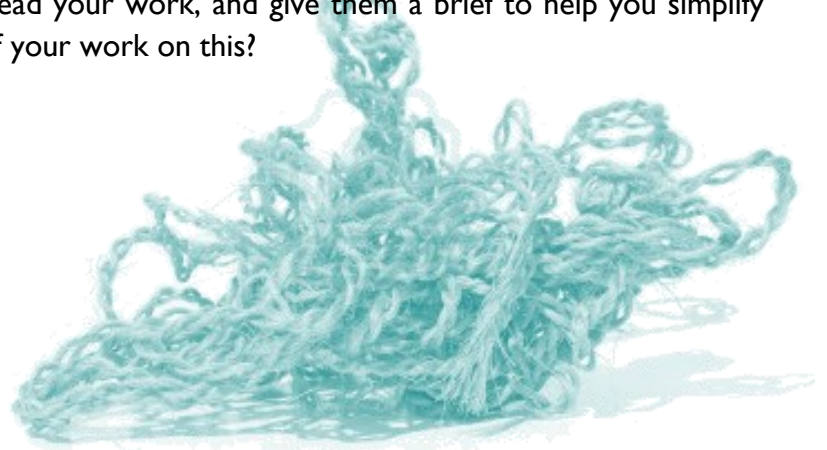
Imagine you are the clerk to the Trustees of a grant making charity and every week of the year you have at least a dozen new applications from projects across the country arriving on your desk. However diligent you are in your work, you are naturally going to find wading through long and hard to read applications somewhat tedious. Not surprisingly you will be more impressed and informed by the applications that give you all the basic information you need in a short and simple way and you may then give them preferential treatment.



Ask yourself why newspapers use headlines of few words and maybe one or two lines only? This ensures that they catch your attention and leave you with a clear understandable message! When introducing your story it is important to reduce your words to as few as possible to make them easy to understand, using bullet points to simplify points of note. You may then put the complex detail in additional supporting documents that only need to be read if the reader requires it.

Verbification - Avoid Complicated Words & Sentences

It is always a good idea to write at least the introduction to your story in a style that a 12 year old might easily understand, for the likelihood is that it will then be understandable by all. This is a good discipline as it should really ensure that what you write is inclusive of everyone and allows them to feel interested and involved. Have a look at the way magazines and newspapers use words and construct sentences for inspiration on packing information into a short piece of writing. Always get someone else to read your work, and give them a brief to help you simplify it—why not involve the beneficiaries of your work on this?



Telling your Story in Fundraising Applications

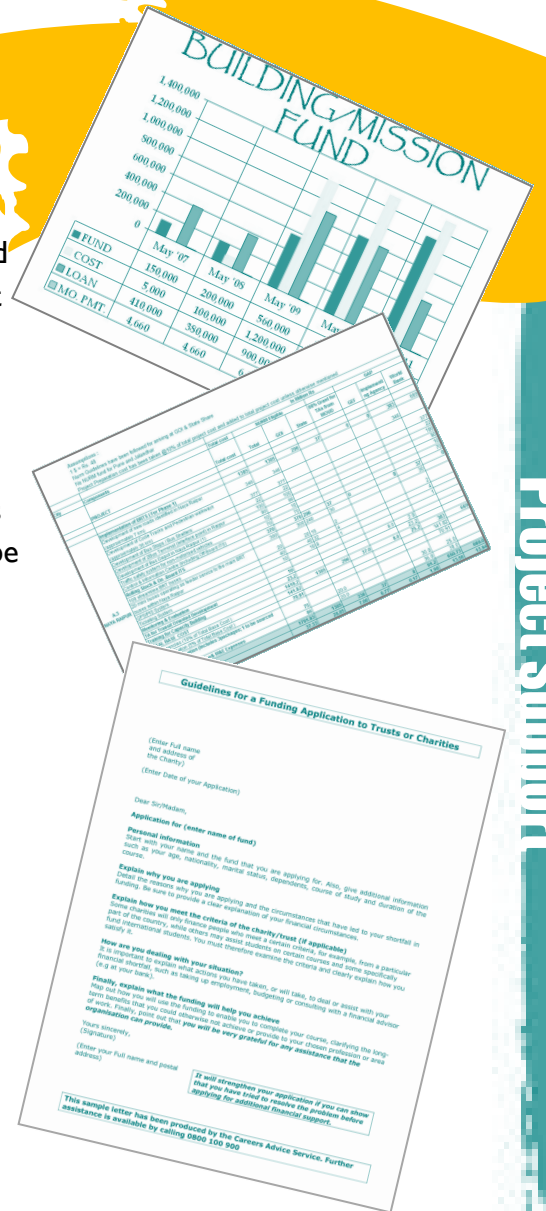
While some funders require you to fill in very tightly controlled application forms, many will have other ways of applying to them. Some will request a detailed written plan and others will just want a simple letter. There are even a few that want a letter, plus a plan, plus an application form, and might also visit you to check on the truth of what you have said! Whatever they are asking for, an individually crafted application to each funder should be your aim but there will usually be a way in which you can tell your story, even if this is in an accompanying document specifically designed by you to be full of the stories you think may interest the funder. The commonest way to do this would be to include your newsletter that features the stories of the lives you are influencing in your work. For a range of information on making applications including how to write an application letter see toolkit.....

Don't Be Put Off

Not all of us are experts in communication but we can still make ourselves understood to those around us, so don't worry about getting it perfect, do the best you can and learn from your mistakes. Practice telling your story on a neighbour or even someone you meet on the bus. Generally the more practised you are at telling your story the easier it becomes and your confidence grows as will the quality of what you are saying.

and Finally...

A true story to give you encouragement. You may like to know that a contributor to these toolkits is now an experienced professional fundraiser having raised millions of pounds for faith based needy causes. This individual used to stutter and be too shy to make a phone call to a funder in case he got anything wrong. He left school with mediocre qualifications and used to dry up if asked to address an audience of people. Through the kindness, prayers and the generosity of people of faith who listened to his story, they encouraged him in what he was doing and gradually he grew out of that stutter. He now is able to stand in front of large audiences, convey a story he feels passionate about and he has helped to motivate people to give to the charities and organisations he works with. His spelling is still not good but with a computer spell check and the help of kind friends who on occasion review his words, he can now very effectively tell his story.



Case Study

£5 and a Bag of Stationery

Back in the 1980's a few friends motivated by their faith set up a charity in a small town to work with people who were unemployed or had mental health issues. They started with a lot of prayer, a £5.00 donation and a carrier bag of pens and papers given to them. They remember going along to voluntary sector meetings anxious to pick the brains of people who were successful in gaining grants. They initially had no fundraising experience and used to get downhearted and envious when they listened to people who had brought in a grant of £30,000 for this and £50,000 for that.

What they didn't realise at the time was that these successful folk had been fundraising for ages and built up skills and experience. They were from communities that had a high social need and money was then thrown at them by agencies who needed to get results in their specific localities. Although working in a needy area, the group of friends weren't in a high priority community because they didn't have the numbers in abject poverty found in some cities, so how could they compete against such successful fundraisers. Eventually they realised it would be foolish to try and compete, they looked for other funders who wanted to fund smaller groups like them and concentrated on providing good and motivational information for them. After 3 years of moderate growth they won a Charity of the Year Award, based on their very good marketing information that said 'We are the fastest growing charity in the County', starting with just £5 and a bag of stationary it wasn't hard to claim that any growth in income for them was 'rapid' even though they still felt very hard to mouth in maintaining their existence. But with this and a growing number of small successes they continued to motivate people to support them to help people in need.

They also began to see some of the groups who had lots of money offered to them begin to fail, sometimes because they hadn't built the skills the friends had over time, sometimes because they had got the money too easily. The friends knew that they needed to make every hard earned penny count and they were also passionate about what they did. Their passion eventually got them a large grant, for they applied to a funder who visited their make-do office one cold, dark, November evening. They didn't have any proper heating because they were putting money into helping others rather than themselves. The funder that visited didn't take his coat off all meeting but the energy and motivation of the friends bubbled forth as they explained what they were trying to do for their community. The friends worried they had made a bad impression but after a couple of months they received a letter from the funder, offering a grant of £50,000, twice what the funder normally gave. They continued to learn and made a great success of what they were doing and even though each of the friends has now moved on from the charity they created it is still going some 25 years later.

