

# The Power of Stories

## *Planned Giving Today*

**Vol. 27, No. 3 (March 2016), pp. 1, 4-5**

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We all enjoy a good story. From early childhood, we can all probably remember a favorite story that we wanted to hear, over and over again. As parents, we got to tell those stories, over and over again, remarking with amazement our children's love of the same story. Some of us read formulaic fiction: thrillers, perhaps, or romance, or detective novels, which if you think about it, is the same story, over and over.

As educators or lecturers, we all know that one way to wake up a class or an audience trying to keep its collective eyes open during a PowerPoint presentation is to stop and say "Let me pause here and tell you a personal story . . ." and watch what happens. People sit up straighter, focus, lift their eyes up from their laptops and ready themselves for . . . for what? What is it that we get from stories that we don't get from, say, PowerPoint?

It is quite simple: If we listen to a PowerPoint presentation with boring bullet points, certain, limited parts in the brain get activated: we process PowerPoint slides in our language-processing parts of the brain, where we decode words into meaning. And that is it, nothing else happens.

When we are being told a story, though, not only are the language-processing parts in our brain activated, but other areas in our brain are activated as well. If someone tells us "Last night I went to Momofuku in New York City and had the most amazing shrimp buns with spicy mayo," yes, our language-processing parts of our brain light up, but so does our sensory cortex. We start imagining the shrimp buns, thinking about the crowded Village restaurant, imagining (if we have been there—or even if we have not) the "crack" pie that is offered up as a dessert (pie that in Indiana would be called Old Fashioned Cream pie)—yet another

sensory cortex light up: “Cream,” “Crack Pie,” “Spicy Mayo with Shrimp”—just writing the words makes us hungry.

When we tell stories about experiences that we have had, if we use enough details, we can imprint our feelings into our listeners’ brains. Our story-telling brain and our listening audience’s brains can synchronize. PowerPoint cannot do that.

Recent brain scientists have discovered many remarkable uses of storytelling in the past decade. For example, a decade ago, Dr. Paul Zak’s lab discovered that a neurochemical called oxytocin was a key “it’s safe to approach others” signal in the brain. Oxytocin, as we have learned, enhances our sense of empathy, our ability to experience others’ emotions. Recently, scientists in Zak’s lab wondered if we could “hack” the oxytocin system to motivate people to engage in altruistic behaviors. To do this, they tested if stories shot on video would cause the brain to make oxytocin. By taking blood draws before and after the story, they found that character-driven stories do consistently cause oxytocin synthesis. Even more to the point of planned gift fundraising, the amount of oxytocin released by the brain predicted how much people were willing to help others, for example, by donating money to a charity associated with the narrative.

They also discovered

- In order to motivate a desire to help others, a story must first sustain attention--a scarce resource in the brain--by developing tension during the narrative
- If the story is able to create that tension, then it is likely that attentive listeners will come to share the emotions of the characters in the story
- And the more listeners shared the emotions of the characters in the story, the more likely they were to aid the charity associated with the story. (See a summary of Paul Zak’s research in the October, 2014 *Harvard Business Review*).

Recent brain research has also shown that stories are useful inside non-profit organizations. We know that people are substantially more motivated by their organization’s transcendent purpose (how it improves lives) than by its transactional purpose (how it sells goods and services). Transcendent purpose is

most effectively communicated through stories – for example, by describing the situations of actual, named people and how they benefitted from your charity.

And note that these transcendent purpose stories are also the ones that motivate donors. We have all known the CEO who comes with us on a donor visit and tries to transact business (“if you give us \$15,000 a year for three years, we will appreciate it”) instead of telling a story about how a retired Presbyterian minister was able to give \$15,000 to his 50<sup>th</sup> reunion (instead of \$500 cash) because a staff member explained how a charitable gift annuity worked.

The still unanswered question is why does the format of a story, where events unfold one after the other, have such a profound impact on our learning? And why do we care so much about these “characters”?

The simple answer is this: We are wired to care. We think in narratives all day (and all night) long—when we are driving (and send the slow driver with his turn signal on in the passing lane to a slow, agonizing death), when we are listening to a boring PowerPoint presentation and imagine the droning lecturer falling into a dunk tank full of cold water. We crave story arcs: as Aristotle told us in “The Poetics” we must have beginnings, middles, and endings. Especially endings. We love endings, probably because we have so many beginnings and middles in our lives that seem to spin out of control and rarely give us the satisfaction of an ending.

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Let us tell you two stories, both of which we have told to donors with great success. The first is about that retired Presbyterian minister we mentioned earlier. He, in fact, was the father of one of your authors. Long active in his college alumni association and one of the leaders of his class during college and over the subsequent decades, he was pleased to be asked to be on the planning committee for his 50th reunion. But he had one major reservation and contemplated turning down the invitation because he felt he could only give a “stretch” gift of \$500 instead of his usual \$100 contribution. The prospect of not being involved in planning for his major college celebration caused him considerable anxiety, and his discomfort about the size of his gift almost caused

him to turn down his invitation to be on the planning committee. Until he heard about gift annuities. After learning about a gift that gives an income back—for life—he was able to use \$15,000 of the appreciated stock he had inherited to fund a CGA. His anxiety disappeared; he accepted the invitation, and he had a wonderful time at the reunion. Most important, he thought of himself now as a major donor in a way he had never envisioned—and his annual gifts jumped to \$1000 per year for the remainder of his life.

The second story comes from an experience with one of our clients. The numbers are much bigger, and the story is just as powerful. It was the eve of a campaign planning meeting, and a key group of trustees had gathered to consider the magnitude and focus of the campaign. As is often the case with such meetings, the leaders of the governing board were also thinking seriously about their own commitments. One of the board members, a successful entrepreneur and venture capitalist, had already made up his mind that he wanted to make a \$1 million commitment, but his cash flow only allowed a \$400,000 gift. Again, the tension between his desires and his possibilities produced uncertainty and anxiety. Fortunately, he had also served on a trustee committee that had, with our guidance, recently rewritten the Gift Acceptance Policies for the organization, and he remembered the discussion about non-cash assets as ways of making a gift. Several meetings later, after talking with one of us about his asset portfolio and after discussions with his family and financial advisors, he was able to make a \$2.5 million commitment to the campaign, an achievement that not only eliminated his earlier anxiety and produced a major impact on the campaign totals, but, every bit as important, stimulated other members of the board to examine the options of using non-cash assets as well. The campaign prospered and the original donor felt—with every justification—considerable pride in raising the proverbial bar for his colleagues.

We all have stories we love to tell and retell. But as good planned giving professionals, we need not just to tell stories but also to listen to the stories our donors tell us. Nothing is more important in cultivating prospects than a genuine interest in what these prospects are saying about themselves. What better way

to learn what excites them, where their passions lie, and what their priorities are than by paying attention to their stories?

The stories we tell—and the stories we listen to—are the vitality of our business. Without stories we are reduced to a series of abstract and impersonal transactions. Stories chronicle the reason we do what we do, and the more stories we include in our work—and the more stories we listen to-- the more successful we will be in raising funds for the causes for which we work.