

How to Tell the Story of Your Library's Impact

AN OUTCOMES-BASED APPROACH FOR

PUBLIC LIBRARIES

DEVELOPED BY

MIA
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Introduction

In discussing, presenting, and possibly defending your library's vision to taxpayers, local supporters, or governing authorities, you have no doubt learned the value of a well-articulated strategic plan and, quite possibly, a dashboard of assorted performance metrics to use in reporting traffic, usage, and other outputs to the people who matter.

Measuring Outcomes @ Your Library with the Help of Impactful Stories

While successful in raising demand, the majority of library campaigns have been aimed at promoting library services and driving library use, not increasing library funding. Funding the collective library mission is a growing problem and without proactive and large-scale action, we can see no economic, social or political factors or events that will reverse the trends in library funding.

From Awareness to Funding

A study of library support in America

A Report to the OCLC Membership

OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc., 2008

Classic library “outputs” are usually defined in terms of collection dimensions, circulation data, and cost-benefit ratios, including ROI. The stories that you will find will enhance these traditional measures with real life anecdotes that show how the library is being used, and the impact it is having on users' lives.

The “outcome-based” results that MLA and Cengage are advocating are about those success stories that are incredibly meaningful and provide justification for change or funding, yet are difficult, if not impossible, to measure with data points. What happened after a patron's library research was done? Were lives saved? Jobs offered? Award-winning efforts completed? Barriers broken? Paradigms shifted? What speaks volumes without using a single lending statistic?

This brief guide will help you gather the powerful stories you need to convince your audience.

For Example

WHAT MAKES LIBRARIES ESSENTIAL

In New Orleans, they tell the story of how 21 communities lost their libraries from hurricanes Rita and Katrina in 2005. After the devastating storms, libraries reopened within days in trailers equipped with electricity, computers and internet access. Besides giving displaced residents a life-line to loved ones outside of the city, to insurance, banks, and other necessary entities, these trailers turned out to be the only place people could go for reliable internet access. Even the FEMA workers themselves and others assisting in the Gulf Coast recovery efforts spent hours using the makeshift libraries to communicate, get supplies, and facilitate volunteers. After seeing the momentous role that libraries played during this disaster, FEMA formally honored public libraries by adding them to the official list of priority services that must be recovered first after any emergency.

Your Step-By-Step Guide To Storytelling

There's no magic formula for crafting a story that will resonate with the community and get your library the support it needs, but following a couple of expert tips will help to focus your effort. These steps must be followed to ensure that a meaningful story will emerge.

STEP 1: Consider Your Current Partners and Potential Funders

Schedule a meeting with select library employees. Use the questionnaire below to help you think about whom your key partners currently are, and who in the community could potentially become a partner. Fill out one sheet for each key group of existing or potential contributors (e.g., taxpayers or state funding bodies, area businesses, philanthropists and charities, civic groups ...)

| Current and Prospective Partners Profile | |
|--|--|
| GROUP NAME: | |
| WHO (Key demographics) | |
| WHAT (Needs, hopes, desires, dreams) | |
| WHERE (Places they work, shop, play) | |
| WHY (They need the library) | |
| WHEN (Best times to reach them) | |
| HOW (Best ways to reach them) | |

For help in filling out this table, use the list of "Key Questions to Ask About Your Partners" included in Appendix I.

STEP 2: Go After Stories

Now that you have a list of partners whom you want to impact, and now that you know what they are looking for, it is time to gather the stories that will appeal to them. Start by considering all the avenues you have to reach people who use your library and have stories to tell:

- Facebook
- Surveys
- Visitors in the library
- Library website
- Flyers
- Newspapers

Utilizing Staff—to get the good stories, you'll need to use your frontline staff as your eyes and ears. Tell the staff about your goal to capture the stories they hear in a way that the stories can be used for library publicity purposes. If they hear a story, have them work with the patron to fill out the Story Gathering Fact Form and get the Release Form signed. Encourage staff to probe for details about what happened outside the library walls. You might consider rewarding both staff and story tellers by offering a small prize for sharing. Put up signs at the main library stations asking for stories. Give your story gathering campaign a name.

Eliciting Stories through Routine Channels—take your story gathering campaign out to the community by making use of your existing email or printed newsletters, Facebook page, Twitter feed, or web site to attract stories and storytellers. You might even provide an interactive web form for gathering story details and permissions, using the Story Gathering Fact Form and Release Form as models. A sample sign might read:

WE WANT TO HEAR YOUR STORIES: What are you doing in the library that is making a difference in your home, school, workplace, or community? Did you find a long-lost relative as a result of genealogy research? Did you find a job as a result of using a library database? Were you able to find medical information that helped a loved one?"

Put some pressure on storytellers to contribute by posting a deadline for submission and offering a small prize.

Combine with Survey Solicitations—add an open-ended question or two to your regular patron or community survey to solicit story ideas. Ask the following questions at the end of your standard survey:

Q1: Do you have a story to share about how the library, or something you discovered within the library, has had a positive impact on you, your family, or the community you live in?

Q2: If so, briefly describe (100 words or less)

Q3: Would you be willing to tell your story in more detail and be interviewed by a member of our staff?

Q4: If so, please provide your contact details (these details will not be used for any other purpose):
email: _____
phone: _____

Q5: What day/time is best to call? _____

STEP 3: Get the Whole Story

After you make initial contact with library users who may have an impactful story, use the interview guide below to get the full story. It is

important to go beyond the library and find out what happened after they left the library doors. How did they make a difference?

Story-Gathering Fact Form

Name of person telling this story: _____

Phone number _____ Email Address _____

Who is this story about?

What happened?

When did it happen?

Where did it happen?

How did the matter get resolved, or, what was the result?

Why did the library matter or what role did it play?

What's the moral to the story? Happy ending? Revelation?

Name of the person gathering this story: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____ Place: _____

Are there photos to go with this story? Audio? Video? _____

Where are the photos, audio files, or videos? _____

Did the interviewee sign a permission form? _____

[See our sample Release Form in Appendix II]

STEP 4: Test Your Story

Now that you have stories, it is important to choose the ones that will really make an impact. Does your story have shock value? Use the check

list below to determine whether your stories will have a positive impact on the potential donors and users of the library.

The Impact Factor Checklist

RATE YOUR STORY'S IMPACT

Check your story against these 12 attributes for success.

| Yes/No | Is your story . . . | Tips for Success |
|--------|----------------------|---|
| | Brief | Keep it short and sweet so listeners can quickly get the message and repeat it to others later |
| | Succinct | Include just enough detail to get the point across. |
| | Complete | Quickly answer the basic questions: Who? What? When? Where? How? |
| | Intelligible | Will your audience appreciate the situation you are describing? Will this tale resonate with them? |
| | Shock Value/Surprise | Is the situation unusual in any way? Can the ending be predicted? Where's the "punch line"? Are they likely to retell it? |
| | Upbeat | Does the story have a happy ending? Finish on a high note. |
| | Illustrative | Does this story implicitly illustrate an impact the library made? The outcome you are seeking? |
| | Appropriate | Does this story fit with your main business? |
| | Personable | Will the audience identify with your story's hero? |
| | Memorable | Will the listener be able to remember this story? Can it be easily retold? |
| | Inspirational | Does the story have the potential to cause listeners to think about what it means to them? |
| | Actionable | Does the story have the potential to spring the listener to a new level of understanding and action? |

Source: Stephen Denning's: *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in the Knowledge-Era Organization* (Butterworth Heinemann, 2001, Appendix I.)

STEP 5: Get Your Story Out

By now you have narrowed your pile of stories down to the best and most impactful. It is time to tell the story to the masses! Refer to the charts you completed in Step 1 to remind yourself how best to reach your target partners and users. Ask yourself these questions again: Where do they shop? Where do they go online? What do they do for pleasure? Are they connected with kids? Schools? Businesses? What does a typical day look like?

Consider how best to package and distribute your stories to partners and users, whether in person, in print, or online.

The ways to get your stories out to the public are limited only by your own imagination. Of course, you'll want to use the channels that you have already developed, including newsletters, email blasts to patrons, social media web sites, and library displays. You will also want to make sure that your board members not only hear but learn to repeat the stories that best make the case your library needs to make.

In addition to reaching your existing sponsors, supporters, and patrons, remember to seek opportunities to take your story to potential contributors. Refer back to the Current and Prospective Partners Profile you filled out earlier to develop some tactics for reaching out to potential sponsors in places and at times not on your routine schedules.



| Potential Story Outlets | | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Videos on YouTube | Wall Postings on Facebook | Tweets on Twitter | Pictures on Flickr |
| Pages on Web Sites | Postcards in Snail Mail | Write-ups in Email | Releases to Media |
| Handouts at Checkouts | Letters to Board Members | Posters in Schools | Town Criers in Malls |



Telling Your Own Story

Last but not least, don't forget to track how well your stories have worked in practice. How would they do this? What is the result of your story having been released? Did it get to the intended audience? Has there been a shift in thinking? Is

there anything measurable to report? Are the people retelling the story to others? Did you achieve your goal? If so, congratulations—you've found your "springboard story".

Appendix I

Key Questions for PUBLIC LIBRARIES to Ask About Your Current and Potential Partners

Fill out a separate form for each partner, potential contributor or influencer. Some groups to consider: Home owners and taxpayers, but also VOTERS; government agencies and local officials, and those who influence them; existing patrons,

especially opinion leaders; local employers and their employees; foundations and charities along with individual philanthropists. These are some examples, but don't let this itemized list limit you! Your team may come up with many more potential funders in your community.

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| PARTNER GROUP OR POTENTIAL FUNDER: | | |
| What is their current connection to the library? | | |
| Are they supporting the library now? If so, how? | | |
| Are they influential? Are they opinion leaders? | | |
| Who or what do they affect? | | |
| What statistics do you have on them? | | |
| | Age | |
| | Gender/marital status | |
| | Income level | |
| | Educational level | |
| | Places of residence | |
| Do they work? If so, who employs them? | | |
| | Who could they tell about your library? | |
| Are they an employer? | | |
| | Who do they employ? | |
| | Is there a direct tie between the employees and your library? Do you help train them? Help them do their jobs? | |
| Do they or their family members use your library? Which members? Pre-school children, retired parents, teens? | | |
| | What do you help these patrons do? What stories could they tell? | |
| What would entice them to give money or provide other support to the library? | | |
| Where do they live? Shop? Dine? Play? | | |
| | What charities do they support? Where do they volunteer? Where would you find them online? What would a typical day in their life look like? What would be their routine? | |
| What stories do you have to tell about them? | | |
| Where would you find them online? | | |
| What would a typical day in their life look like? What would be their routine? | | |
| What stories do you have to tell about them? | | |

Appendix II

Sample Release Form

Story Contributor's Release Form

Full Name: _____

Address (city, state, Zip): _____

Phone: _____ Email Address _____

I hereby grant the _____ Library permission to use the details of my story about

in print, online, or other media of expression, as deemed appropriate by Library officials for the purpose of publicizing and promoting the library.

In conjunction with the telling of my story, I specifically grant the Library permission to (check all that apply):

Use my full name as written above [] or shortened to _____

Use my occupation, to be listed as: _____

Use my age, to be listed as: _____

Use my gender, to be listed as: _____

Use my image (photo or other graphic) as taken by staff or supplied by me.

Use a video or audio recording of me telling my story

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Parent's or Guardian's Signature if a Minor: _____