





STRATEGIC STORYTELLING

A timeless tool makes its way into association management.

BY LORI L. SILVERMAN

HOW CAN YOU COMMUNICATE ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY IN A WAY that increases members' commitment and involvement? How can you make

dramatic organizational changes that members and staff will embrace? How

can you quickly capture members' attention and get them to listen to what you have to say—in print and in person?

Try stories. Although the art and practice of storytelling is timeless, its application to association management is in its infancy. As you'll see from

the following stories, organizations that have tried it have achieved dramatic results.

Signaling a mission shift
During the past four years, United Way of America, Alexandria, Virginia, has committed to transforming its business. As the national leadership organization for the United Way movement, it wanted to move beyond traditional fundraising to a new mission: improving people's lives by mobilizing the caring power of communities. The organization wanted to create lasting change in communities and the lives of poor people like Bob who were struggling to see the change shift in the approach to the independent United Way organizations.

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The Ogre Story
A villager is walking by the river early one morning. The villager is floating down the river. Horrified, the villager faces into the water, grabs the baby, and brings the baby to shore. The baby is fine.

Followed, the villager looks back into the water and sees a baby floating down the river. The villager again dives into the water and rescues the baby as well.
Once more, the villager looks into the water... and sees...
floating down the river. The villager calls out an alarm and the entire village comes running to the river to rescue as many babies as it can before the water carries them away.

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When she delivered the keynote address at United Way's 2004 National Brand Forum, the powerful advertising executive Charlotte Beers summed up the answer in six words: "We all need to become storytellers."

The staff took those words to heart. "We realized that we needed to tell the new United Way story and make it compelling," says Matt Gaston, who works in the United Way president's office as transformation communications manager. The organization's community-impact staff was already



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using "The Ogre Story"—a folk tale about mobilizing a community—in a limited way. (See "Story One" for details.) "We felt it deserved a prominent place in our national arsenal," Gaston says.

The staff set out to give it that prominence during the May 2004 National Leadership Forum, which was attended by representatives from the 1,400 United Way organizations. The forum's planners offered both examples and instruction on how to use stories as a strategic tool to convey the importance of community impact. United Way Board Chair Johnnetta

Cole made "The Ogre Story" the centerpiece of her opening-day address. The next day, a storyteller and organizational consultant gave a 90-minute workshop on finding and telling real-life stories to spread the organizational transformation.

"Leaders left the forum with lots of ideas and inspiration," says Gaston. "A month later, 'The Ogre Story' was one of the top three downloaded items from our internal Web site."

For Gaston, "a good story is not enough to effect change. You must *link* this story to your strategy and weave it together with compelling human stories." The goal is to put a human face on how the efforts of the United Way and its partners improve the lives of individuals *and* help communities reduce dropout rates, decrease the number of homeless people, and more. To achieve this goal, in the coming year the United Way plans to find a variety of ways to use a combination of "The Ogre Story" and others that bubble up from local organizations. The stories will likely fuel speeches delivered nationwide, appear in publications, and serve as a memorable tool for conveying the importance of community impact.

Mining member stories

In November 2002 the board of directors of the American Society for Quality (ASQ), Milwaukee, approved a new vision and set of strategies. But the ideas didn't take on a life of their own until the next board meeting in May 2003. To prepare for this meeting, board members were asked to review articles on storytelling in organizations

STORY ONE: The Ogre Story

A villager is walking by the river early one morning. The villager looks out into the water and sees a baby floating down the river. Horrified, the villager races into the water, grabs the baby, and brings the baby to shore. The baby is fine.

Relieved, the villager looks back into the water and sees another baby floating down the river. The villager again dives into the water and rescues this baby as well.

Once more, the villager looks into the water...and sees dozens of babies floating down the river. The villager calls out an alarm, and the entire village comes running to the river to rescue as many babies as it can before the water carries them away.

This is a village that is mobilized. Every villager is at the river, trying to save the babies from the water.

This is a village that is improving lives. Many of the babies are being saved.

But the babies keep on coming... because no one is going upstream to put a stop to the ogre that is throwing the babies into the water in the first place.

United Way needs to gather a contingent of villagers to go upstream and stop the ogre. Otherwise, we will be pulling babies out of the water forever.

Pulling babies out of the water is essential. How can we live with ourselves if we don't try? But going upstream, redirecting the ogre, helping it find better uses for its energies—that is creating a lasting change in the conditions that are causing this nightmare to begin with.

and reflect on several questions. The answers would form a collective story of what quality meant to the board and how it has shaped their lives and the lives of others. "We needed to balance the hard, technical side of quality with emotional intelligence," recalls Tom Mosgaller, the 2002–2003 board chair. "Good leaders are able to express stories that create connections to people and capture their emotions."

ASQ Executive Director Paul Borawski, CAE, concurs. "The potency of stories is that they surface and unlock people's passions and create shared meaning and understanding."

Fueled by this new-found passion, the board conducted 26 three-hour stakeholder dialogue sessions across the country at ASQ divisions and corporations. Each session began with a personal story from a board member. These sessions captured meaningful questions, imaginative and powerful responses to them, and themes and patterns from more than a thousand of ASQ's 100,000-plus members and their organizations.

One example of how this worked comes from Jeff Jackson, former ASQ board member and chair of its Division Affairs Council. Applying to a council meeting what he'd learned

STORY TWO: Finding a Niche

Late in the 1990s Campbellville Industries, a steeple-building company in south-central Kentucky, began running into a competitive problem. Its account managers could not easily or efficiently exchange data with customers via e-mail or other electronic transfers. But many of the architects and engineers the company dealt with fully expected such latitude. After all, that's how business is done today. Unfortunately, that's not how business could be done in Campbellville.

As Team Taylor County, the local chamber and industrial recruitment organization, started looking at other businesses in the area, it became clear that Campbellville Industries was not alone. Others confronted the same problems. Data transfers that take mere moments on high-speed connections took hours on traditional modems. Time is money. Campbellville was losing ground in an increasingly competitive environment.

Together, Team Taylor County and the chief information officer at the Kentucky League of Cities devised a solution. High-speed access could be attained through wireless technology. KLC provided the technical expertise and the system research; Campbellville provided a ready and willing test market.

The results have been extremely encouraging. With a level playing field, Campbellville now has the competitive advantage it needs to attract both high-tech and traditional businesses. In addition, the local telephone and cable providers discovered that a market for broadband service does indeed exist in a rural setting and is deploying the same technology.

The same sorts of partnerships are now being forged with other communities and organizations. They recognize that such access is not an economic development edge but an economic-development and quality-of-life necessity. Thanks to the efforts to solve the problems of a small-town steeple company, Kentucky has quickly become a national leader in cutting-edge, high-tech solutions.

about storytelling, he asked the group, "What is it about being a division leader that turns you on and makes you want to volunteer?"

"Everyone participated and was engaged," says Jackson. "Anecdotal comments and session ratings demonstrated that telling personal stories was highly valued by division leaders."

Several interconnected changes arose from this work. The board realized that its membership included as many professionals *not* directly involved in the quality field as those who are. This has triggered a shift in scope, says Borawski. ASQ is now moving from being a professional association—focused only on the care, feeding, and development of the quality profession—to being stewards of the quality movement as a whole—of which the profession is an important core. That shift prompted a change in the way the association addresses what it offers. ASQ leaders formerly believed that members wanted

to know, "What do I get for my money?" Now they believe the question is more properly framed as, "What am I supporting with my money, and what do I get for it?"

This gave life to ASQ's new "Faces of Quality" marketing campaign, which the association is using to raise awareness of the value of quality and the profession. It features stories and testimonials from individuals inspired by quality concerns to make a difference in their industries, their communities, and their personal lives. The stories are also highlighted in ASQ's online Image Center (www.asq.org/news/image).

The most remarkable change, Borawski says, was a complete reformulation of ASQ's membership model. The association now offers a variety of new and enhanced membership types and benefits that are tailored to anyone interested in the practice or profession of quality. ▶

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—PAUL BORAWSKI, CAE



What's next for ASQ? A second round of dialogue sessions are planned for its annual conference in May 2005. The goal will be to more deeply explore emerging themes and patterns and to expose more members to storytelling. As Borawski says, "The power of stories is available to everyone, and everyone has a story to tell."

Using stories to communicate with—and for—members

A few years ago Campbellsville, Kentucky, almost lost a steeple-building factory and a hundred jobs, because the small town lacked the technological infrastructure the factory needed to obtain blueprints from its clients online. But with the assistance of the Lexington-based Kentucky League of

Cities, Campbellsville overcame the problem by creating a wireless broadband Internet solution that was the first of its kind in the state, says Terri Johnson, KLC's marketing and communications manager.

Now captured in a story called "Finding a Niche" (see "Story Two"), the tale of the endangered steeple factory plays a part in KLC's presentations to civic organizations, where it vividly demonstrates the value of the league's support to member cities throughout the state.

The league is sold on the power of stories—so much so that it gathers them at every opportunity and uses them in its work as well as the work of the NewCities Foundation, its non-profit educational foundation. In the past year, more than 80 staff and



COMPELLING ANECDOTES CAN SPEAK TO THE IMPORTANCE OF PROTECTING A PROGRAM'S BRAND IMAGE.

—SUSAN SCHOENBERG

**STORY THREE:
One Contractor's Story**

BY STEVE CARDER

In 1994 a young man decided to go into business. He had been successful as a project manager for a \$2 million commercial contractor, but he had dreamed of opening his own business since he helped his father in his business. His love of reading taught him that there is more to life than going to work for someone else every day to make a buck.

Commercial construction was difficult for a new company, so he started out in service and repair. At first the days were long and the nights were longer. He would get up early in the morning to work a few jobs and work into the night on bills and estimates. Soon he was able to bring his wife and brother into the business, and then a few more. At times he remembered his days at his first employer and thought how nice it was not to have to worry about payroll, hiring, government reports, and so forth. But he loved what he did, including providing a living for his employees and a vital service for his customers.

He was finding that greater meaning to life, but he still sought more. He joined his trade association, the

Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors-National Association (PHCC). It did not take long for the members to realize he was a talented person, and he rose quickly to become president of his state association. He met people and learned lessons that helped in his business, but he didn't think much about it until one day a friend said, "Why do you spend so much time on this association? I just joined an Internet site that gives me all I need, and I don't have to pay dues or go to meetings."

This made him think: Why am I spending so much time and money on this association?

He lay awake that night, because the question was just eating at him. Then the answer came like a bolt of lightning: "I am in this association for the industry, not just for me. I can learn a lot from Web sites, or other industry groups, but I want to be with people like me who love this industry and want to make a difference in it. I want to support legislative efforts that keep us strong—you can't do that sitting on the sidelines. I want to find a greater mean-

ing in life than making a profit." Encouraged by his realization, he became more active than ever before.

This man is really me, Steve Carder, the president of PHCC. I will tell you what I've learned firsthand: It is not always about work and profit, but it is about people—that is why I am active in PHCC. I believe we are in a vital industry that everyone in the world depends on. I get a great deal of satisfaction working with my peers in PHCC. It was not always easy. I am really a shy person. But I have learned to speak in front of groups and do things I never thought I could do—all because of PHCC.

What's in it for you? We need you. We need leaders in PHCC and in our industry. I bet a few of you reading this want to make a difference in your industry. Yes, it is great to see your business grow and to make a good living for you and your family. But it is not all about work, profits, and employees—it is about finding greater meaning in your life.

I encourage you to call or e-mail directly. Let's talk.

Steve Carder, owner, Carder Plumbing Company, Inc., Sand Springs, Oklahoma, and board president of the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors-National Association.

interns have mined more than a hundred stories from communities statewide. Staff members systematically collect stories from members via roundtable discussions, board meetings, and informal conversations. KLC's Web site solicits them through a prominently featured "Tell the Story" box. And as Director of Communications Bobbie Bryant says, "Stories are so important to us that we even mention them in our personnel policies manual." The manual says:

"To ensure consistent and quality branding throughout all our mediums, we shall use the storytelling format. Lessons and insights are always best absorbed—and retained—if there is an interesting story that demonstrates them, whether the message is sad, humorous, dramatic, angry, or simply entertaining. Any story that reflects human struggle and human triumph offers a far more compelling way to engage people at every level—from commitment to a cause to understanding of an issue at a deeper and more personal level."

KLC puts the stories to work for many purposes. They enhance the league's strategic planning, enliven its vendor meetings, and enrich its publications as well as the publications of media partners, such as *Kentucky Monthly* magazine. The stories feature people associated with local businesses, successful projects, innovations, best practices, and cost savings. The staff stores them all in an intranet story pool that's organized by city and topic and is searchable by keyword.

The initiative got started in 2001, when KLC Executive Director and NewCities President Sylvia Lovely learned about the importance of real-life stories at a public-speaking workshop. She decided that stories would be ideal for helping members understand exactly what KLC does for them. One recent example: A story that KLC uncovered about the small city of Cloverport and its school system was published in KLC's *City Magazine*. The resulting attention caused "the entire city to be abuzz and tickled to death," says the story's author, Tad Long, senior advisor for business development at

the NewCities Foundation. "It generated a lot of phone calls and e-mails from other places wanting to replicate the idea of helping students earn an associate's degree while attending high school. The mayor thanked us over and over again. It strengthened an important relationship for KLC."

The staff has found the results so valuable that KLC now offers related training to members and staff statewide. An upcoming convention, for example, will include a workshop on story listening and storytelling techniques to help public officials use stories to lobby legislators in the Kentucky General Assembly.

Managing with stories

Michael Benjamin, executive director of the Minneapolis-based National Council on Family Relations, once found himself serving as the third speaker on a four-person panel. To spark the audience's interest in the potentially dry topic of how research can be used to influence policy and practice, he told the following story:

"When I was in graduate school in 1970 at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, all public health research was done in one neighborhood. One day, I was conducting a survey on chronic diseases in this location. A woman answered my knock on the door with a stern, 'Honey, what do you want?' I told her about the study. Her response was unforgettable. 'It always seems you get what you want but we don't get what we need. You Yalies are

all alike.' Only then did I realize that she and her kids had numerous health problems. I arranged to have them seen at a clinic run by the Black Panthers.

"Her comments put me in my place. Back at school I told my team that we needed to give something back to the community. I also learned that research cannot be conducted in isolation. We need to combine research with policy and practice...."

For Benjamin, telling personal stories such as this one accomplishes something that no ordinary speech could. Stories "engage the audience, build rapport, and make my point come alive," he says. "Afterward, audience members say to me, 'I really understand what you're saying. We get lost around our own mission and jobs at the expense of the people we're providing services to.' This is exactly what I was trying to achieve."

In your own work as a leader, one of your roles is to serve as the constant communicator of what your association is striving to achieve. As Benjamin notes, by integrating stories into what you say, you can do much to get your message across vividly.

The stories don't always have to be personal. In many cases, stories from others can work just as well. Recently Susan Schoenberg, program administrator for Jump Rope for Heart and Hoops for Heart, was crafting a 45-minute talk to present to state-level executive directors at the annual leadership development conference. While she was working on a part of the talk



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—MICHAEL BENJAMIN

SOMETIMES IT'S NOT ABOUT THE STORIES YOU WANT TO TELL, BUT THE STORIES OTHERS WANT YOU TO HEAR.

—KAREN DIETZ



about a policy recommendation regarding advertising in newsletters, she found herself asking, "What am I missing? How do I pull at their heartstrings?"

It dawned on Schoenberg that she could convey her message more memorably by using the powerful stories hidden inside grant proposals.

She ultimately selected four grant recipients' stories—compelling anecdotes that spoke to the importance of protecting these programs' brand image. When she shared them, "the room became quiet. Everyone was listening. It was apparent that attendees had forgotten the primary purpose of these programs and how they make a substantial difference in the fight against heart disease and stroke. I know these stories made my point."

Admittedly, it does take significant work to uncover stories and then tell them effectively, says D.L. "Ike" Casey, executive vice president of the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors-National Association (PHCC), Falls Church, Virginia. To get better at it, he makes it a point to set aside time to practice out loud before telling a story.

The extra effort is well worthwhile. "Face it—people are tired of PowerPoint slides," Casey says. "They don't wow them anymore."

One of Casey's favorite tales is "One Contractor's Story" (see "Story Three"), a synopsis of a personal story he helped craft for Steve Carder, president of PHCC. "This story shows our members, especially younger people

interested in the trade, how our president achieved success in the industry and provides an example for others to emulate."

Sometimes merely listening to others' stories is the most important thing a leader can do. Karen Dietz is executive director of the National Storytelling Network (NSN), Jonesborough, Tennessee, a member organization that supports storytelling in performance and within organizations, medicine, and education. When Dietz took the job in January 2004, she made a conscious decision not to focus on the stories that she wanted to *tell*. Instead, as a means of encouraging change and growth within NSN, she concentrated on eliciting what others wanted her to *hear*. "I listened to board members tell stories about the organization, themselves, and others in relationship to NSN. And I asked questions such as, 'Are you ready for change? What leads you to think that? How have you come to know that?'"

Today Dietz continues this approach with members and staff. In contrast to always seeking facts or data, her habit of mining others' experiences and emotions "gives me a better understanding of the organization's health and people's attachment to NSN. I also discover problems, successes, and talent." From these stories several themes have emerged, including "we're making a difference" and "we're proud of what we do." For Dietz, such themes are fodder for marketing materials as well as for building community.

Drawing out stories forces Dietz to sit back and be calm, quiet, and receptive rather than directive. "This requires me to be fully conscious of my behavior with others. It takes work and effort." But in time, she may need to challenge some of the prevailing stories. "NSN was founded out of rebellion. Some hurt, anger, and suspicion still exists," she says. "We have to get over this or we'll get stuck. It's my role to question stories that convey these emotions, build awareness that we're operating in this mode, and aid members in shifting the conversation to a new story that helps NSN be more effective."

A quote by writer Salman Rushdie guides her in this work: "Those who do not have the power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless because they cannot think new thoughts."

Continuing the story

What all these executives have realized is this: Stories achieve greater results for them, their organizations, and the causes they represent because of their ability to touch people intellectually, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Reflect for a moment on your work. What role do stories play in helping you accomplish your goals and those of the organization? How could you use them more effectively? How well do you listen for stories from members and staff?

Stories are a powerful tool for association management. Put them to work in your organization and see. **AM**

Lori L. Silverman is the owner of Partners for Progress, a management consulting firm in Madison, Wisconsin. She will speak about "Increasing Organizational Effectiveness Through the Use of Stories" at the New Great Ideas Conference in Orlando, December 5-7, and in Phoenix, February 13-15. E-mail: lori@partnersforprogress.com.



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