



# Tell me a story

## 13 Tips and one cautionary note for powerful narratives that drive social impact

By **Eric Friedenwald-Fishman** | Metropolitan Group Creative Director/President

**Stories matter.** As a social marketer and social entrepreneur, I am highly aware of the use of narrative and framing in our daily lives. From politics to the marketplace, who sets the narrative and how they set it has great power. It impacts who cares about an issue, what they hear, and what they are willing to do.

Recently, everywhere I go, people ask me how to tell a more effective story. Advocates, colleagues, and clients observe that the organizations that achieve policy goals, get transformative grants, or seize the market's interest are the ones that 1) have the resources to disseminate their story and 2) just tell the better story. I would argue that the real winners are the organizations that actually manage to tell a story at all.

In response to all of this interest in storytelling, I have examined what I have learned from my collaboration with social entrepreneurs and have distilled those lessons into thirteen tips. Let me share the **Storyteller's Power Ps**:

### The Power of Purpose

Being crystal clear about your mission, vision, and values illustrates why your story matters,

highlights your point-of-view, and advances the positions you hold.

### The Power of Plot

Great tales have a story arc—a beginning, a middle, and an end. They capture our attention, pull us into the story, explore its themes, and bring us to a conclusion. Without the journey, there is no story.

### The Power of Peril

Evocative stories include dynamic tension. They make the audience viscerally aware of what is at risk. The messy twists and turns of a story parallel the nonlinear experience of our actual lives. Our sense that there is something important that may be lost or gained is what makes us care about a story.

### The Power of Personalities

Without characters, there is no story. Who is the hero? Who is the villain? Who are the victims? Who are the bystanders? While casting to type (the privileged Ivy Leaguer, the rapacious one percent, the virtuous middle voter, the welfare

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mom) may be cliché, it works. It provides the audience with instant recognition and elicits an emotional response.

### The Power of Parable

Every culture has archetypal stories (the hero's journey, the return of the prodigal child, love triumphs, or hate destroys) that are deeply ingrained in the collective memory of a community. The times, places, and characters may change, but the familiarity of the tale immediately resonates and creates context.

### The Power of Passion

Emotion trumps data. We make decisions driven by our emotions and then back them up with data. The storyteller's level of investment, conviction, and authenticity sets the bar for how others will perceive the story. Making it personal and showing vulnerability by sharing your own experience creates a more likely connection to those hearing the story.

### The Power of People

Amplifying the voices of the people most affected by an issue increases the story's authenticity and relevance. Including quotes, testimonials, eyewitness accounts, and personal narrative makes the story more interesting.

### The Power of the Pause

Varying the rhythm of your tale provides your audience with critical space to process the story, connect it to their own experiences, arrive at judgments and serves to better punctuate your points.

### The Power of Pictures

It is true that a picture paints a thousand words and can more quickly translate concepts and

ideas to diverse audiences. From the use of narrative description and photographs to the utilization of video and information graphics, imagery sells your story.

### The Power of Prologue

A frequent dilemma when telling a story for social impact is balancing the need to set context (the policy environment, issue history, disclosure of conflicts of interest, etc.) with the need to tell a good story. By utilizing a brief preamble, the story teller can provide critical information and clarify their role and position.

### The Power of Proposition

While great fiction may leave the audience hanging, story tellers for social change need to close the deal with a call to action. By clearly articulating what you want people to do, your story can serve as a provocative request or a welcome invitation.

### The Power of Persuasion

When telling a story with the goal of persuading others to take action, reminding ourselves of Persuasive Writing 101 can help strengthen our argument. A quick refresh on the basics: establish a clear premise; identify the most salient, evocative and verifiable proof points; expose and dispel the arguments counter to your position; tally a

concluding score card that makes your point; and make the close with a call to action that returns to your premise.

### The Power of Presence

The most effective messengers, and thus the most powerful medium for story telling, are

### The Power of Pitfalls

There are three pitfalls that kill any story: being patronizing, pandering, or pedantic. And to avoid the risk of doing any of the above, I will let them speak for themselves.

people. This is why grassroots organizing is such an imperative tool for social organizing. People listen to people with whom they have a relationship of trust—their neighbors, co-workers, fellow congregants, friends, etc. Thus, the best stories are told in person, and great story tellers make sure that they are fully present. They establish eye contact, engage in dialogue rather than monologue, listen to and incorporate the experience of their audience into their story, and truly make a personal connection to the audience. If you are going to tell a story to a live audience by rote, don't bother, just send the video.

### So, how do we put these principles to use?

As social entrepreneurs, we often have seats at the decision-making tables that drive strategy and messages. We can increase the efficacy of our narrative if we take a moment to ask:

- What is the human story here?
- What is a shared experience that connects stakeholders?
- What are the core elements (plot, theme, moral of the story, etc.)?
- Which of the thirteen Ps help best tell this story?

There is no formula. Rather, there are questions and principles that can help us make the choice to tell a story and to be great storytellers. Humans have always used stories to make sense of our world. From the powerful Greek political dramas of Euripides to the statecraft and stagecraft of modern politics, stories shape our worldview and tip the scales on nearly every issue. We all benefit if we stop to hear what people are really asking us; “Please, tell me a story.”



**Eric Friedenwald-Fishman** is the creative director/president of Metropolitan Group, a leading social marketing firm with offices in Chicago, Portland, OR, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. He is the co-author of *Marketing That Matters* (Berrett & Koehler), which has been translated into six languages; the primary author of MG's *Public Will Building Framework: An Approach for Sustainable Social Change*; and co-author of MG's article “Relevance, Relationships and Results: Eight Principles for Effective Multicultural Communication.”



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