

BEST PRACTICES FOR IDENTIFYING AND WORKING WITH STORYTELLERS



WHY DOES STORYTELLING MATTER?

Storytelling, or intentionally sharing personal anecdotes that illustrate the problem at hand and/or potential solutions, is a crucial component of any strong campaign. To put it simply, storytelling is what makes connections that data alone can't. Your audience can find pieces of themselves or a loved one within a person's story. A strong story can spark action, driving those already embedded in your campaign to recommit to the fight and even persuade those who haven't yet been convinced to support your cause.

Data paired with anecdotes make a compelling story, regardless of your audience. That's the beauty of storytelling – it's universal. While some stories will resonate more with one audience than another, stories change hearts and minds because they help us bridge divides and recognize commonalities in the human experience. We can put ourselves in another person's shoes and recognize the need for change.

HOW DO I IDENTIFY STORYTELLERS?

The best way to identify storytellers is to consider the people you serve and work with. Often, the people who volunteer for your organization or even work within your organization are driven to do so due to their personal experiences. That said, not everyone is comfortable being a storyteller for all audiences. It's important to get an understanding of who is open to being a storyteller and under what circumstances. Often, this is accomplished by inviting people to complete a survey or participate in an interview.

Some questions to consider when compiling a survey or interview questions include:

- What brought you to this issue or program?
- Are you interested in sharing your story publicly? If so, why? What do you want people to know? What do you hope to see as a result?
- Who, if anyone, do you want to hear your story?
- What are you comfortable sharing publicly about your story?
- What about yourself are you comfortable sharing publicly?
- Do you prefer to communicate via phone, Zoom, writing, or in person? Is there a form of communication you're uncomfortable with?
- What are your preferred methods of contact?



TIP: Anonymity is always an option. While it's compelling to have someone share their story personally, it's most important that the story is shared. That means that someone else can share a story, with the storyteller's approval, to ensure anonymity. Additionally, media interviews can be conducted on the condition of anonymity or under the requirement of a pseudonym. If that is of interest, anonymity conditions must be agreed upon, ideally in writing, *ahead of the interview*. We also recommend working with a trusted journalist and ensuring that you or an advocate for the storyteller joins the interview to serve as an additional layer of security — pushing back against unfair questions or stepping in to prevent retraumatization for the storyteller.

HOW DO I WORK WITH STORYTELLERS?

When working with storytellers, it's crucial to recognize that their story is deeply personal and perhaps challenging for them to share with you and others — even if they're eager to do so. Because their story is so personal, the goal is always for the storyteller to speak on their own behalf if they're comfortable doing so. We recommend creating a bank (e.g., a simple spreadsheet, a chart, a list, etc.) of storytellers you can go back to regularly throughout the campaign. This "storyteller bank" would include information from the intake survey or interview, such as the topics they're eager to speak about, their anonymity needs, the representatives for their district, and their preferred methods of contact and communication.

Importantly, agreeing once to a story does not mean the storyteller will always be comfortable sharing their story with any given audience at any given time. Before engaging a storyteller or their story, always check in with them to ensure they're comfortable with how their story is being shared, the tone, the audience, the circumstances, and the timing. Avoid being extractive of someone else's story and give the storyteller the microphone whenever possible.

WAYS TO USE A STORY BANK

- **Legislative meetings.** Bringing storytellers to meetings with lawmakers, especially if they are the lawmakers' constituents, can be particularly compelling.
- **Press coverage and statements.** Having a storyteller sign an op-ed, LTE, or a statement within a press release has a powerful impact. Press interviews for written, radio, or television coverage always benefit from a compelling story shared by someone with lived experience — and is often a perspective journalists are eager to hear.
- **Social media.** You can consider creating brief social media videos of a storyteller sharing their story, quote graphics and/or pictures, brief statements, or even social media “takeovers” (where the storyteller posts from your organization’s social media page for a given day).
- **Email.** Newsletters and other email communication can be made more interesting when a real story is shared. You can embed videos in an email, share pictures, or have the storyteller sign a brief statement within the email.
- **In-person events.** At rallies, convenings, press events, or community gatherings (e.g., with a local faith community) having a storyteller share their experiences grounds the conversation in what truly matters. It can be energizing, inspiring, and compelling to audience members and journalists who capture the moment.
- **Storyteller’s choice!** If there is a creative approach to storytelling the storyteller is particularly interested in, lean into that. It’s important that they feel safe and empowered when sharing their stories. For example, if a storyteller is an artist and feels most comfortable sharing their story through a mural or a series of sidewalk chalk drawings, help them take the required steps to make that happen in a strategic place. Consider how to work that into your social media, press outreach, or even in-person meetings with lawmakers as a way to share someone’s story in the way that makes them feel most comfortable.

