



**CENTER FOR
PUBLIC INTEREST
COMMUNICATIONS**
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA



**Council on
Foundations**

Sector Survey Results: Identifying Current Storytelling Practices

Created by the Center for Public Interest Communications

Introduction

In the first phase of this research, [“Better Stories. Better Language.”](#) we identified a narrative vacuum around philanthropy. We found positive and negative stories about individual foundations from news outlets, activists, and even from foundations themselves. But what was missing was a clear sector-wide storytelling practice that explained what foundations actually do. This lack of a shared narrative creates a vacuum that makes it hard for people to understand what foundations do and leaves the door open for harmful narratives to spread from individual foundations to the sector as a whole.

Recognizing that storytelling is a major communication and strategy function in the philanthropic space, we started our second phase of research with a survey of the sector. We wanted to understand how foundation teams and communicators who work with foundations think about storytelling now, how they approach it, and what they need to tell better stories that build trust in foundations both at the individual and sector-wide levels. Using a “snowball sampling” approach where respondents shared the survey with other folks working in this space, we were able to get 77 full responses about the current state of philanthropic storytelling. The following document highlights the main insights from this method and presents the results of this survey within the context of the questions.

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Topline Insights

1. **Practitioners frequently incorporate storytelling into their work, and three in four respondents say they want to use more stories in their strategic communication.**

78% of respondents said they use stories at least once per month: 32.9% said they use storytelling in almost everything they put out, 12.2% said weekly, and 32.9% said about once a month. Only 1.3% said they never include stories in their work.

2. **Practitioners use stories that highlight collective action and show systems in action, showing movement away from the single-hero story.**

Survey respondents had an opportunity to select multiple reasons for why they tell stories. The most selected option was “to demonstrate the importance of our priority issues” (67.1%), but the two other options selected by more than half of the respondents were focused on sharing the voices of people closest to the situation (56.6%) and to highlight collective action to address a shared concern (55.3%).

Additionally, the top three selections for “who are your stories about?” were directly affected people (64.5%), grantees and partners (51.3%), and community leaders (47.4%). All of the other responses were selected by fewer than 40% of the respondents. Slightly more than a third of people said they told stories about people working in their organization. Our other methods found that telling stories that include the people making decisions inside foundations is a major opportunity for providing more transparency in the work and increasing trust in foundations.

3. **Our sector’s storytellers need more resources—including time, funds, and staffing—to do this work effectively.**

Only 47.4% of the survey respondents said they felt supported in their storytelling work; a surprisingly low number considering the increased focus on storytelling and narrative change in the philanthropic sector. When we asked respondents what they need most to expand their storytelling capacity, the biggest response was staff or partners with storytelling skills (22.4%), followed by write-in responses (15.8%) like funding, time, and tools to support others to tell their stories. Additionally, respondents who noted that their leadership had bought into storytelling said they had not received the funding to make it possible. One response encapsulates the importance of more institutional support: “Authentic, non-extractive storytelling requires significantly more investment than communications department infrastructure/budgets typically accommodate.”

4. **The sector needs better metrics to help align its storytelling goals with its communication goals.**

We saw multiple responses noting that showing the value of storytelling to leadership and funders was difficult. Traditional metrics like engagement and placement can be great benchmarks, but what are the deeper evaluation points to showcase effective change? A

response to our question about stories they've had success with noted that while they of course want readership and viewership of the stories they share, they didn't want it to be the sole metric. They go on to say, "We also want to make sure that the subjects of the story feel empowered throughout the process and feel seen and heard through the final pieces. That comes through having them make decisions throughout the process. We're constantly challenging ourselves to evaluate how we determine what is a successful story." Future phases of this work should build new metrics that provide a fuller picture of how storytelling and change are linked for people inside and outside of foundations.

Survey Method and Information About the Sample

From June 23 to August 27, 2023, the research team conducted a five-minute Qualtrics survey of the sector using "snowball sampling" — a process that asks respondents to share the survey with others, relying on networks to collect responses. We distributed the survey to foundation, nonprofit, and social change communications practitioners through the Communications Network, Free-Range Thinking, and the frank gathering community. At the end of the survey, respondents were given the option to recommend other survey participants by emailing the research team.

We collected 77 fully completed responses from participants aged 18 and above living and working in the United States. We asked respondents to share what type of organization they worked for, the size of their teams, and whether they are based or work in rural communities. For organizations type, 21.1 % said communication agency, 18.4% community foundation, 18.4% private foundation, 15.8% freelance/consultant, 3.9% family foundation, 1.3% corporate foundation, and 21.1% Other (61% of "other" responses did not specify further; those that did included private schools, intermediary organizations, public universities, and nonprofits.).

For communications team size, most respondents were on 1 to 2-person teams (45%). 25% said they were on teams of 3 to 5, 14% said 6 to 10, 16 % said more than 10. Additionally, 17.1% of respondents said they use a communications agency, outside consultants, or freelancers. And 5.3% said they had no dedicated employees devoted to communications and had no contracted communications support. Only 3.9% of respondents worked in rural areas as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service¹. We also asked what type of areas their projects fund: 67.1% said urban, 13.2% said suburban, 6.6% said rural, and 13.2% did not respond.

¹ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural>

We used the following descriptor in the survey: "Rural areas consist of open countryside with population densities less than 500 people per square mile and places with fewer than 2,500 people."

Survey Questions and Survey Data

The following section includes all the questions we asked participants and the cleaned data in table form. We included the responses to questions with fill-in boxes with identifying information removed. Some of the questions do not have data with them because they were questions used to determine eligibility, or they included identifying information.

Q1: Are you 18 years old or older?

Part of the participant informed consent for this survey was that participants be older than 18. This question was used to remove respondents who did not meet this requirement.

Q2: Do you live and work in the United States for a U.S.-based organization?

Since this was a survey about the storytelling practices of U.S. philanthropic organizations, part of the participant informed consent for this survey was that participants work for a U.S. organization and live in the U.S. This question was used to remove respondents who did not meet this requirement.

Q3: What type of organization do you work for?

Communication Agency	21.1%
Community Foundation	18.4%
Private Foundation	18.4%
Freelance/Consultant	15.8%
Family Foundation	3.9%
Corporate Foundation	1.3%
Other	21.1%

61% of “other” responses did not specify further; those that did included private schools, intermediary organizations, public universities, and nonprofits.

Q4: What is the size of the communications team at your organization? (Please choose all those that apply.)

1 to 2	45%
3 to 5	25%
6 to 10	14%
More than 10	16%

	% Yes	% No
Our organization employs a communications agency, outside consultants or freelancers	17.1%	82.9%
There are no dedicated employees devoted to communications and we DO NOT have others contracted to help	5%	94.7%

Q5: Is your organization located in a rural area as defined by the USDA? Definition: “rural areas consist of open countryside with population densities less than 500 people per square mile and places with fewer than 2,500 people.”

Yes	3.9%
No	94.7%
Don't Know	1.3%

Q6: Primarily, what type of area are the projects you fund or work on?

Urban	67.1%
Suburban	13.2%
Rural	6.6%
No Response	13.2%

Q7: Which of the following are goals for your organization’s communications efforts? (Please choose all that apply.)

	% Yes	% No	No Answer
Build our organization’s profile and brand in the	72.4%	19.7%	7.9%
Help people understand what we do	67.1%	25.0%	7.9%
Raise awareness about priority issues	56.6%	35.5%	7.9%
Lift up the work of our grantees or partners	55.3%	36.8%	7.9%
Build our organization’s reputation	52.6%	36.8%	10.5%

Build support for solutions	52.6%	39.5%	7.9%
Place stories in our prioritized media outlets	50.0%	42.1%	7.9%
Enact change in the priority issues we address	50.0%	42.1%	7.9%
Help decision-makers in our priority issues understand the lived experience of people affected	50.0%	42.1%	7.9%
Put our strategic messaging out in the world	46.1%	46.1%	7.9%
Differentiate ourselves from other organizations	43.4%	48.7%	7.9%
Help potential grantees understand our funding priorities	40.8%	51.3%	7.9%
Support fundraising efforts for our organization	38.2%	53.9%	7.9%
Other	9.2%	82.9%	7.9%

There was no overlap among the seven “other” responses which included: Convince families to use our free services; educate about how to operate in the nonprofit sector; help shift outdated grant and power dynamics; increase fear, concern, and worry; donor engagement with living donor; narrative mindset; tools for internal buy-in.

Q8: Which of the following metrics does your organization track? (Please choose all that apply.)

	% Yes	% No	No Answer
Engagement on social media platforms	77.6%	10.5%	11.8%
Website traffic or downloads	72.4%	15.8%	11.8%
Mentions in traditional media outlets	64.5%	23.7%	11.8%
The number of stories created by your organization shared on your organization’s platforms	46.1%	42.1%	11.8%
Public speeches given by senior leaders	44.7%	43.4%	11.8%
TV appearances by senior leaders	42.1%	46.1%	11.8%
Other	17.1%	71.1%	11.8%

There was no overlap among the eight “other” responses, which included Blogs and webinars produced; inbound media requests; inclusion of narrative themes by leaders and grantees; radio interviews and podcast appearances; topic area mentions; video engagement; varies depending on the project; none.

Q9: How frequently do you incorporate stories into your work?

Almost everything we put out in our communications has a story as a component	32.9%
Weekly	12.2%
Occasionally - about once a month	32.9%
Only in our annual report	2.6%
We do not include stories	1.3%
No answer	17.1%

Q10: Which of the following describe the purpose of the stories you tell? (Please choose all that apply.)

	% Yes	% No	No Answer
To demonstrate the importance of our priority issues	67.1%	13.2%	19.7%
To share the voices of people who are most affected by the problem	56.6%	22.4%	19.7%
To highlight collective action in response to a problem	55.3%	25.0%	19.7%
To show systems at work and how those systems were put in place	44.7%	35.5%	19.7%
To demonstrate our organization's value	43.4%	36.8%	19.7%
To showcase wins (of both foundation or grantee partners)	43.4%	36.9%	19.7%
To help us fundraise	38.2%	40.8%	19.7%
To display solutions to problems that have worked elsewhere	38.2%	42.1%	19.7%
To build our organization's reputation	35.5%	44.7%	19.7%
To build transparency about the decisions we make	34.2%	46.1%	19.7%
To highlight the needs of our organization	26.3%	53.9%	19.7%
To show that anyone can make it if they work hard enough	19.7%	60.5%	19.7%
To show that anyone can make it if given some help from our organization	19.7%	60.5%	19.7%
We do not use stories	11.8%	68.4%	19.7%
Other	10.5%	69.7%	19.7%

There was no overlap among the four “other” responses: Increase fear, concern, and worry; to convince other families to use our free services; to show anyone can make gifts and have the power to transform through those gifts; we don't use stories effectively and consistently nor do we use them intentionally, it is very ad hoc.

Q11: Who are your stories about? (Please choose all that apply).

	% Yes	% No	No Answer
Directly affected people	64.5%	15.8%	19.7%
Grantees/partners	51.3%	28.9%	19.7%
Community leaders	47.4%	32.9%	19.7%
Experts in the field	39.5%	40.8%	19.7%
People working in your organization	36.8%	43.4%	19.7%
Your team members	26.3%	53.9%	19.7%
Your executive leadership	23.7%	56.6%	19.7%
Funders	18.4%	61.8%	19.7%
Program teams	18.4%	61.8%	19.7%
Founders	6.6%	73.7%	19.7%
We do not use stories	1.3%	78.9%	19.7%
Other	5.3%	75.0%	19.7%

There was no overlap among the four “other” responses: people using our programs, projects/animals not people, real and potential harm; volunteers.

Q12: Who usually makes decisions about which details are included in the stories that are told by your organization? (Please choose only those that apply.)

	% Yes	% No	No Answer
Communications team	65.8%	14.5%	19.7%
Organizational leadership	53.9%	26.3%	19.7%
Story-owner	40.8%	39.5%	19.7%
Directly affected people	27.6%	52.6%	19.7%
Consultants or producers	18.4%	61.8%	19.7%
External grantees	15.8%	63.2%	21.3%
We do not use stories	1.3%	78.9%	19.7%

Q13: Who usually makes decisions about whose voices are present in the stories told by your organization?

Question 13 did not make it into the final survey. It was a “choose only those that apply” style question similar to question 12. Since it was not included, there is no data for this question.

Q14: What do you need most to expand your storytelling capacity?

Staff or partners with storytelling skills	22.4%
Storytelling strategy guides	13.2%
Tools for getting internal buy-in	7.9%
Tools for getting external buy-in from funders	6.6%
Tools for storytelling	6.6%
We do not use stories	1.3%
Other	15.8%
No Response	26.3%

Other Responses

As a funder, we have a good system for storytelling internally and externally

Access to RPs ("real people") using the programs

Because we are a pass through organization, we don't have direct access to individuals or communities directly impacted by issues or solutions

Funding to hire strong storytellers

i think there's a lag in understanding what this is, why do it, how much it costs, how it compares to other PIC approaches, etc - beyond 'story time magical thinking'

methods for identifying and connecting with subjects of stories

More resources? I feel like we're at capacity from a staffing / editorial perspective

More time in the day to incorporate storytelling strategies

tangible bad outcomes and real harm

This should be a "choose all that apply" question because it is not just one thing that's needed. It's first an understanding of the importance of stories and sharing them beyond just internally. then it is how to use those stories strategically and intentionally. So, we need tools for raising awareness/understanding of the importance of stories; getting internal buy-in, tools for storytelling and strategy guides; staff with stronger storytelling skills. it's not a choose only 1 challenge.

time and talent

tools to support others (including marginalized ppl) to tell their stories

Q15: Do you feel supported in including storytelling in your work?

Yes	47.4%
Somewhat	23.7%
No	5.3%
No Response	23.7%

Q15B: [If Somewhat or No above] Why do you feel that way about support?

As a one-person company, it's up to me to find and craft meaningful stories/examples.

As the sole communications person, I generally can go in whatever direction I deem most appropriate. I've also been able to do professional development in the storytelling field via the Goodman Center. What I feel is lacking is the ability to brainstorm with others to make my stories more compelling, as well as the ability to have others create stories. They're very time-consuming and I often have to prioritize getting the bulk of my work down vs. writing one story.

Authentic non-extractive storytelling requires significantly more investment than communications department infrastructure/budgets typically accommodate.

Execs don't always understand the value

Folks need more understanding about the role of stories and how to use them not just for branding the organization but how you do it.

Hard to quantify the impact and feels like a longer term strategy than others

i think people like the product and appreciate it but often work with clients who think it is 'nice for the annual report' as opposed to a guiding value in PIC

I work collaboratively with other smart folks trying to navigate narrative shifts and strategy, always room to grow!

I'm encouraged to leverage stories, but not given the budget to do so in widely compelling way.

It's complicated. Our college has an outstanding communications team but in order to give them stories, I need more time & support.

Leadership doesn't understand what storytelling is. Often, they feel that highlighting one person, or a couple people, is exploitive. They often feel they need to highlight their work or a key partner rather than the individuals that work impacts. In short, they don't understand what storytelling or how it's impactful. When we step up to storytelling that features the people directly affected, they routinely get cold feet and retreat to the safety of communications devices that talk about the problem and solution rather than show it, which from their perspective is safer ground.

Limited comms. Interest in it but not a big focus.

No dedicated staff, also would love to have examples of "good" stories to have a mental model of what to strive for

See my previous "other" answer. Leadership thinks they know what storytelling is or the importance of it, but they don't and they don't understand the importance of communications' role with storytelling, so they designate comms to administrative/operational work and yet say they need to do storytelling.

Sometimes funding is more important than the need to create a story so it might not be as supported as other projects

There are higher priorities in our outreach efforts

There is staff and consultant support for storytelling but it could be bolstered by added strategic tactics and tools.

We are a small communications team so it's sometimes difficult to find subjects of stories, craft a story, and effectively promote it just based on capacity. It's not always a top priority for other departments.

We have little to no budget or agency in decision making. Staff don't understand communications work and it creates tensions within the organization due to competing priorities and scarce resources and unclear roles/decision making power.

Q16: Are you interested in including more stories in your work?

Yes	75.0%
No	1.3%
No Response	23.7%

Q16B: [If Yes above] Please specify how you would like to include story in your work?

All the ways - all of my work is storytelling / in comms

Balance the data we provide to board and community members with stories that amplify the voices of lived experience with the issues we're trying to solve.

can't do - this is secret

Demonstrate systems-level interventions and the impact on people

direct voices, less experts, but this is a constant balance.

Examples of how orgs are valuing volunteers in holistic ways...telling stories of the org, volunteer, and/or community server's experience

for me, this would look like getting the voices of client orgs' partners and grassroots level participants' stories closer to the center of conversations about their work, and a little more playfulness/less control around tone and voice

highlighting more unique voices and regional examples

Highlighting the wins of grantees

Humanizing our work

I want to use stories to allow the public to understand that parenting education is health promoting, should not be stigmatized, and truly makes a difference in not only the lives of parents, but also their children. It's a story of preventing and healing from trauma and creating community.

I would love to focus more on outcomes and personal impact, rather than just "telling" how our org supports the community

I'd like to include more personal stories of people who are using the library (we are a library support org) to show that ultimate impact

In all aspects of the work. With all team members.

In service of a broader narrative change effort

In the ways previously mentioned

Incorporate to be more creative

maybe especially in speeches and interviews

More examples of how our work is leading to better outcomes for targeted populations.

more knowledge and understanding

more strategically

more time for in-depth story telling

Mostly on our website. We have a lot of opportunity to better communicate our story via storytelling

Perhaps more brief, personal features on website or social media; more in annual report, etc.

Rely more on human stories than on research and data/facts and figures

Sharing best practices with other communities

Showcasing solutions and the people advancing them

Solutions, People along with animals

Storytelling should be the leading tactic for pretty much every major project or initiative we do. It's the only way we can connect with potential solution providers in a way that connects with them emotionally, makes them care about the issue, and motivate them to take action. Without storytelling, we're only able to effectively communicate with the people who are already engaged, already care, and are already seeking solutions. We're losing out on the opportunities to bring in fresh voices, innovative ideas, and new decision-makers to our movement.

Telling better stories across teams within the organization to ensure even those whose primary job is not about telling stories understand how all the pieces connect to each part of our work

telling more kinds of stories, engaging more contributors, leveraging different types of media for storytelling

To better showcase what our organization does and how it enacts change on the projects we are involved in. Also showcasing wins

to create emotion and drive action through media coverage, social media posts, video, fundraising

To enact change

To help people understand the potential benefits

Trainings for donor engagement. Better use of our website.

Unsure, perhaps more for grant writing

We can always include more stories to bring heart to our issues

We compile Impact Stories from ... but I lack time to compile and share them 😞

We tie most things to stories, but sometimes it's hard to get really robust stories from the field back to our communications team

web, social media, annual report, presentations, etc

Q17: What stories have you had success with?

"Success" is an interesting word and one that we are challenged with in our evaluations. One way we gauge success is through metrics, but we don't want that to be the only metric. Of course we want good readership or viewership, and we also want to make sure that the subjects of the story feel empowered throughout the process and feel seen and heard through the final pieces. That comes through having them make decisions throughout the process. We're constantly challenging ourselves to evaluate how we determine what is a successful story.

Capturing the impact of our decisions from supporter and grantee work

Charismatic megafauna

I'm not sure we've been able to connect results to stories we've shared

Mostly ones that are the story of an organizations learning journey.

N/A

Not a whole lot with funders

people affected by the issues

People love to hear a cliché story about a single mom who grew up in difficult, chaotic circumstances, but through parenting education realizes that there are other paths to parenting. This is a great, but ultimately, limiting story.

Personal stories of how people have come to this work and/or how the work has made a difference in their lives

Re-sharing stories that are told in the story-owner's own words - often re-sharing from their own accounts.

Stories about current students and stories about successful alumni

stories about directly-affected people are most valued by our target audiences

stories of those directly impacted by philanthropy are most relatable (and measurements confirm this).

Stories of why people support us, stories of impact, stories of why we do our work

Success stories of how we assisted NPOs

There are a few news articles on our website that we were pleased with

Training is those with lived experience

video interviews regarding housing-related issues seem to have been successful.

Videos, client testimonials, grantee spotlights

We did a story about creating a community garden in an underserved urban area that got lots of social media traction and was able to give a spotlight to community leaders that had been trying to create other community uplifting projects like this but lacked the support or financial means to do so.

We did a video ... It was a great example of starting with someone's aspirations and using the actual policy for context to show how it helped them reach their aspirations.

We make videos for each of our grantees. [example provided]

Q18: Optional: Can you let us know of anyone in the sector or who has worked in the sector who you think would be interested in taking this survey and being connected to the project? If so, please email recommendations to [the research team].

Q19: If you'd like to give us permission to quote and identify your responses in our reports, please enter your name, email and where you work below.

We will not share your name or email with any third parties. If you do not want to, you can choose “I do not wish to provide any of these right now.”

- Name (1)
- Email (2)
- Where you work (10)
- I do not wish to provide any of these right now (11)