Washington Women in Public Relations

Building Your Story Bank: Where to Find Stories and How to Capture Them

WWPR Nonprofit Communications Toolkit

*This resource is the fifth in the **WWPR Nonprofit Communications Toolkit**, a year-long series of practical guides designed specifically for small to mid-sized nonprofits working with limited staff and budgets. Each guide is designed to be immediately implementable without prior communications experience or expensive tools.*

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Introduction: Every Organization Has a Story

Uncover your organization's best stories to boost visibility, expand influence, and inspire action.

Every organization has meaningful stories to share. They are the heartbeat of your work, connecting people to your mission and reminding them why it matters. Yet for many nonprofit and association teams, especially small ones, finding and capturing those stories consistently feels like one more thing on an already demanding list.

You already know how powerful stories are. They build understanding, strengthen trust, and remind your audiences why your work matters, turning passive audiences into passionate advocates. A single story told well can do what a year of press releases cannot: move someone to give, volunteer, champion, or simply pay attention.

The challenge is not that organizations lack stories. The challenge is building a system to find them, capture them, and keep them flowing even when your team is small, your bandwidth is limited, and storytelling competes with every other organizational priority.

This toolkit is designed to help communications professionals do exactly that, and create emotional, relatable narratives that will inspire action.

The Nonprofit Story Bank Toolkit

Quick Start	*Grab a notebook or open a doc and jot down ideas as you go through this guide. Do not overthink it. Small wins and real moments often turn into the most powerful PR opportunities.*

This guide addresses the following:

- Why stories matter more than statistics
- The five places to look for compelling stories inside your organization
- Practical, low-lift systems for capturing narratives year-round
- The anatomy of a story worth telling
- How to evaluate whether a story has media potential
- Ethical storytelling principles every team should follow

Work through it at your own pace. Return to specific sections when you need a fresh batch of ideas. And remember: the best story bank is one that grows a little every week, not one you build in a single afternoon.

Why Stories Matter More Than Statistics

Research consistently demonstrates that a narrative is a more effective vehicle for persuasion and retention than data presentation alone. According to Braddock and Dillard (2016), narrative communications can be up to 22 times more memorable than facts presented without a story context. This advantage is especially significant for mission-driven organizations that rely on public trust, donor investment, and stakeholder engagement.

For nonprofits and associations, the communications challenge extends beyond product promotion. Organizations are asking audiences to believe in a mission, invest in a community, and trust that the organization is the appropriate vehicle for the investment. As of 2025, there are approximately 1.9 million registered nonprofits in the United States that feed, heal, shelter, educate, and inspire people of every demographic (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2024). In this crowded landscape, stories are the primary mechanism through which organizations differentiate themselves and build lasting credibility.

Uri Hasson, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Princeton University and a neuroscientist whose work is highly relevant to storytelling and communications, has demonstrated through neuroimaging research that storytelling produces measurable effects on brain activity and retention. Specifically, his research indicates that a story activates parts of the brain that allow the listener to convert narrative into their own ideas and experiences. While the processing of facts engages only two areas of the brain, a well-told story engages many areas simultaneously. Furthermore, when the brain experiences an emotionally charged event and anticipates resolution, it releases dopamine — a neurochemical that enhances memory retention and accuracy.

Stories DO	***Stories DON'T***
• Create emotional connections between your mission and the people who can support it.	• Rely on data without a human face to accompany it.
• Build credibility that no statistic, report, or press release can replicate.	• Speak in program language when plain, personal language would land harder.
• Help donors, policymakers, and partners understand the human stakes of your work.	• Wait for the perfect story when a small, honest moment will do.
• Sustain engagement across channels including social media, email, events, and media.	• Underestimate the power of your own team's lived experience.

The organizations that appear consistently in media coverage, in donor awareness, and in community discourse are not necessarily the largest or best-funded. They are the ones who have developed the capacity to tell their stories with clarity, confidence, and consistency. This is a learnable skill that improves with practice and with the right organizational systems supporting it.

Where to Look for Stories

Compelling stories can be found in five key areas within any organization. Each source requires a slightly different approach, but together they provide a steady, renewable pipeline of narrative material. The following sections present story prompts and questions to help communications professionals identify, surface, and develop story ideas from each source.

1. The People You Serve

The most powerful stories in any nonprofit organization belong to the people the mission exists to support. These are the stories of transformation: before and after, struggle and growth, or challenge and possibility. They represent what donors fund, what policymakers need to hear, and what the media most wants to tell.

Recommended story prompts include the following:

- Who has experienced a meaningful change because of the organization's programs or services?
- What was at stake for them before connecting with the organization?
- What specific moment marked a turning point in their experience?
- What does their life, work, or opportunity look like now?
- Would they be willing to share their story, and in what format?

Ethical Note	*Always lead with dignity. Every person whose story is shared is a full human being, not a symbol of need.*

2. Your Staff and Volunteers

The individuals who carry out an organization's mission on a daily basis represent a significant storytelling resource. Their motivations, experiences, and behind-the-scenes perspectives reveal the organizational culture and commitment that differentiate one nonprofit from another. These stories humanize the organization's public presence and contribute to internal morale and staff engagement.

Recommended story prompts include the following:

- Why did this person choose to work or volunteer with this organization?
- What moment made the mission feel most real to them?
- What does a typical day look like, and what is quietly extraordinary about it?
- What have they witnessed that surprised, moved, or changed them?
- What do they wish the public understood about the work?

3. Your Programs and Milestones

Every organizational program generates data, and behind every data point is a human story. Anniversaries, funding milestones, new initiatives, advocacy actions, and program expansions are all narrative opportunities that can be framed for various audiences and channels.

Recommended story prompts include the following:

- What program milestone is approaching, such as an anniversary, a participant count, or a geographic expansion?
- What problem did this program solve that did not have a solution before?
- What has surprised you about how the program has evolved?
- Who was the first person served by this program, and where are they now?
- What would not exist in this community if the organization had not acted?

4. Your Community and Partners

Nonprofit organizations do not operate in isolation. The partnerships built, coalitions joined, and community contexts navigated are all sources of storytelling material. These stories expand organizational reach, demonstrate credibility, and position the organization as a connector and collaborator within the sector.

Recommended story prompts include the following:

- Which partnership has created an outcome neither organization could have achieved independently?
- How has the community context, including policy, demographics, or economic conditions, shaped organizational priorities?
- Who in the organization's network has a story that connects to the mission?
- What would community leaders say about the gap the organization fills?
- What challenge is being faced collectively that the public should know about?

5. The Organization's Own Journey

The founding story, organizational evolution, periods of difficulty, and moments of achievement are all components of a larger institutional narrative that merits telling. Organizational stories build institutional credibility and provide audiences with a sense of legacy, progress, and purpose.

Recommended story prompts include the following:

- Why was this organization founded, and what was the moment that identified the need?
- What is the most significant change the organization has navigated?
- What lesson was learned the hard way that shaped current operations?
- What does this organization stand for that most people do not know?
- Where is the organization headed, and why does it matter now?

How to Capture Stories: Systems That Work for Small Teams

Even the most compelling story ideas will not surface without intentional systems to identify them. The following approaches are designed to make storytelling a natural, low-effort component of organizational operations rather than a special project requiring dedicated sprints. Most of these systems require fewer than 30 minutes to set up. The primary discipline is in returning to them consistently.

Sit In on Team Meetings

Communications professionals who join program, fundraising/development, operations, mission, or partnerships meetings on a monthly basis will regularly encounter informal updates that represent strong story leads. Staff members often mention participant breakthroughs, funder responses, or community challenges in passing. These offhand observations are frequently the seeds of the most compelling organizational narratives. Communications staff should attend with a notes app open and capture any detail that produces an emotional response.

Some organizations open monthly staff meetings or town halls with a designated "mission moment." These brief shares represent an efficient opportunity to capture stories suitable for media interviews, blog posts, or podcast appearances. Additionally, grant interim reports submitted to foundations and donors often require personal narratives from program participants and represent an additional source of story material.

Create a Monthly Story Share Communication

A short email or internal Slack/Teams message to staff monthly with two or three prompts drawn will surface material that would not otherwise be reported through formal channels. Staff should be asked to share recent wins, memorable moments, or participant interactions that stayed with them. A content calendar shared internally allows colleagues to think proactively about potential stories for time-sensitive opportunities. When stories are published, sharing them with key stakeholders and potential partners creates cross-posting opportunities that extend reach.

Sample prompts for a monthly Story Share:

- Share one moment from this month that reminded you why we do this work.
- Tell me about a participant, family, or community member who stood out to you recently.
- What is something small that happened this month that deserves more attention?
- Is there a challenge we are facing that the public does not understand but should?

Review Internal Reports

Impact metrics, client feedback forms, program notes, and staff reports represent significant untapped story resources. The goal of this review is not to identify the statistic but the story behind it. When a metric changes substantially, the follow-up question is why. When a client leaves a comment, the follow-up question is who. When a program reaches a milestone, the follow-up question is what it took to get there. The data functions as a map; the story is the destination.

Follow Staff on Social Media

Staff members frequently share personal or behind-the-scenes moments on social media platforms that could generate PR opportunities. A photograph from a site visit, a reflection following a difficult day, or a casual post about a community event can indicate stories that would not appear in an internal report. Following staff accounts provides communications professionals with an additional channel for story discovery.

Host a Quarterly Story Roundtable

Convening colleagues from different departments, including programs, public affairs/ public policy, development, communications, and operations, for approximately one hour per quarter produces story material that siloed team structures rarely surface. These conversations can be incorporated into staff retreats. Cross-departmental dialogue consistently reveals the strongest organizational narratives because participants from different vantage points perceive different dimensions of the same experiences.

Roundtable starter questions:

- What is the most interesting thing that has happened in your work this quarter?
- Who have you met recently that we should know more about?
- What challenge are we facing that is not being talked about enough?
- What would surprise our donors or supporters if they knew it?
- What moment from this quarter should we never forget?

Ask Department Leads for One Highlight a Month

Adding a standing item to monthly leadership check-ins requesting one story highlight from each department creates a reliable pipeline of narrative material. Using a shared form such as JotForm or a Wufoo form to collect these highlights produces an institutional memory that also functions as a content calendar. Posting the form on the organizational website alongside a consent and release form allows staff to direct program participants and community members to share their own stories directly.

Build a Story Tracker

A simple story tracker does not require specialized software. A shared Google Sheet, spreadsheet, or Notion page with five columns is sufficient to maintain an organized, actionable pipeline. The five recommended columns are as follows: (a) Subject — who or what the story is about; (b) Source — who flagged the story and who must be contacted; (c) Type — participant impact, staff story, milestone, partnership, or organizational journey; (d) Best channel — media pitch, blog, social media, newsletter, donor communications, or speaking opportunity; and (e) Status — idea, in development, ready to pitch, or published. The tracker should be reviewed monthly, published stories archived and the pipeline kept active.

The Anatomy of a Story Worth Telling

Not every moment becomes a story. However, those that do tend to follow a recognizable structure. Understanding that structure helps communications professionals recognize story potential when they encounter it and guide others in sharing their own narratives.

The Five Elements of a Compelling Organizational Story

Element	*What It Covers*	*Questions to Ask*
1. The Person	Who is this story about?	*Give them a name, a detail, a moment that makes them real. Who are they beyond their connection to your organization?*
2. The Challenge	What were they facing?	*What was at stake? What was the obstacle, the gap, the barrier, or the struggle? This is where empathy begins.*
3. The Turning Point	How did your organization enter?	*What changed and why? What specific action, program, or connection made the difference?*
4. The Outcome	What does transformation look like?	*Be specific. A milestone, a moment, a new possibility. Avoid vague language like 'They thrived.' Show and demonstrate it.*
5. The Connection	Why does this matter now?	*Link the story to your mission. What can the audience do: give, advocate, share, or show up?*

Once these five elements are identified, the story exists. The format — a blog post, a media pitch, a social post, a donor letter, a 60-second verbal share — is a secondary decision. Establishing the elements first ensures that the story is substantive regardless of the channel through which it is delivered.

Turning a Story Into a Media Opportunity

Not every organizational story is suitable for a media pitch, but more are than communications professionals typically assume. Once story ideas have surfaced from the story bank, four filters can be applied to assess media potential. This chart represents those filters.

Filter	What to Ask
Timely	Is this story connected to a recent event, current policy debate, seasonal moment, awareness month, or emerging trend? Timeliness is the single most important factor for media interest.
Leadership or Innovation	Does this story demonstrate something that is new, better, or different? Reporters and editors are drawn to what is working and what others should know about.
Real Impact	Does the story illustrate impact through a real person, a specific outcome, or a meaningful insight? Data without a human face rarely moves an audience.
External Curiosity	Would someone outside the organization, such as a reporter, a podcast host, or a community leader, find this genuinely interesting? If the answer is yes, it is worth pitching.

If your story meets two or three of these criteria, it warrants further development. A strong story meeting two filters is more valuable than a mediocre story meeting all four. New initiatives and grant investments are frequently covered in the media due to human-interest narratives rather than the substantive details of a program or investment.

Pro Tip	*Stories that center real people and specific outcomes consistently outperform organizational announcements, even when the announcement is significant. Leading with the human and then connecting to the institutional news is the recommended approach.*

Ethical Storytelling

Powerful storytelling carries serious ethical responsibility. The individuals whose stories are told by nonprofit organizations and associations are frequently in positions of vulnerability — as program participants, as community members navigating hardship, or as staff sharing personal experiences. How organizations handle these stories reflects directly on institutional integrity.

Four Non-Negotiable Principles

Dignity First

Every person in an organizational story is a full human being, not a symbol of need, a cautionary tale, or a fundraising mechanism. Stories that reduce individuals to their hardship without acknowledging their strength, agency, and complexity are both ethically problematic and less effective as communications tools. The most powerful stories honor the whole person. Person-first language should be used consistently to place the individual before their condition or circumstance, reducing stigma and reinforcing full humanity.

Informed Consent

Anyone whose story is shared must understand clearly how that story will be used, where it will appear, and who will see it. This includes whether the individual's full name or first name only will appear, what specific publications or platforms will publish the content (print, website, interactive map, etc.), and whether a photograph will be used. Individuals must have the genuine right to decline, and that right must be respected without pressure or consequence. Whenever possible, subjects should review the story before publication. Organizations should consult legal counsel to determine whether content applies in perpetuity or should be renewed periodically. Consent is a continuing conversation, not a one-time transaction.

Organizations should consult legal counsel as several best practices govern ethical consent in organizational communications. First, consent should not be granted in perpetuity. While few legal requirements address consent duration outside of health organizations — which must comply with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) — best practice recommends a consent window of three to five years. The Better Business Bureau (BBB) requires a minimum of three years. Practically speaking, however, using a story or image that is three to five years old in a new communications product raises questions of relevance, with the exception of historical retrospectives.

Second, organizations should provide the individual with a digital or paper copy of the consent form and a leave-behind document summarizing what was consented to, along with a point of contact should the individual wish to withdraw consent. The right to rescind is a critical component of ethical storytelling practice. Failure to uphold this standard can result in significant reputational harm to an organization.

Third, consent protocols must specifically address minor children. Minors cannot legally sign consent forms; therefore, organizations should establish a formal policy requiring that only a parent or legal guardian provide consent on a child's behalf. Teachers, camp counselors, and community leaders are not authorized signatories. As an additional best practice, adolescents ages 14 to 16 should be asked to co-sign consent forms alongside their parent or guardian. Organizations should track these assets and, when a minor reaches the age of 18, seek renewed consent if those assets remain in active use. While not a legal requirement, this practice prioritizes dignity, agency, and individual choice.

Consent is a continuing conversation, not a one-time transaction.

Accuracy and Context

Stories should never be oversimplified, sensationalized, or stripped of the contextual details that make them true. The full truth, told well, is always more powerful than a dramatic version that sacrifices accuracy for emotional impact. If the accuracy of a detail cannot be verified, it should be omitted until verification is possible.

Center the Voice

Whenever possible, individuals should speak for themselves.
The role of a communications professional or organizational leader is to amplify, not to author. Stories should be genuine, authentic, and told in the subject's own words. Communications professionals should resist the impulse to translate, polish, or editorialize to the point where the subject's voice disappears from their own narrative.

Ethical storytelling checklist — before you publish or pitch:

- Have I obtained informed consent from everyone named or identifiable in this story?
- Does this story represent the person's full humanity, not just their need or struggle?
- Have I verified the facts and avoided oversimplification?
- Does the subject know how and where this story will be used?
- Would this person be proud to see this story in print or hear it at an event?
- Am I centering their voice, or have I replaced it with my own interpretation?

Story Bank Quick-Start Plan

The following four-week plan is designed to help communications professionals establish a functioning story bank regardless of team size or prior experience. This table presents the recommended activities for each week.

Week	Your Focus
Week 1	Establish the story tracker. Review each of the five story sources. Write down three story ideas based on existing organizational knowledge — people, programs, or moments that come to mind readily. Record without filtering.
Week 2	Send the first Story Share email or internal message to staff. Use two or three prompts from this guide. See what surfaces. Add promising responses to the tracker.
Week 3	Attend one team or program meeting. Document observations that produce an emotional response (surprise, pride, sadness, inspiration, etc.) Identify one potential story for further development.
Week 4	Apply the four media pitch filters to the top story idea. Determine the appropriate channel: media pitch, blog post, social feature, or donor communication. Identify and take one step toward publication.

After 30 days, the organization will have a functioning story bank, a system for maintaining it, and at least one story ready to develop. For many organizations, this represents the communications infrastructure foundation on which all subsequent storytelling capacity is built.

"Each story we tell is a small flicker of light. Enough of them, and we set the world on fire." — Brené Brown

Your stories are already out there. This toolkit is your map to find them.

About the Author:

Lauren Lawson-Zilai is the Founder and Principal of Zeal Communications, a communications consultancy that helps mission-driven organizations and entrepreneurs amplify their impact through purposeful, results-oriented communication. Previously, she held senior leadership roles at organizations including the National Head Start Association and Goodwill Industries International, where she served as national spokesperson and led media relations, crisis communications, partnership cultivation, and multi-channel storytelling initiatives.

Lawson-Zilai is a former President of Washington Women in PR and board member, where she served for six years in roles including Pro Bono Chair and PR Woman of the Year judge. She founded the Emerging Leaders Awards, served on the WWPR Advisory Council, and is a PR Woman of the Year honoree.

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