

Cultivate Great Donor Profile Stories

The who, what,
and how of engaging
donor and gift stories

BY MEREDITH BARNETT

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LAURINDO FELICIANO



Each year, the Santa Barbara International Film Festival draws 90,000 movie buffs for an 11-day celebration of film. Behind the star-studded affair is Roger Durling, executive director of the venerable festival for more than a decade.

In 2018, Durling gave a significant gift to support the arts at his high school alma mater, the Peddie School in Hightstown, New Jersey, U.S. To share the news in its magazine or online, the school could have published a highlight reel of Durling's glowing accomplishments. But instead, the magazine told the story of how, when Durling was a Peddie student in the 1980s, he fostered a deep connection with a drama teacher who mentored him—helping a shy immigrant from Panama to find confidence and start auditioning for theater shows.

"We could have done a story that says, 'Wow, look at this donation.' But we decided instead that the

story was really about Durling's powerful experience at Peddie," says Carrie Harrington, associate editor for content strategy and editor of the *Peddie Chronicle*. "We didn't even mention the gift until the second-to-last paragraph."

Harrington's storytelling decision speaks to a challenge (and opportunity) in development communications. Stories about donors can recognize supporters and inspire philanthropy—but if not handled wisely, they can miss the mark.

"Done well, donor stories are a great way to demonstrate the health and vitality of your institution. But I've read stories that are a biography of a donor. Readers can see right through that. That's a big turn-off," says Harrington. "Our job is to tell good stories that sustain alumni affinity for the school."

Here, advancement professionals dig into the why, what, and how of donor profiles—offering five strategies to reinvigorate these stories.



The Purpose and Promise of Donor Stories

Donor stories are a mainstay in fundraising communications. Eighty-two percent of nonprofits have used storytelling in fundraising materials in the last 12 months. Published online, on social media, or in magazines or newsletters, stories are typically aimed at stewardship or cultivation, says Heath Elliott, associate dean for external affairs at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore.

“A stewardship story recognizes the reasons behind the gift, the benefits of the gift, and the impact. While it can secondarily inspire others, that shouldn’t be quite as overt,” Elliott says. “A cultivation story is leading somebody to take an action. It might not incorporate a specific ask, but it lays out the need for support. It should be inspirational.”

Research on the neuroscience of empathy and giving demonstrates how vital donor stories can be for cultivation. Stories drive altruism, according to neuroeconomist Paul Zak’s work on oxytocin, the brain chemical that promotes prosocial, empathetic behavior. In one 2009 study, Zak (director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont Graduate University) showed participants two videos: one with a story about a boy dying of cancer, and one storyless video about the same boy and his father walking in a zoo. The first video boosted participants’ oxytocin—and subjects with the highest oxytocin were, when asked, more likely to give money for cancer research. Results are similar in Zak’s many subsequent experiments, in which he showed participants public service announcements about topics such as global warming or smoking.

“Stories that sustain attention and generate emotional resonance produce post-narrative donations,”

Zak writes. “As social creatures, we are biased toward engaging with others, and effective stories motivate us to help others.”

Five Essential Storytelling Strategies

Still, donor stories are difficult to execute well. According to CASE’s Alumni Magazine Readership Survey, nearly a quarter of respondents (24%) said they’re “not at all interested” in stories about donors. Why the disconnect? Too often, donor stories don’t sustain readers’ attention or build emotional resonance, says Tracey Palmer, a long-time development writer and teacher and head of Palmer Communications.

“Most development writing is grounded in fear,” she says. “We’re afraid that we’re going to offend someone or a donor is going to take their money back or not going to give again. I understand all that, but it makes for dull, safe, vanilla, generic storytelling. How can we be fresh and cutting-edge when we’re starting from a place of fear?”

Start instead from a place of possibility. Here are five ideas from advancement professionals on how to reimagine donor profile stories.

1 Home in on emotion. Kyle Michalek graduated from Ohio University in 2007 and put his degree in engineering technology management to work by starting a drag-racing company. In August 2019, at a popular racing event, Michalek announced that he’d be giving \$100,000 to his alma mater for a scholarship—not for the engineering school, but for the College of Nursing. Why? His wife, Stephanie, a nurse and fellow graduate, had died in childbirth. This was his way to honor her.

Ohio covered the gift on its *ohiotoday.org* news site with a story that centered on how Michalek looked for hope amid tragedy.

“This story is about more than a gift,” says Jenn Bowie, assistant vice president for communication and chief of staff for university advancement. “A gift is part of this story, but this is really about human beings who are coping with a negative situation and honoring a family legacy in a special way.”

Facts about gifts are essential, but humans need emotional connections to be moved to act, says Bowie. Transportation is the word neurologists use for the emotional phenomenon that happens when we experience what someone in a story is feeling: loss,

The COVID-19 pandemic and its economic ramifications have made fundraisers’ jobs more challenging but also as critical as ever to their institutions. Find resources and guidance on how to recalibrate and respond to difficult times in the CASE Library’s Subject Guide: Fundraising in a Crisis. Find it, and other resources, on CASE’s COVID-19 Resources and Best Practices page.

See more at case.org/covidresources ➔



hope, redemption. In this way, stories form a shared experience—a connection between donors, alumni, and students—but striking the right tone can be tricky, says JHSPH's Elliott.

"Emotion is tough to get right if it comes across as less than genuine. It doesn't have to be overt," he says. "It can be subtle, about how somebody was just so moved by, say, the coaching and mentoring they received. That can resonate with so many other people."

2 Highlight impact. Impact is increasingly top-of-mind for donors around the world. According to the *2018 Global Trends in Giving Report* from the Public Interest Registry and Nonprofit Tech for Good, 60% of donors are more likely to give repeatedly if they receive regular communication about impact.

So, when Peddie's Harrington gets a request from a colleague to write a donor profile, the first thing she does is ask what impact the donor's gift made on the school.

"To me that's the story: People want to know about a particular student or students, or a program

that has benefited from that gift," Harrington says.

In 2018, Peddie's staff wanted to commemorate the 25th anniversary of a historic \$100 million gift from alumnus Walter Annenberg. To tell that story, Harrington profiled five students who had benefited from the gift and showcased what each graduate went on to do. One studied oral history in North Carolina. One started a venture capital firm to invest in Africa. One became the first in her family to go to college.

Ohio has used a similar roundtable-style approach to profile scholarship recipients. Writers on her team, as Bowie puts it, "don't write giving stories. They write impact stories."

Even if the impact of a gift hasn't been achieved yet—say, a building is still being built—or if it's not clear how funds will be used, there's still a way to tell that story. Paint a picture of the future, suggests Palmer.

"I'd give in very concrete detail what that future will look like. I'd describe that building and tell you what the students are doing inside, what it smells like, and what the sounds are like," she says.



3 Employ classic story plots. Stories—from ancient myths to literature to *Star Wars*—often fit into recognizable archetypes. According to Christopher Booker’s *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, all human tales follow one of these plots:

- Overcoming adversity
- A quest
- Rags to riches
- Tragedy
- Comedy
- Rebirth
- A voyage and return

Well-told donor stories are no exception. Take Randi Pupkin’s story. Pupkin, founder of the Baltimore nonprofit Art with a Heart, has scleroderma, a rare autoimmune disease that causes the body to produce too much collagen. Pupkin’s organization is now creating and donating nine mosaics to beautify the Johns Hopkins Scleroderma Center, where she is treated. That’s overcoming adversity.

Or the story of two University of Queensland alumni who, in their work at investment management firms, saw an underrepresentation of women

in finance. They funded nine scholarships at the Australian institution to support women in the sector. That’s a quest.

“I can’t stress enough how important story plots are,” Palmer says. “That’s what human beings respond to. All the movies and books we love, even a 20-second TikTok video: we want there to be a story arc.”

4 Rethink whom to profile—and who should write it. Amherst College’s Wade Fellowship has given 21 black alumni of the Massachusetts, U.S., college the opportunity to engage with current students. Named for Harold Wade Jr., the fellowship was created by a 1976 gift from Wade’s friends and classmates. In 2018, Amherst published a profile of Wade, “His Black History,” exploring his life, scholarship, and tragic death before his 26th birthday.

His story—recognized with a gold Circle of Excellence award for profile writing from CASE—underlines how donor stories don’t have to cover just renowned donors. Writers and fundraisers can also look beyond major donors for other subjects with stories to tell: first-time donors, alumni families, or a

person who inspired a gift. Ask questions to understand their journey—and if this donor has given significantly, don't be afraid to ask creative questions.

"If they're a major donor, they've probably been interviewed a lot," says Palmer. "Your job is to ask questions they haven't been asked before—open-ended questions that get to their emotions. But be authentic. Genuinely try to get to know them and what inspires them."

Consider, too, who can best tell that donor's story. At Ohio, many donor stories are penned by students, often from the journalism program, who work with the communications team.

"We've had students write stories about six-figure and seven-figure donors. We don't shy away from that. It's a huge win. Alumni love it and students get a lot of forgiveness," Bowie says. Coached by a staff member, students can hone their writing and get to know alumni—plus, donors will often share memories and personal details that they might not always share with staff, she adds.

5 Amp up impact with visuals. Stories have only a few moments to capture attention—and at times, visuals are the most effective way to do that.

"You have three seconds to grab someone, so your hook has to be really strong," says Palmer, who suggests starting stories right in the middle of the action. "Sometimes a story can best be told with a photo montage instead of a lot of text. I prefer to work with the creative team before I even start interviewing and writing, to see what they might have in mind."

Photos, video, and graphics give storytellers a way to unpack the complex layers of a narrative. Take Boston University's *Portrait of a Gift* video. In it, viewers learn about Harry Southerland, plumbing supervisor at the university for more than 40 years, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. His family made a gift to support Alzheimer's research. The Circle of Excellence Award-winning video captures visually and aurally—through family photos, interviews with Southerland's daughter, and footage inside the research lab—his life and legacy.

Like BU, the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health features videos about donor-funded projects or research centers, in addition to its written profile stories. Elliott's department uses video to tell the stories "that have the greatest impact—because it's a universitywide initiative or could be of interest to multiple audiences." He notes that a storyteller's toolkit should include graphics, too. "A clever infographic can also be a really powerful storytelling technique. It can visualize data or tell the story in a way that you don't have to use words. It can intrigue somebody to read the rest of the story."

Collaboration Is Key

Great donor stories are built on emotional resonance, thoughtful plot structure, and good visuals—but they're also founded on collaboration between development and communications professionals.

When frontline fundraisers and stewardship professionals come across story ideas and sources, they have to trust that communications teams will execute the stories with sensitivity and respect. On the other hand, communications teams have to have access to interview donors and, in the content creation process, "be able, as expert storytellers, to steer the story in the right direction," as Peddie's Harrington says.

To build that trust, Harrington and her communications colleagues have a kickoff meeting with the development team to brainstorm for each issue of the institution's magazine, the *Peddie Chronicle*. Similarly, Ohio's campus communicators group meets regularly to swap story ideas. In the last five years, the communications team has shown how stories about impact and emotional ties (such as family connections) have garnered good online engagement, says Bowie.

"Like everything else we do in this business, it's about developing relationships," Bowie points out. "It's about keeping those lines of communication open and including those folks when you start telling the story." ■

Meredith Barnett is CASE's digital communications manager.

Great donor stories are built on emotional resonance, thoughtful plot structure, and good visuals.