

The Communication Formula That Opens Hearts, Minds And Wallets

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Philanthropist Melinda Gates is a storyteller. “The power of stories open our hearts to a new place, which opens our minds, which leads to action,” she once said. Storytelling is front and center at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The Gates’ wanted to show the impact investments and donations were having on the global fight against poverty. This year they released an extensive report, complete with [a website](#) and [videos](#), to highlight the progress being made on sustainable development goals set forth by the United Nations. The report is called Goalkeepers: The stories behind the data.

“Bill and I love data,” Melinda says in the report’s introductory video. “The numbers matter to us. Between 1990 and today the number of people living in poverty has been cut in half. Six million fewer children die every year. Those numbers represent a lot of hard work in countries around the world.”

“But it’s tough for people to see the progress,” Bill Gates adds. “That’s why we’re zooming in on the stories behind the data. Stories of leadership, stories of the people saving and improving lives.”

Bill and Melinda Gates understand the power of story to drive action. In fact, the interest in storytelling is a growing area of research among charities looking to make an impact and attract donors on Giving Tuesday...and all year long.

“A compelling story with an emotional trigger alters our brain chemistry, making us more trusting, understanding, and open to ideas,” says neuroscientist Paul Zak. Zak has conducted experiments on charitable giving. In a remarkable series of experiments Zak discovered that higher levels of oxytocin—our social bonding molecule— is associated with significantly higher desire to give to a charitable cause. Zak’s experiments, along with the research of other scientists, concludes that hearing or seeing stories of real people who benefit from charitable giving is the single best way we have of triggering an emotional response from potential donors.

The charity, World Vision, is well aware of the power of story to trigger donations. The nonprofit is a humanitarian organization dedicated to lifting people out of poverty. The 65-year-old organization has plenty of data to make its appeal. For example, according to [its website](#), more than 41 million children and their families have benefited from public and private donations this year. It helped more than 4.6 million children and adults gain access to clean water, distributed more than 1.3 million loans to poor entrepreneurs in 31 countries and responded to 130 humanitarian emergencies. These numbers are simply too big for most people to absorb. And data isn’t emotional. [Data backed by personal stories grab our attention and elicit our empathy.](#)

World Vision’s home page and marketing material feature “Shine Bright Stories.” We learn about a young girl in Guatemala named Yenifer who used to suffer from malnutrition until they were given chickens to breed. We learn about 10-year-old Rosemary in Zambia whose family found an end to hunger through the gift of goats. Her family raised the goats, sold some off to buy fertilizer, which increased the yield of their garden. Today Rosemary is in school and pursuing a dream to become a chef. [Rosemary’s story](#), along with the others, is accompanied by photographs, videos, and testimonials.

Storytelling isn’t as pervasive among charities as you might think. Nonprofit leaders, understandably, are focused on financial performance to attract donors who want to see their money spent wisely and go directly to those in need. But more charities are finding that the right blend of data and narrative are giving them the best chance to succeed, which means helping more people.

I recently met an entrepreneur who volunteers her time at a local organization that helps abused and neglected children in a local foster care system. She brought a storyteller’s approach to raising awareness for the charity. Every year the organization hosts a live

auction. The 2017 auction was the organization's most successful fundraising event ever because, according to the volunteer, they featured the stories behind the data. For example, the attendees watched a 5-minute video of "Matthew," a young man in the foster care system who had lost his mother to a drug addiction. Matthew, his sister and father lived in a car until his father also died. The organization and its volunteers helped him through the foster system and to succeed in school. After the video, Matthew appeared on stage and gave a touching, heartfelt speech about the organization's impact on his life.

The event raised 78% more money than the year before, which will provide resources to significantly expand the program in 2018. Featuring the real people behind the data motivated people to give.

Giving Tuesday kicks off the charitable giving season. Charities that want to amplify their message this season and all year long should consider the power of story to inspire their donors.