

How to Tell the Story of Your Library's Impact

AN OUTCOMES-BASED APPROACH FOR
ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

DEVELOPED BY

MIA
Michigan Library Association

IN ASSOCIATION WITH
GALE, A PART OF CENGAGE LEARNING
AND
UNISPHERE RESEARCH, A DIVISION OF
INFORMATION TODAY, INC.

October 12th, 2011

1-800-877-GALE
www.gale.com



 GALE
CENGAGE Learning®

Introduction

In discussing, presenting, and possibly defending your library's vision to your dean, provost or governing board, you have no doubt learned the value of a well-articulated strategic plan and, quite possibly, a dashboard of assorted performance metrics to use in reporting traffic, usage, and other outputs in sound bites to the people who matter.

To date, these ways and means have no doubt proved not only necessary but sufficient to get the funding, support and accolades your library deserves. But are they impacting those outside of your governing board? How is the community at large hearing about advances and innovation in your library?

Inspired by Stephen Denning's book, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in the Knowledge-Era Organization* (Butterworth Heinemann, 2001) the Michigan Library Association joined forces with educational publisher Cengage Learning in June 2011 to develop and test a systematic method for academic libraries to use in gathering stories to demonstrate their true impact on their users, communities, and institutions.

Classic library "outputs" are usually defined in terms of collection dimensions, circulation data, and cost-benefit ratios, including ROI. The stories that you will find will enhance these traditional measures with real life anecdotes that show how the library is being used, and the impact it is having on users' lives.

The "outcome-based" results that MLA and Cengage are advocating are about those success stories that are incredibly meaningful and provide justification for change, innovation, or funding, yet are difficult, if not impossible, to measure with data points. What happened after a patron's library research was done? Were lives saved? Jobs offered? Award-winning efforts completed? Barriers broken? Paradigms shifted? What is it about your library that sums up to something greater than its parts? What speaks volumes without using a single statistic?

It is here that your story telling skills will pay off, at least if you subscribe to the premise of Stephen Denning's book: While at the World Bank in the mid-1990s Denning tells how he convinced a staid, conservative organization to expand its world view and start communicating at internet speed, not with a good chart, but with a great story.

Now, it's your turn.

Your Step-By-Step Guide To Storytelling

There's no magic formula for crafting a story that will resonate with the people you need to impress or influence, those who grant you your funds or who call upon you to achieve missions critical to the faculty, students, or academy at large. However, these steps will guide you through creating stories that will impact your designated audience.

STEP 1: Define Your Story-Telling Mission

To begin, take some time to identify goals, objectives, and groups of people of importance to your library or its mission. Perhaps you can draw these goals from your existing strategic plan and use the form below to amplify them.

Use as many copies of the form below as needed to detail each of your goals and identify the type of stories you want to gather.

How Stories Can Work to Promote and Advance Your Library's Goals

State Your Goal:	
WHY is this goal important?	
WHOM will it affect?	
WHAT will be its impact?	
HOW will you measure your success?	
WHEN do you need to achieve it?	
WHERE will you share the results?	
Make up a story which would serve as an ideal case-in-point.	

STEP 2: Go After Stories

Now that you know what they are looking for, it is time to gather the stories. Work with your planning staff to develop a method for systematically soliciting and collecting stories. Some avenues to consider using are your existing web site, Facebook page or Twitter feed, outbound newsletters, library signage, and annual surveys. Consider how you might tap library staff for stories they have heard.

STEP 3: Get the Whole Story

After you identify people with stories to tell it's important to make sure you get the whole story, including not just what they did in the library or how they used the library but what happened as a result. If you need help interviewing those with stories, use this guide's Story-Gathering Fact Form.

Story-Gathering Fact Form

Name of person telling this story: _____

Phone number _____ Email Address _____

Who is this story about?

What happened?

When did it happen?

Where did it happen?

How did the matter get resolved, or, what was the Result?

Why did the library matter or what role did it play?

What's the key realization from the story?

Name of the person gathering this story: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____ Place: _____

Are there photos to go with this story? Audio? Video?

Where are the photos, audio files, or videos?

Did the interviewee sign a release form?

[See our sample Release Form in Appendix I]

STEP 4: Test Your Story

Once you've collected some stories, you will soon see that some have more merit than others. Stephen Denning advocates telling a certain kind of story, which he calls the "springboard story". A "springboard story" is one that makes people

think, and subtly encourages them to act. You can use the Impact Factor Checklist, based on Denning's work, to check your story's impact. Continue fine tuning your story until you can say "Yes," for most of the 12 elements.

The Impact Factor Checklist

RATE YOUR STORY'S IMPACT

Check your story against these 12 attributes for success. Does it contain each element?

Yes/No	Is your story . . .	Tips for Success
	Brief	Keep it short and sweet so listeners can quickly get the message and repeat it to others later
	Succinct	Include just enough detail to get the point across.
	Complete	Quickly answer the basic questions: Who? What? When? Where? How?
	Intelligible	Will your audience appreciate the situation you are describing? Will this tale resonate with them?
	Shock Value/Surprise	Is the situation unusual in any way? Can the ending be predicted? Where's the "punch line"? Are they likely to retell it?
	Upbeat	Does the story have a happy ending? Finish on a high note.
	Illustrative	Does this story implicitly illustrate an impact the library made? The outcome you are looking for?
	Appropriate	Does this story fit with your goal?
	Personable	Will the audience identify with your story's hero?
	Memorable	Will the listener be able to remember this story? Can it be easily retold?
	Inspirational	Does the story have the potential to cause listeners to think about what it means to them?
	Actionable	Does the story have the potential to spring the listener to a new level of understanding and action?

Source: Stephen Denning's: *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in the Knowledge-Era Organization* (Butterworth Heinemann, 2001, Appendix I.)

STEP 5: Get Your Story Out

Once you have narrowed your stack of stories down to the best and most impactful, consider how to best package and distribute your stories to your audience, whether in person, in print, or online.

Last but not least, don't forget to track how well your stories have worked in practice. What is the result of your story having been released? Did it get to the intended audience? Has there been a shift in thinking? Is there anything measureable to report? Are the people retelling the story to others? Did you achieve your goal? If so, congratulations—you have found your “springboard story”.

Appendix I

Sample Release Form

Story Contributor's Release Form

Full Name: _____

Address (city, state, Zip): _____

Phone: _____ Email Address _____

I hereby grant the _____ Library permission to use the details of my story about

in print, online, or other media of expression, as deemed appropriate by Library officials for the purpose of publicizing and promoting the library.

In conjunction with the telling of my story, I specifically grant the Library permission to (check all that apply):

Use my full name as written above [] or shortened to _____

Use my occupation, to be listed as: _____

Use my age, to be listed as: _____

Use my gender, to be listed as: _____

Use my image (photo or other graphic) as taken by staff or supplied by me.

Use a video or audio recording of me telling my story

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Parent's or Guardian's Signature if a Minor: _____