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Eight Tips for Telling Your Story Digitally

Advice on planning, building, and promoting digital stories

By: Brian Satterfield
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As a nonprofit, one of the ways you raise funds and attract attention to your cause is through the art of storytelling. Whether you recount the history of your organization to a donor, the life of someone you've helped in a grant proposal, or the challenges you face in a letter to supporters, storytelling is an everyday aspect of nonprofit life.

A well-told story can bring an invaluable sense of immediacy to your cause, especially important when you have just minutes (or even seconds) to capture the attention of your audience. Yet whereas nonprofits' storytelling arsenal was once largely limited to the traditional mechanisms of writing or speaking, new, affordable multimedia tools are making it possible to tell your story digitally, combining the power of images, narration, music, and text to engage and inspire others to action.

Good Tools, Best Practices

To help nonprofits learn more about this ever-growing medium, TechSoup recently held a two-day online event on digital storytelling hosted by Daniel Weinshenker and Andrea Spagat of the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS), a Berkeley-based nonprofit that has trained organizations and individuals around the world in the art of digital storytelling for over 12 years. Here, nonprofits and storytelling experts came together to discuss good tools and best practices for creating a powerful and engaging digital story.

The following tips, gleaned from some of the conversations that took place during the event, can help you get started on making and sharing your own digital stories.

1. Use "The Seven Elements" to plan the story's script and content.

A digital story that moves viewers to action must be built upon a solid narrative and structure. To this end, CDS has identified seven important elements in crafting a compelling story. Examined in-depth in its downloadable Digital Storytelling Cookbook, we have briefly summarized these elements here.

- **Point of View.** Telling your digital story from one perspective can help you decide which content to include and which to leave out. To determine your story's point of view, ask yourself what your story's message is, why it's important to tell it, and who your audience will be.

- **Dramatic Question.** A dramatic question is posed by the narrator at the beginning of the story to create tension and draw in the audience. A dramatic question is usually not an actual question that the narrator poses; rather, it is an intriguing statement that causes the viewers to ask themselves a question.
"'I was seven years old when I met my father' is an example of a dramatic question," said Spagat. "It hooks you in and motivates you to listen to the story until its conclusion."

- **Emotional Content.** Stories that include incidences of loss, redemption, crisis, or change are key to keeping your audience engaged and interested. "[Emotional content] is what everybody can relate to and what makes stories so universal," said Spagat. She noted that it can be helpful to create a story about an experience that has already been resolved, as perspective plays an important role in being able to clearly examine your past emotions.

- **Voice.** A good narrator can help give your digital story direction and personality and can make it more powerful than using text only. Weinshenker suggests adopting an informal tone when relating your story, as if you were

talking with someone over a cup of coffee.

- **Soundtrack.** Music can be a great way to establish mood and complement your overall message. Choose carefully, however: the wrong music can actually undermine your story.
  Instrumental music is often the best choice, as lyrics can interfere with your narration or contradict your message, notes the Digital Storytelling Cookbook. Yet no matter what music you include, make sure you keep it at an appropriate volume to avoid drowning out the narrator's voice.

- **Economy.** Keeping your script brief (between 250 and 350 words) can help you decide what content to include. "Economy of words plays an essential role in making digital stories short and sweet and emotionally compelling," said Spagat. "It forces the writer to cut out all the extraneous stuff and focus only on the language that supports the central focus of the story."

- **Pacing.** Just as a glacial pace can bore viewers, a rushed story can overwhelm them. To hold your audience's attention, strive for a happy medium; vary the amount of time that images stay on the screen, and use effects such as pan and zoom when appropriate.

2. Build the story's visuals around the script and voiceover.

When crafting a digital story, let the script dictate which visuals you include, not the other way around. "In our model of digital storytelling," said Weinshenker, "the voiceover narrative leads the edit. That means that people write a story first and then think about what visuals complement that voiceover."

3. Focus on still images instead of video clips.

While you can certainly include video in your story, CDS emphasizes the use of still images, such as photos, slides, or flat artwork, over film.

Still images can be easier to work with than video, explained Weinshenker, especially if you lack video footage or are relatively new to technology. They also take up less memory, thereby reducing the risk of system crashes, and allow for greater flexibility.

"Still images are infinite files," Weinshenker said. "You can [display] an image for one second or 10 minutes, whereas video has a very specific beginning and end."

4. Respect copyright laws.

If you create a digital story using only your own content — including your own script, your own images, and your own music — you would have the legal right to publicly display and distribute it. Still, if you're using photographs of people in the story, it's probably a good idea to get the blessings of your subject matter.

Yet if you wish to include any material not created or owned by you, you must get the express permission of the copyright holder. This is especially important if you plan to post your story online or screen it to the public. (To learn more about when you need to ask permission and when you don't, read TechSoup's article Borrowing Images from the Web: An FAQ.)

What if you are short on your own materials, but lack the time to get permission to use others' work? Some artists and musicians have made their work available online for others to use freely. Freeplay Music, for example, provides nearly 2,000 downloadable music tracks (in MP3 and AAC formats) classified by genre, style, and mood. (Note that if you may be asked to pay a fee depending on how you plan to broadcast and distribute your creation.) TechSoup's article Where to Find Free Images and Visuals lists dozens of free online image libraries. Remember to check each site's licensing terms before you borrow, and always try to credit the artist as a professional courtesy.

5. Use free and low-cost software to keep production costs low.

To put together your digital story, you will probably need to have access to image- and audio-editing software, as well as an application to assemble the content. And while you may eventually want to purchase software to create more elaborate or high-profile digital stories, you may find it useful to know about several free tools available.

Free Audio Tools

Open-source application Audacity allows you to record voiceovers, though you will need a microphone to do so. Audacity also offers tools for trimming audio files and adding a number of different effects, such as echo, equalization, and cross fades.

Free and Low-Cost Image-Editing Tools

If you want to touch up the images you'll be adding to your story, Adobe Photoshop (available to qualifying organizations for $60 on TechSoup Stock) offers a wide array of high-end, professional image-editing tools. If your needs are more basic, GIMP, FastStone Image Viewer, and IrfanView are good free options.

Free Movie-Assembly Tools

When it comes time to assemble your digital story, you might want to take a look at Sophie, a program that allows you to combine images and audio into a video and annotate it with text. Alternatively, Windows XP users can download Microsoft's free Windows Movie Maker, which provides tools for recording and editing audio; compiling and editing images; adding captions, transitions, and effects; and assembling all the content into a video.

6. Keep your digital stories accessible.

Because most digital stories depend on a combination of visual and audio information, users who are blind or deaf may miss out on key elements of the story. Fortunately, there are a few things you can do to make your digital stories more accessible to everyone.

CDS modifies some of the digital stories it helps produce in order to ensure that users who are blind and deaf can still understand the content, said Weinshenker. "We have, at times, subtitled digital stories or made them audio only," he said. CDS has also produced versions of digital stories that contain static images and a text rendition of the script, which can help make the content more accessible to audiences using older computers and dial-up connections, Weinshenker noted.

7. Circulate the story among your peers or colleagues for feedback.

Before you finalize your digital story and begin promoting it, you may find it useful to share it with others to get their feedback regarding tone, structure, and content.

Specific questions you might ask during this review process might include "Did this character come across the way I wanted him to?" and "Was the ending clear?"

8. Use video-sharing sites and blogs to increase your audience.

If your organization has spent the time creating a powerful digital story with a compelling script, you probably want to get it in front of the largest audience possible. Digital stories can be shared in a number of ways, including posting them to your Web site, uploading them to a video-sharing site such as YouTube, screening them at fundraising events, distributing them via DVD, or posting them to a blog. (For more details on posting your story to the Web, see TechSoup's article Share Your Nonprofit's Videos with the World.)

Finally, take a look at other nonprofit-produced digital stories for ideas. Digital stories by organizations such as Downtown Aurora Visual Arts and EngenderHealth can give you the inspiration and creative spark you need to create a digital story of your own.

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