

TELLING STORIES ETHICALLY

tip sheet

WHY ETHICAL STORYTELLING?

Stories are a powerful way NGOs can connect with supporters and donors. That said, NGOs need to be intentional about collecting and sharing stories, especially when working with vulnerable populations. This tipsheet seeks to help nonprofit practitioners, storytellers, donors, and volunteers tell better, more dignifying stories.

CONSTITUENT

For this tipsheet, we refer to those sharing their own testimonies as “constituents.” We use constituent, which means being a part of the whole, to recognize the agency of the individual in the broader narrative.



TIPS TO CREATING ETHICAL STORIES

IN COLLECTING

Deep consent

Deep Consent means constituents are informed and understand what they are committing to. As the NGO, clearly communicate that saying “no” to sharing their story is an option. Let constituents know how their story will be used and shared and who the intended audience is. If possible, use a translator to minimize miscommunication and have an advocate present for the constituent (parent, friend, colleague, etc.)

Control over their story

Constituents have the ability to change their mind about sharing their story. They can request it be taken down/deleted at any time. Additionally, organizations can use a sunset policy (an expiration or renewal date for each consent form) that is incorporated into the consent form (More resources from Ethical Storytelling).

Collaboration — involve them in creating their story

When we collaborate with the constituent, we allow ourselves to listen to what they would like shared. We hold our outline loosely, preferring to involve the constituent by asking open questions and letting them guide the conversation to what they want to share.

Safety

Know the legal context, especially for NGOs working in foreign countries. The constituent's safety must be considered in both the collecting of the story and their safety once the story is shared. Be aware of local laws and regulations about the use of information or photos.

Open mind

Do extra preparation and background work beforehand to interrogate personal and cultural assumptions you may have coming into the conversation, especially when working in contexts where racism, colonialism, imperialism, patriarchy, etc. have played a historically impactful role. Involve someone native to that context to test for issues and blind spots, or hire local storytellers for the production process.



TIPS TO CREATING ETHICAL STORIES

IN CRAFTING

Human-centered

At the heart of every powerful story is a person who deserves dignity and respect. Constituents must always be portrayed as a whole, not characterized by a stigma, stereotype, or misfortune for a "better" story.

Understanding rolls

Every story is complex and nuanced. What has the constituent already been doing to improve their situation and advocate for the future? What role did the organization or donor play? Also, help the audience understand the surrounding context in order to avoid oversimplifying.

Ask, "What if it was me?"

If you hesitate to answer with a definitive "yes!" it is probably a sign that you need to reconsider or refrain from sharing. If we wouldn't be proud to share this story about our mother/brother/daughter/etc. then we shouldn't share another's.

Consider the impact

Once a story is out there, it is difficult to retrieve. By keeping the story honest, dignifying, and respectful, you'll lend to a positive impact both for the constituent and the community.

TIPS TO CREATING ETHICAL STORIES

IN DELIVERING

Choosing a medium

Some mediums (i.e. social media, newsletters, in-person meetings) are more appropriate than others in sharing stories depending on the context. If the person is considered vulnerable (victims of violence, displacement, trafficking, abuse, persecution, etc.) special care must be taken to ensure the safety and dignity of the person in how they are publicly portrayed.

Involvement of the constituent

As storytellers, it's important to remember that we are not "voices for the voiceless." Everyone has a voice. Some are rarely heard. In sharing stories of marginalized people, recognize their agency and serve as a microphone, amplifying their hopes and dreams over your own interpretations. Know when to share the stage and empower others.

Responsibility

When someone entrusts us with their story, we have the responsibility to carry that story with respect. Tell the story truthfully and honestly, with dignity and respect, not embellishing or exploiting suffering for personal or institutional gain.

CONCLUSION

Stories are powerful, but it can be a challenge to walk the line of engaging content that moves audiences to action and content that remains dignifying, not exploitative. But it is possible! These tips can help you center the constituent and their dignity and respect in your communications.

CONTRIBUTORS:

[Humanitarian Disaster Institute](#) | [Ethical Storytelling](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[The Narrative Project](#) | [Ethical Storytelling](#)

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Our website and social media accounts provide ongoing updates and resources for preparing your church for COVID-19.
EMAIL: hdi@wheaton.edu | FACEBOOK: [facebook.com/WheatonHDI](https://www.facebook.com/WheatonHDI) | TWITTER: twitter.com/WheatonHDI | INSTAGRAM: [@wheaton_hdi](https://www.instagram.com/wheaton_hdi)