=mc consulting

The power of stories

BERNARD ROSS

Welcome to the =mc eBook series. Each book offers a summary of an important management or fundraising idea. Through this set of books, we want to share with you some of the key concepts we're using to help transform the results of major charities and other ethical organisations in the UK and internationally.

For more information about the author, and how we can help you further, see the final section of this book.

This eBook accompanies =mc's training programme, **The Power of Stories.** It explores how you can use stories in a range of settings – fundraising, advocacy, and presentations – to ensure that your message is clear, memorable and above all promotes action.

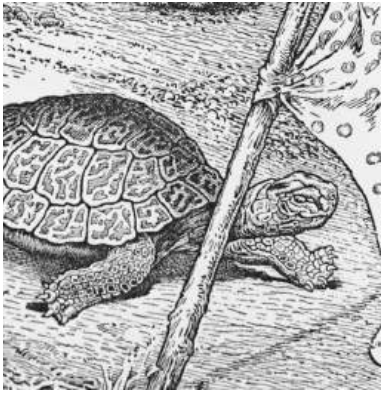
The programme has helped a number of agencies to improve their use of stories and storytelling including international agencies like ICRC, UNHCR, Care and UNICEF as well as UK domestic ones like MENCAP, MS Society, Marie Curie, and Stonewall.

Specifically, this eBook introduces you to the =mc story formula: **HeroesAIM4SUCCESS.**

01

People and stories

People as we know them today appeared around 200,000 BC and for most of our history, we lived in small communities, bands, and tribes. We communicated verbally and conveyed our stored wisdom to new generations through stories. Telling and listening to stories is deeply ingrained in our psyche. The first human writings go back only 5,500 years. For centuries the dominant form of communication was oral — and many great literary classics probably began life as oral traditions. It is likely Homer's *Iliad* was handed down as a song for generations before being captured by a scribe. The printing press was introduced to the world around 1440, allowing the wider transmission of books. Over time we have evolved and now stories exist in many media including the web.



Today, we still tell stories, many of them based on the myths of the ancients: the movie *Jaws* is basically the same story as the ancient poem *Beowulf* — a reluctant hero battles against the evil sea monster, saves the village and in doing so becomes a more mature person.

◂ Aesop's fables: Tortoise wins the race

Why have stories?

Stories can serve a number of functions. The parables in the Bible are a way of explaining and sharing key philosophical ideas to create what many social activists would now call a movement. Other stories, like *Aesop's fables* or Japanese Zen stories contain important knowledge about a shared culture or contain advice on how to behave. As individuals involved in social change we need to tap into the purpose and structures of stories to help convey information and ideas in a powerful memorable way.

Among the roles stories can fulfill are:

- motivate others to action
- encourage supporters to donate
- build trust in you or your organisation
- transmit your values
- get people working together
- share knowledge
- share your vision
- enable people to consider another perspective
- motivate yourself

Key elements

A story often draws on a number of key elements. These can include, but aren't limited to:

- **Listener/target** – a specific group at whom the story is aimed
- **Purpose** – to share a message, to reinforce a point, etc.
- **Hero or heroine** – one or more key protagonists
- **Mentor** – someone who helps or guides the hero or heroine
- **Structure/Story Arc** – a journey, a challenge, a conflict, a difficult task etc.
- **Empathy** – the potential to identify with the hero or heroine
- **Memorable content** – a striking event or situation
- **Unexpected development** – a change or turn of events that surprises us

Challenges with stories

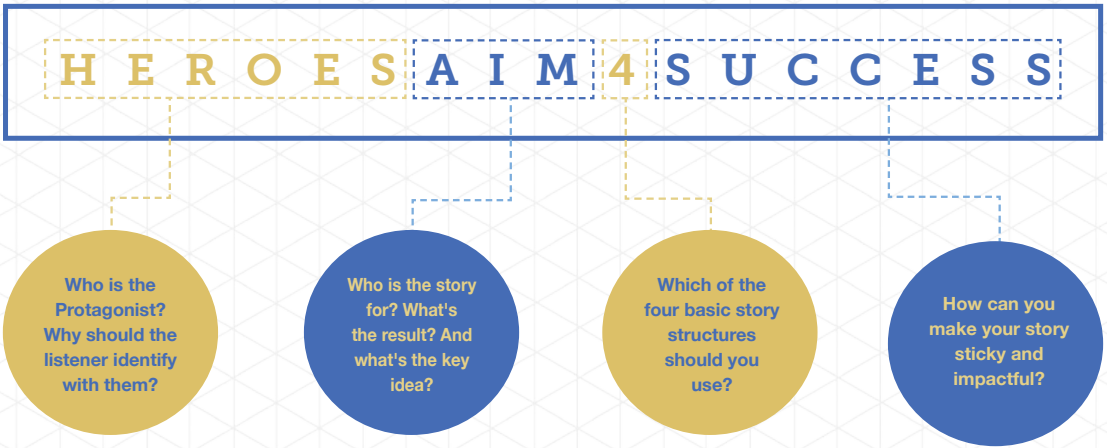
In our experience there are three key problems in the way stories are shared by fundraisers or campaigners:

- They're too internally focused: many stories we've heard are obsessed with the organisation's internal concerns or use a technical language inaccessible to anyone not on the staff. By not focusing enough on the needs of the beneficiaries or the concerns of the supporters, stories sound become self-referential or even indulgent.
- They're too long: the best story might exist in several forms – from 2 pages of prose in a carefully crafted Case for Support, to a 60 second spoken version that can be shared over dinner, on a train, in a speech. But some are just way too long – 10+ pages or stretching out for 10-15 minutes
- They're too perfect: listeners, in our experience, don't want a perfectly polished story that sounds like it has been shared 100 times and allows no room for imagination. They want to be involved creatively. So you need to create space for them to add in their ideas and 'colour'. This can make the story more real to them and create ownership.

The =mc story framework

The =mc story framework:

At =mc we've developed a framework that will help hold your story together and make it drive action. We've based this on experience of working with fundraisers and campaigners worldwide. The =mc framework consists of four linked elements. When creating your story, work through them to create and shape your basic narrative.



Heroes or heroines

Begin by deciding *who* is the key protagonist in your story — the hero or heroine. (From now on we'll use hero to signify any gender.) Next, consider *why* are they a hero? And why should I — the reader or listener — empathise with them or be concerned about their future ?

Typically, you can choose from three categories of heroes and heroines:

- The organisation: this might include fundraisers; research scientists; campaigners; humanitarian workers; doctors; social workers etc.
- The beneficiary: this could be: the refugee; the person impacted on by an illness; the child in need of protection; the caregiver etc.
- The supporter: these can be: volunteers; donors; campaigners; members; and others who add value to your cause

You need to decide who within your chosen category is the hero or of the story. Ideally it should involve what seems to be a real individual — Abdul, Jane, Sean or Eman, though of course, you can, and sometimes should, create a composite person to protect anonymity. Your hero or heroine can *represent* a more general cluster — for example, 'Susan Jones the research scientist working to develop the cure for Multiple Sclerosis', represents the many individuals.

If you choose to make the organisation itself the hero, make sure you're clear about the brand personality. Commercial companies use this all the time. Walmart plays 'The Regular Guy' in brand terms. Nike plays 'The Champion,' focussing on high achievers. And Ben and Jerry plays 'The Jester' for its playfulness with food. You can apply the same thinking to non-profits. Greenpeace might, for example, be 'The Rebel' campaigning on behalf of the planet, Macmillan Cancer Support the 'Caring Companion' of someone with cancer. To the right is a table with some possible personalities.
Use this for inspiration but devise your own.

Brand personalities

The Caregiver (e.g. Macmillan)	**The Counsellor** (e.g.Childline)	**The Defender** (e.g. Amnesty)
The Doctor (e.g. MSF)	**The Guardian** (e.g. NSPCC)	**The Magician** (e.g. Cirque du Soliel)
The Protector (e.g. UNICEF)	**The Rescuer** (e.g. Red Cross)	**The Jester** (e.g. Comic Relief)
The Helper (e.g. Samaritans)	**The Rebel** (e.g. Greenpeace)	**The Warrior** (e.g. RNLI)

Which of the three hero clusters is best? In our opinion, the usual answer in fundraising is the *supporter* — the one that other supporters or potential supporters can identify with. (But think about the circumstances where this might not be the best choice.)

A key element of the supporter as hero is to ensure that they feel *agency* — the sense of power or the ability to act and address the challenge.

Think about the difference between:

- "We'd like you to help us tackle the injustice or Jane Jones imprisonment." **(organisation)**
- "Please help Jane Jones challenge the injustice of her imprisonment." **(beneficiary)**
- "Here's how you can tackle injustice." **(supporter)**

Next you need to decide and outline *why* this person is a hero, why are they admirable? Note that they need to be admirable in their own eyes, too.

This could be because of:

- what they achieved
- what they contributed
- the example they gave
- a challenge they helped someone overcome
- the way they did something etc.

Finally, check that this is someone the target audience could identify with and build a bridge to. This is especially important if they are from a different country or culture or have an experience — an illness, for example — that others might not understand. If the hero is very different, often the case with a beneficiary, think how you can create empathy — as a woman, as father, as a teacher, as someone who had a tough upbringing, as someone who loves reading, as a person of faith...etc. What's the empathy bridge?

You may also consider a second sub-hero role — that of the *mentor.* Many heroes in stories have a mentor or coach who helps them develop and grow. Think about Yoda and Luke in Star Wars, about Harry Potter and Dumbledore, or Mary Poppins and the Banks children. You could position your organisation as the mentor or coach, helping the supporter as hero deliver the result.

Audience:

- Who is the audience?
- What are their concerns?
- What are their motivations?

Impact

- What is the outcome or result you want?
- How will you/the hero know that you've achieved the outcome?
- What are the risks?

Message

- What do you want the audience to think, know or understand?
- How should they feel?
- What do you want the audience to do?
- How should you 'frame' the message – how will you structure and organise it?

You've decided who your hero is, so now you need to decide how should you direct or focus your story and content. By taking **AIM** you check your thinking about the ***A**udience*: who is your story for? the ***I**mpact:* what result do you want it to have? and the ***M**essage:* what key information or ideas you want to convey? See left for more detail on what you need to consider.

Everyone needs a story

You may need to adapt your story to a number of different audiences.

Many of these will be *external* audiences — supporters, in particular. But you may also need to adapt your story for *internal* audiences. Maybe the board or senior managers are also key nternal recipients and sharers of your story. And what about the person who answers your switchboard? They might not appear to be very important in the great scheme of things, but the way they respond to supporters calling in could make a massive difference to your success. A story that influences the internal audience is hugely important — possibly most especially for that vital person who answers the phone.

4 possible story structures

Stories can take many different forms. Some commentators suggest there are a limited number — most famously Christopher Booker's seven plots . (In our experience, while interesting, these structures are not practically very useful. See the table right for more on this.) The key issue is that all of these are concerned with what's called a story arc — the shape of the story.

For our purpose it's useful to think about four basic structures which might appeal to or engage supporters: *risk*, *crisis*, *opportunity*, and *vision*. Ideally you should be able to tell your story in any one of these formats. Note that individuals often have preference for one or more of these options. You may want to tell your story in all four as a story arc: without action, risk might become a crisis, which can then be solved by taking up an opportunity to deliver a vision.

We've used this model successfully with many of our customers in their storytelling — from a gallery raising $50M for a Renaissance painting, to an international childcare charity raising $500M across 27 countries to provide education for children in conflict zones.

The framework begins from the perspective that all stories can be based around two dimensions:

- Time: whether the outcome will happen *now/soon* or at some *future* point
- Impact: whether it will work *towards* a positive or *away* from a negative

If you put these dimensions together in all the possible combinations, you have four choices.

Christopher Booker's thesis was that all the characters in a story essentially provide a way to explore aspects of the hero's character or psyche. His Seven Basic Plots were:

Overcoming the Monster: the protagonist sets out to defeat an antagonistic force (often evil) e.g. Perseus, Theseus, Beowulf, Dracula, Harry Potter and Shrek.

Rags to Riches: the poor protagonist acquires things such as power, wealth, and a mate, before losing it all and regaining it back while growing as a person e.g. Great Expectations, David Copperfield, Brewster's Millions.

The Quest: the protagonist and companions set out to acquire an important object or to get to a location, facing obstacles and temptations along the way e.g. The Iliad, Pilgrim's Progress, and Indiana Jones.

Voyage and Return: the protagonist goes to a strange land and, after overcoming the threats, returns with experience e.g. The Odyssey, Ramayana, Alice in Wonderland, Apollo 13, and even Finding Nemo

Comedy: light character works towards a happy ending e.g. A Midsummer Night's Dream, Bridget Jones' Diary and Four Weddings and a Funeral.

Tragedy: the protagonist has a major character flaw, which is ultimately their undoing. Their unfortunate end evokes pity. e.g. Macbeth, Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, Breaking Bad, and Hamlet.

Rebirth: an important event forces the main character to change their ways, often making them a better person e.g. The Snow Queen, A Christmas Carol, Despicable Me, How the Grinch Stole Christmas.

Four structures

	Present	Future
Negative	Risk ●	Crisis ●
Positive	Opportunity ●	Vision ●

1

A negative future: i.e. a risk.

This:
– encourages the supporter to think ahead
– is about a *negative* outcome

2

A negative present: i.e. a crisis.

This:
– has a relatively short time horizon
– is about a *negative* outcome

3

A positive present: i.e. an opportunity.

This:
– has a relatively short time horizon
– is about a *positive* outcome

4

A positive future: i.e. a vision.

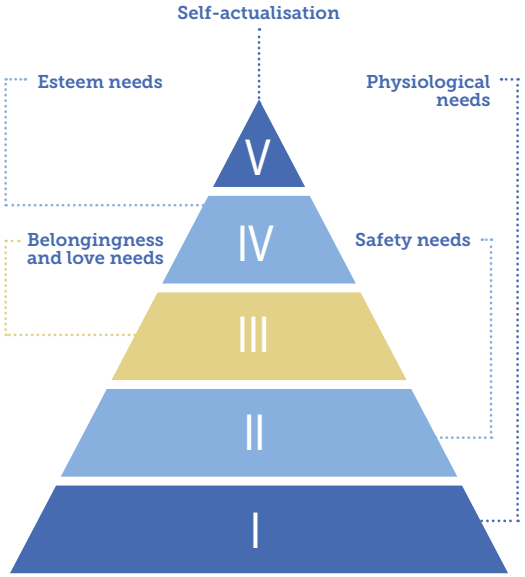
This:
– encourages the supporter to think ahead
– is about a *positive* outcome

Each option is illustrated below for two different examples — one an HIV/AIDS development agency in Africa, and the other a theatre education programme in a small town.

You need to decide which of the quadrants your story falls into most naturally. One of them often stands out as the most powerful in fundraising. Take a second to reflect on which you believe will generally work best.

We've asked that question in over 100 conference sessions in places as far apart as Brazil and India, Australia and Sweden. Almost universally *experienced* fundraisers know the answer. While most of them wish it could be 'vision' (positive future), in *practice* — from their experience — they know 'crisis' (negative present) is *normally* the strongest. The psychology of this is complex but can, in part, be traced back to Maslow whose hierarchy of needs is based around *unmet* needs. It's worth having an option to frame your case as a crisis. (And, if you can, useful to have your case expressed in all four forms to allow for maximum flexibility to adapt to different supporter preferences.)

Maslow's, hierarchy of needs



HIV/AIDS story case

- Risk: 'Unless we use condoms and education programmes to stem the growth of HIV transmission, in 10 years there will be 5 million AIDS orphans in Zimbabwe.'
- Crisis: 'At current rates of infection and with the current limited access to anti-retrovirals, 100,000 people in Zimbabwe will die needlessly in the next 6 months.'
- Opportunity: 'If we can organise the condom distribution programme effectively in the next 6 months we can reduce infection by 60% in Zimbabwe.'
- Vision: 'By building the new centre and equipping it properly, we can ensure that within 10 years every person in Zimbabwe will have access to anti-retroviral medicines.'

Theatre example story case

- Risk: 'If we don't secure the funds for the education programme then within 5 years there will be a whole generation denied access to culture – up to 3,000 15-year olds in this town who will have never seen a live theatre performance.'
- Crisis: 'if we don't find funds for the roof repairs within the next 3 months, we will have to close the building. The loss of cash from the box office will be so great we may never re-open. Our town and its 200,000 citizens will have lost its only purpose-built theatre.'
- Opportunity: 'Thanks to a shop closure, the building lease has come free on a large space next door. If we raise the money in the next 3 months, we can acquire the space for the experimental studio we've been talking about for years. We can then offer a completely different kind of performance for our passionate and committed core audience.'
- Vision: 'If we raise the cash we can extend into the premises next door. With that extra 10,000 sq. ft., we'd gain space to complement our main platform, and have room for workshops, offering opportunities to people who love visual arts/crafts/dance/and film. In 3 years we'll be the a genuine art centre serving the whole town.'

04

‘Stickiness’– making your stories powerful and memorable through SUCCESS

Finally, you need to run your story through the SUCCESS checklist to make sure it is 'sticky,' — that is that it stays in people's minds.

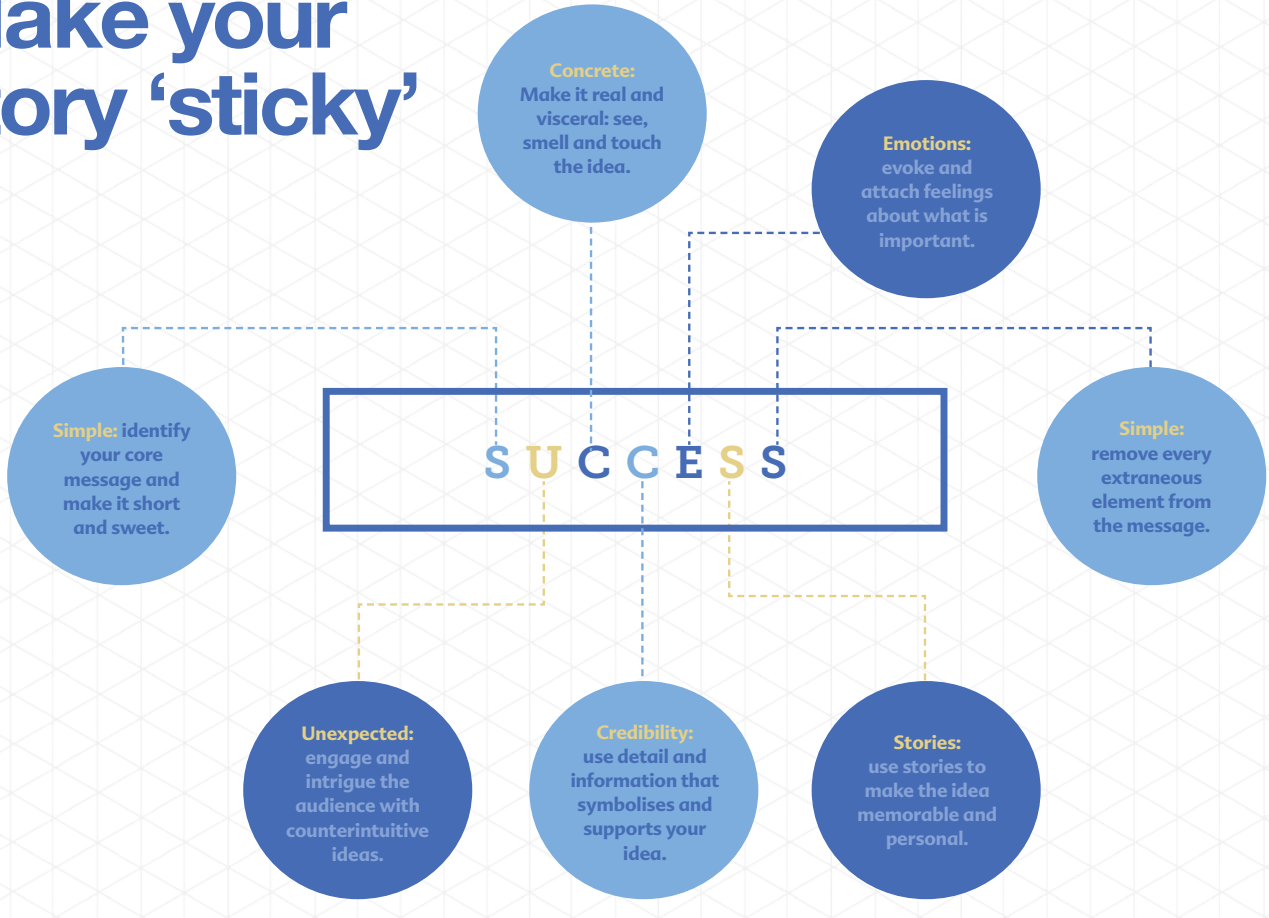
Some ideas seem to very quickly and easily acquire significant circulation and stay in people's memory. Some are natural, that is they have grown up seemingly spontaneously. And some have been created — consciously designed by advertising executives, marketers, advocacy specialists or even charity fundraisers[1].

We can find sticky ideas everywhere. The Heath Brothers — authors of *Made to Stick* — were drawn to this area through an interest in questions such as what makes 'urban legends'— like the myth that the Great Wall of China is the only man-made object visible from space — so compelling? Why do some teachers make what could be mundane chemistry or geography lessons work much better than others?

They came up with a framework to help ensure stickiness based around the mnemonic SUCCESS. At =mc we've adapted this framework to SUCCESS — with an extra S. Using this will help you make sure that your story creates a powerful impact and remains memorable. SUCCESS is about the elements in your story, where possible, meeting six key principles: **S**imple; **U**nexpected; **C**oncrete; **C**redible; **E**motional; **S**tory; **S**imple (yes — x2!) Using this formula, you can shape your story and make it powerful.

[1] A number of social scientists and scientists have explored this phenomenon, in particular Malcolm Gladwell in his book *The Tipping Point* and most recently Chip and Dan Heath in their book *Made to Stick*. We also explore the practical implications of this phenomenon for fundraisers in *The Influential Fundraiser* (Wiley 2008), co-written with my colleague, Clare Segal.

Make your story 'sticky'



1

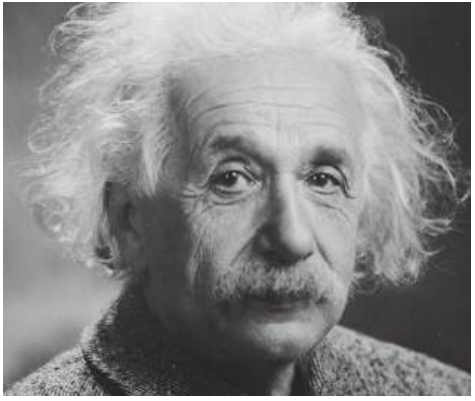
Principle 1: Simplicity

How do you find the essential core of your ideas? As Johnny Cochrane, the US defence lawyer who got OJ Simpson off first time round, says, "Don't argue ten points, even if each is a good one — when the jury get back to the verdict room they won't remember any. Find one simple idea to sell." To prove his point he used the infamous — and unforgettable — "Glove that didn't fit" message to secure OJ Simpson's acquittal.

Think of e=mc2. This is, with H2O, the best-known scientific formula on the planet. The thinking behind, and implications of, e=mc2 are wide ranging and outside most of our understanding. But Einstein wanted to summarise his profound idea for scientists *and* make it memorable for everyone else.

To strip an idea down to its core, we need to pare away all the extras and prioritise the key elements in the message. Saying something that is merely short is not the goal — 'sound bites' or slogans are not what we're suggesting. That said, proverbs are an interesting format — "look before you leap" has some real wisdom in it as well as being a catchy thought.

The aim is to create ideas that are both simple and profound — and capture them in a story.



▲ Albert Einstein

2

Principle 2: Unexpectedness

How do you get our audience to pay attention to your ideas, and how do you maintain their interest when you need time to get the ideas across? You need to disrupt people's expectations.

It's essential to avoid the *blah, blah blah* message, which causes audiences to tune out because they're (over)familiar and perhaps a little bored with it. For example, 'people in developing nations don't have access to proper medical facilities'; 'the planet's climate is changing, and human activity is responsible'; 'people with drug addiction need support and help not punishment.' For some, these messages simply become static in the background and they feel unwilling or unable to address them.

To disrupt this blah blah blah mindset, you may need to be disruptive — that is, approach things in a radically different way, or tackle popular misconceptions head on. In this way you gain attention — or 'headshare.' Think of the example of Bill Gates releasing mosquitos in a room filled with HNWI to engage them in the campaign to buy mosquito nets for children in sub-Saharan Africa. The action of the astonished audience swatting at the whining insects, reinforced Gates' message that the net was an affordable solution to protecting people from mosquito bites. Everyone there wanted a net to protect themselves. Gates message — 'now you know what it's like for the kids — provide one for them.'

Another way to disrupt a mindset is to embed a challenging fact in your story. For example, a refugee organisation began a presentation by telling people that Britain is a nation of net *emigrants* — more of us settle overseas every year than other people enter the UK. That counters the traditional view reported in the conservative media that we're being 'flooded with foreigners.' The implication? If we're against immigration we need to stop Britons going abroad, not worry about people coming in.

You can also use mystery to increase alertness and focus — to grab people's attention. In the seminar we tell the story of the message on a t-shirt on woman in a gym. From a distance it seemed to say: "Woman without her man is nothing." How many would agree with this sentiment? (And how many disagree?) On closer examination the message actually said "Woman: without her, man is nothing." The optical illusion resulted because some of the punctuation had been deliberately greyed out. It caught attention because it seemed unusual for a woman to be using such a misogynist expression.

There's a great example of a fundraiser who asked his corporate sponsors for more money so that the organisation could apparently do *less* well. The sponsors had naturally, from their point of view expected that an increase in their contributions would lead to better results. By asking for additional cash so the organisation could work with more difficult young people, the fundraiser introduced the idea of the importance of innovation, and the risks associated with innovation, which captured their attention.

But surprise doesn't last forever. For your idea to endure long-term, you must generate some additional responses — interest and curiosity. You can do this over a period of time by systematically 'opening gaps' in the audience's knowledge — and then filling or getting them to fill those gaps. You're looking for headshare.

3

Principle 3: Concreteness

How do you make your ideas clear and understandable? You need to explain your ideas in terms of human actions and the senses by which we find about these actions — vision, words, smell, taste, etc. This is where so much business and charity communication goes wrong. Way too many mission statements, strategies, and visions are ambiguous or vague or general to the point of being meaningless.

Naturally sticky ideas are full of concrete images — for example, ice-filled bathtubs — because our brains are wired to remember concrete data. Notice how proverbs contain abstract truths couched in concrete language: "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush."

You can even make a group experience a concrete feeling. A Mexican domestic violence charity we worked with held a dinner for donors on an empty piece of land. Marked on the bare site with plastic tape and nails was the outline shape of the refuge they hoped to build. The meal they provided — an open-air barbecue done in the family style — symbolised that the donors were the 'family' who were to build this house for women who had violent partners. And the meal took place in an 'imaginary' building that people wanted to see built. They walked between the tape lines carefully as if there were real walls — talking about the facilities they could 'see' in their imagination. And went on to commit to build what they had 'seen'.

Speaking or writing concretely is the only way to ensure that your idea will impact on everyone in your audience. It also helps enormously with making it memorable. Think about the story of the Titanic — what do you remember? It's the concrete details — the claim it was 'unsinkable', the band playing on, women and children first, the captain going down with his ship etc. These details make it come alive.

4

Principle 4: Credibility

How do you help people believe in your ideas? When the head of the British Medical Association talks about a public health issue, like smoking being bad for you, most people accept his or her ideas without scepticism. But in day-to-day situations the rest of us don't enjoy this authority.

Sticky ideas have to carry their own credentials. You need ways to help people test your ideas for themselves — the Heath Brothers, who came up with the Sticky Ideas format call this a 'try before you buy' philosophy for the world of ideas. When we're trying to build a case for something, most of us instinctively grasp for hard numbers or data. But often this is exactly the wrong approach.

In the only US presidential debate in 1980 between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, Reagan could have cited innumerable statistics demonstrating the sluggishness of the US economy. Instead, he posed a question to which the majority of voters apparently had the same answer. "Before you vote, ask yourself if you are better off today than you were four years ago." They decided that the answer was "No." And Ronald Reagan came into the White House... Think also of the 2016 UK EU referendum where one — untrue — stand out number on the side of a bus 'An extra £350M a week to spend on the NHS' was successfully used as a key reason to vote for Brexit.

Ideally you need a *killer number* — a true one rather than one made up — that sticks in people's minds and captures their attention.

Working with WWF to illustrate how vulnerable wildlife is to poaching in Africa, we came up with this example: 'If she mistakenly wanders from her natural habitat in Botswana into Zimbabwe, on average Notch the rhino only has 32 minutes to live. In Botswana there is wildlife security.

In Zimbabwe poachers haunt the border looking for elephants and rhinos, without a good sense of geography, to murder them for their tusks or horn.'

Or this example: "One in three women in this country will be affected by breast cancer at some point in her life. Help me to answer the call from that woman when she needs advice. At the moment we can only answer 50% of the calls from the women who need our support."

One powerful statistic can be very compelling.
You can also work to create your organisational USPs (Unique Selling Propositions). To test for credibility, use the three books that drive USPs.

- Guinness Book of Records: *for quantitative data*
- Who'swho: *for qualitative data*
- Bible: *for values-based data*

Finally remember that credibility can come from a candid admission that you're not perfect. At all costs avoid *Stepford Wives Syndrome*[2] where your annual report becomes a channel to claim that all your programmes and processes worked perfectly over the last year. You need to be honest in building credibility with individuals, companies and charities.

[2] *This movie, you may remember, involves a community where all the wives are 'perfect.' The original version from the 70s is darker and more sinister than the remake. But the premise is the same - nothing that seems 'perfect' can be true. And the illusion of perfection makes people uneasy. Real life is messy, and we have to acknowledge that in our communications.*

5

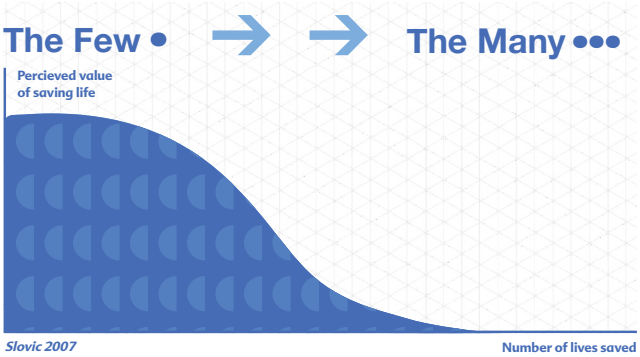
Principle 5: Emotions

How do you get people to care about your ideas? You need to think about the emotions you want to generate, for example:

- Joy
- Sadness
- Anger
- Frustration
- Surprise
- Fear

You can make people *angry* at the way victims of domestic violence are ignored by the legal system. Or make people *sad* about the way women are harmed. Or *frightened* that if they were the victims of abuse there would be nowhere for them to go. (Note that it's often a *feeling* that creates action — the word is e-*motion*.)

Research shows that people are more likely to make a charitable gift to a single needy individual than to an entire impoverished region or nation — or even a small group. We seem to be hard-wired to feel things for an identifiable person, not for abstractions. Paul Slovic, a researcher at Decision Research, has demonstrated this by measuring the contribution levels from people shown pictures of children in distress. Some subjects saw a photo of a single starving child from Mali, others were shown a photo of two children in similar terrible condition. All were identified by name. The subjects shown two children donated 15% **less** than those shown a single child. In a related experiment, subjects shown a group of eight starving children contributed 50% less money than those shown just one.



Slovic called this the *Collapse of Compassion*. These are distressing results. But they do mean we have to make our stories about individuals if we want to drive action.

Sometimes the challenge is finding the best or most appropriate emotion to engage. Another study demonstrates how difficult it is to get teenagers to stop smoking by talking about the negative long-term consequences. Much easier — and more effective — is to tap into their resentment of the deceit practised by big business tobacco corporations.

When you share internally an example of great customer/donor/supporter care, do you want staff colleagues to feel *proud* of the organisation for what it did one time or *embarrassed* that you haven't always met that standard? Think carefully about what is the appropriate emotion(s) you want to instil in others. It may not be the same as yours. This perspective will also help you shape your sticky idea. And in this way, you secure *heartshare* to complement the *headshare* we talked about in Principle 2.

6

Principle 6: Stories

How do you get people to remember and act on your ideas? You need to make sure you tell proper stories — not just anecdotes. Reporters know how to bring alive a situation. Look at this example from the novel and film The Shipping News:

Publisher: It's finding the center of your story, the beating heart of it, that's what makes a reporter. You have to start by making up some headlines. You know: short, punchy, dramatic headlines. Now, have a look, [pointing at dark clouds gathering in the sky over the ocean] what do you see? Tell me the headline.
Protagonist: HORIZON FILLS WITH DARK CLOUDS
Publisher: IMMINENT STORM THREATENS VILLAGE
Protagonist: But what if no storm comes?
Publisher: VILLAGE SPARED FROM DEADLY STORM

Aid workers, firefighters and soldiers naturally swap stories after an emergency situation, a fire, or a battle, and by doing so they multiply and share their experiences, looking for resonance and commonality. Stories have a very specific purpose for many professionals — they become an informal system of knowledge management. After years of hearing stories, the people they are designed for have a richer, more complete mental catalogue

of critical situations they might confront and the appropriate responses. UNICEF has hired storytellers to help improve its knowledge management, and the senior campaigner in Greenpeace is now called Head of Storytelling. At =mc we worked with MSF to create board games based around stories that captured and codified the learning that experienced staff had of working in emergency relief situations.

Research shows that mentally rehearsing a situation, in the form of a story, helps us perform better when we actually encounter that situation. Similarly hearing stories acts as a kind of mental flight simulator, preparing us to respond more quickly and effectively.

Finally stories are a way to celebrate your organisation's heroines and heroes — they are a great guide to culture. Think about the stories where you work. Who are they about — the CEO, the frontliner, the supporter? What do they celebrate — imagination, risk taking, user/supporter care, investment, etc? Make sure your story celebrates the person *and* the values you want to champion.

7

Principle 7: Simple (again!)

We've repeated 'simple' and made it up to a seventh principle for two reasons. First, simple is so important it's worth repeating. Make your message as simple as possible — like Picasso's drawing of a bull that's only 8 lines or Einstein's formula, e=mc2. Both are the essence of simplicity and yet both also convey complex ideas. Simple is not the same as simplistic.

The second reason is that to fix something in the brain it's helpful to repeat it in a memorable way. Using the SUCCESS acronym helps make the formula itself memorable

To summarise, here's the checklist for creating a successful idea:
a **S**imple **U**nexpected **C**oncrete **C**redentialed **E**motional **S**tory — Simply told.

Writing stories

Telling a story person to person is definitely best from an impact and engagement point of view. You can see the effect it does or doesn't have — and you can adjust accordingly during the telling. But sometimes you need to write it down — in an email, a webpage or a publication. Unfortunately, when stories are written down they often lose much of their energy and authenticity, because people tend to style switch into a more formal or convoluted English.

Our experience of reading and writing fundraising stories — and more important, our experience of asking supporters about their reaction to different stories — suggests there are four fundamental rules of any good written communication. By following these you can increase the chances of successful impact from your story on the page.

Four rules of writing stories

Here are some basic rules which will ensure your writing is clearer and more powerful. This is not an exercise in aesthetics, it's just clearer writing is more likely to achieve influence.

1

Favour shorter, familiar words

2

Keep most sentences short

3

Use active verbs

4

Put people in your writing

1.

Favour shorter, familiar words

Shorter words are in general easier to use and to understand. For example, use 'help' not 'facilitate' and 'cash legacy' rather than 'pecuniary legacy.' Your communication will be read more quickly and will be more widely understood.

We're not saying that you should never use long words — sometimes they're necessary. In a specific situation you may need to use a technical word like 'endowment' or 'governance.' But don't use longer or more complicated words than you have to. Why use 'facilitate' when 'help' means the same and is easier to understand? People often use longer words to try to impress or to cover up weak thinking. Don't fall into that trap.

Here are examples of words we've found in various stories and our suggested — simpler — replacements.

Complex word	Simpler word
utilise	use
sufficient	enough
ongoing	continuous
endeavour	try
remuneration	pay
in the event that	if

Go through your own written documents and get rid of complex language.

2.

Keep most sentences short

By short sentences we mean ideally 17 words or less. Shorter sentences are easier to read and easier to write. Again, short and simple doesn't mean *simplistic*. Highbrow newspapers like *The Times* in the UK and the *Wall Street Journal* in the US both use a stylebook that asks journalists to write in short sentences. The logic is straightforward. Busy people don't have time to spend the whole day reading the newspaper. Nor do donors. Short sentences speed up reading.

Another failing of long sentences is that they may hide key messages from donors by combining too many of them. For example: *"The Southtown Advice Centre has a pressing need for funds to upgrade its IT-based reference systems to help staffers to be more effective and so provide better quality information on welfare benefits for socially and financially excluded people in the local area."*

With a long sentence you minimise the benefits. Contrast this with:
"The Southtown Advice Centre urgently needs to upgrade its benefits advice software. If we can raise the money for the upgrade, staff will be able to provide better information on benefits for poor people locally." (Notice we've lost the long and unnecessary words too.)

3.

Use active verbs

Using passive verbs in writing holds us back from communicating and influencing effectively. Contrast "The boy bounced the ball" (active) with "The ball was bounced by the boy" (passive). The passive is clumsy. And if — as will happen if you miss out the 'who' — it can also hide responsibility for the action.

Compare "It has been identified that the Southtown Advice Centre needs a new computer system," with "The Trustees commissioned a feasibility study from experienced independent consultants. Their recommendation is that we install a new computer system." It's clear in the second one who did what.

We've seen many board minutes that say something along the lines of: "It was agreed that money should be raised for the new project." Usually such a minute is a death knell for the scheme. '*Who will do what?*' is a key question. And *active* sentences always answer that question.

4.

Put people in your writing

There's a misguided view that good writing is impersonal. It's sometimes called using the *third* person. But this approach can make your case sound 'cold' or — again — pseudo-academic. When you put yourself and the people you want to help in your case statement you gain two benefits. First, your writing is more alive and engaging. And second, you're forced to think about who you're writing *for*.

Let's go back to the advice centre. "Help with benefits is available at the advice centre" is not going to encourage local people to come in. Much better to say, "If you need help with benefits, then there is a team of five trained staff at the centre who can help." Or compare "Funds can ensure the long-term future of the

arts centre's education outreach programme" with "We need committed supporters keen to make a significant investment to help our trained educators continue their work with young people in schools."

Using metaphors

Finally let's look at one of the most powerful and neglected aspects of stories in general — the power of metaphors. A metaphor — from the Greek, 'to carry meaning' — is a figure of speech in which one thing or idea is linked to another.

Metaphors are popular and common in literature, especially with great writers. Have a look at any work by Dickens, Dante, or Whitman. The very best metaphors engage us in a powerful emotional way. Read, for example, the opening of Dickens' *Bleak House* with its description of fog as a metaphor for moral uncertainty. And metaphors are not just the preserve of 'high' culture. For many people Forrest Gump's "Life is like a box of chocolates," is a powerful metaphor (though it's really a simile) for accepting all parts of life — the bits you don't enjoy along with those you do. Hokey, but it works for some.

Technically metaphors are different from a range of other language techniques such as similes, analogies, and parables. But for the purposes of this chapter, let's assume they all serve as a means to emotionally engage those we wish to influence.

In what's come to be known as his *I have a dream* speech, Martin Luther King jnr proves himself a master of metaphor. He talks about "Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice," "...the quick sands of racial injustice," and "...the solid rock of justice." He has a dream that Mississippi "a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice." The richness and variety of the language and the images he conjures, carries King's audience along on an unstoppable wave of anger and optimism even today, even reading the speech more than 50 years later.

One notable contemporary example of a widely used metaphor that has been hugely useful for the environmental movement is Gaia. The name Gaia — symbolizing the ancient Greek goddess of the earth — was taken by James Lovelock to make concrete the idea of the planet as a living organism, with which people have to co-habit in harmony. Among others, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth have used the Gaia metaphor to explain to

donors why environmental concern is not just about recycling. It's about a way of life that allows us to share the living organism that is this planet.

More than just words

Sometimes words are not enough. To get around this, we've often used an approach in which 'physical objects' — toys, tools etc. — are used as metaphors.

We've been lucky to be involved in some fabulous examples of 'things' as fundraising metaphors. For instance, a few years ago we worked with the British Film Institute on its fundraising case. A lot of its work is about preserving historically interesting films from the 20s, 30s and 40s. And much of that work is quite prosaic — transferring movies from old, unstable, nitrate-based stock to new digital media. Hard to make engaging, but essential to preserving the cultural heritage. With the Director of Development, we came up with an idea.

When she met a donor, the Director began by presenting her case for protecting the cinematic heritage. And at the end she asked what was their favourite old movie? Next, she took a strip of film from a tin and rubbed it between her fingers, allowing it to crumble into a pile of ash-like material on the desk or table. She paused and then said, "That's what's happening to the original of your favourite film right now. And to many others like it." The donor would look aghast and, with their eyes never leaving the distressing ash pile, usually committed to give.

If you can come up with a 'physical' metaphor and use it to turn on the senses in a powerful way, your story will be much stronger.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bernard Ross is a Director of =mc consulting.

He co-authored *Breakthrough Thinking for Non-Profit Organisations* with Clare Segal — voted Best Non-Profit Book in the USA 2004. The Influential Fundraiser was nominated as one of the Top Five 'Must Read' Non-Profit Books in the New York Times in 2009. In 2016, the *Strategy Workout* was Global Fundraising by the Financial Times/Pearson, following which he co-edited Global Fundraising with Penny Cagney which won the Skystone Prize for Research and was published in China in 2018. *Change for Good,* followed by *Change for Better* and *Making the Ask.*

With his talented colleagues at =mc he has created global strategies for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, World Health Organization (WHO), Amnesty International, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and UNICEF International. As a fundraiser he's raised money to France's most famous tourist site, for a museum to house the world's largest dinosaur in Argentina and to save the last 800 great apes in Africa.

Contact Bernard at bernardross@mc.consulting

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