

Stewardship Forum

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Stewardship Tools for Fundraisers : Giving Matters

Title: Inspiration Superhighway

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Moving curiously slower, with a slight wiggle to the left and a hasty waggle back to the right, our family's favourite caterpillar twirls its way forward. With her faced pressed against the aquarium glass wall, in a tone of angst, my little girl asks, "Daddy, what's wrong with Fuzzy?" My assurance that Fuzzy and his actions are precisely the way nature intended is met with "then why does he look sick?" from inquisitive Emily.

For the next several minutes I shared the enchanting metamorphosis story of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly: how the journey of a caterpillar is one of crawling and climbing, but its quest is to soar far above the foliage it consumes. Emily's eyes glistened brighter with every word as her young mind was enlightened with the guiding truth of how life ascends towards new heights.

The magical response in my daughter's eyes is much like the one I receive from charities when I share the mystical story of the sleeping giant cocooned along the "Information Superhighway."

You know all about the "Information Superhighway." It's an international conglomeration of computer networks, a relentless emerging infrastructure that is revolutionizing communications and methods of commerce. Also referred to as the Internet, it offers access to information and supports written communication through e-mail and various forms of electronic conferencing. And unless you're a computer programmer or Al Gore, this last paragraph has done little to spark enthusiasm in your heart. Though the paragraph is factual and informative, this alone will not win the hearts of men and women.

There is no lack of information on this electronic boulevard. However, there is a disconcerting lack of spirit. A lack of vision to connect with people so they feel extraordinary. A lack of passion to seize the heart and challenge the soul. A lack of inspiration to give people meaning and purpose, to join others who share fundamental values in something profound.

The Internet's organic journey was powered by scientists and technologists consumed with a different passion. Masterful engineers of hardware and software worked with experts in design and usability, all motivated to achieve one thing ... the seamless distribution of communication. But an awakening must happen in order to understand the Internet's true quest is not merely to deliver communication, but rather to shape a message so it will strike emotion, engender trust, and persuade people to take action.

Charities, our slumbering giant, possess the most powerful messages to capture hearts for the remarkable; however, most utilize their fifteen megabytes of fame to present static

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corporate-speak taken straight from an annual report. Many non-profit websites are cluttered with facts, figures, and informative activities; very few sparkle with impact and personality. Certainly, the good news for charities is that the possibilities to inspire are endless. Furthermore, like all processes, change is inevitable, so it will be the champions of philanthropy who will usher in the transformation of the "Information Superhighway" to the "Inspiration Superhighway." Just like the caterpillar, our quest is to soar high above where we began. So, let me give your organization a gentle nudge and whisper in its ear, "Wake up and begin your metamorphosis ... present your message so it will win the hearts of people. For if you win their hearts, their minds will follow."

Perhaps now you aspire to inspire ... to appropriately translate your organization's powerful story to this new medium. If you are willing to lead by sharing your passion online, then I'll give you my Baker's Dozen of ideas to stir spirits to the remarkable.

0. **Establish one over-arching goal for your organization's website.** Though I have an open mind, I cannot imagine the ultimate goal to be anything other than to raise money. You may have other objectives for individual web pages, but they should support the achievement of the primary goal. Most charities do not exist to produce informative websites on a particular subject matter. Therefore, ensure that this medium is working to raise money so you may go out and fulfil your mission.
0. **Make an impression.** Often people will forget the details of a particular encounter, words that were spoken, one's attire, etc., but they will never forget how you made them feel. Therefore, have a vision to present your message in such a way that people will feel extraordinary about themselves.
0. **Write to connect with your visitors on an emotional level.** They have a passion to do something significant, so make sure your message speaks directly to their heart. People are looking for a place to belong philanthropically; be true to your cause so they may find you. Three secrets to writing emotional copy:
 - Embrace clarity. Concise, straight-forward communication to help the reader grasp the gravity of the situation.
 - Engage the reader by bringing them into the story. Explain their critical role so they feel important and a part of something greater than what they can do on their own.
 - Encounter the heart with picturesque phrases. Write like a painter, so the reader can visualize and feel the power of the story.
0. **Select the most interesting perspective from which to tell your story.** Each story can be told from various points of view. Captivate the reader's mind by letting them see reality from the most fascinating angle.
0. **Find your organization's voice, a unique blend of charisma, courage, and concern.** This will help differentiate your charity from the next in the minds of prospects and donors.

Stewardship Forum

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6. **Be persuasive by first understanding the specific action you want the reader to take.** Then, through images and words, direct the reader to see themselves taking that action.
7. **Be human.** Don't be an organization. Show the donor that you're people who are a part of a worthy cause, and that you're searching for more folks just like you. Allow donors and prospects to connect and join real people from your organization. As P.T. Barnum once said, "Nothing draws a crowd like a crowd."
8. **Illustrate your mission through images and pictures.** Allow people to become inspired by your visual presentation. It has been said that the eyes are the window to the soul. Keep that in mind when you choose the photos for your website.
9. **Present a virtual tour of your mission.** Not everyone has the firsthand opportunity to see your organization in action, and a virtual tour is the next best way to give people an idea of what you do. Let people see from the perspective of the people you serve "what the alley looks like for a person who calls it home." Furthermore, your e-mail gift acknowledgment might include a link to a virtual tour of their gift in action, making positive change - perhaps a warm smiling face that says, "thank you for saving me."
10. **Write in an active and conversational style.** The Internet is the most powerful marketing medium because you can have a conversation. Don't speak to people as if they are reading your corporate brochure, but rather as though they were sitting across from you.
11. **Stop spending 90% of your organization's resources on technology and only 10% on your online message.** Let others chase the latest technology solution for you, which is always changing and will always be readily available. It's the words, imagery, and personality you present that will stand out in the hearts and minds of people, not the flexing of your proverbial "Flash" muscle.
12. **Give your headlines soul.** Many people read in "scan" mode, skimming for relevant information before deciding to read further. Often all people will read is a headline, so you should approach them as the ultimate "short story." Headlines that work have these three qualities.
 - They seize the reader's attention.
 - They inspire the reader on an emotional level.
 - They spark curiosity, which motivates the reader to continue.
13. **Understand online human behaviour.** People behave differently when they read online as opposed to offline, just as we adjust expectations when we walk into a McDonald's versus an Outback Steakhouse. In both instances we perform the same functions (reading and eating), but our attitudes, patience levels, and actions are very different. Here are three things that will help you present your message so it gets viewed and embraced.

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1. Make a good first impression. In seconds, people will determine whether they should stay or go; therefore, the words and images of your homepage must communicate the most compelling reasons that will motivate people to action. How many times have you walked out of McDonald's or kept driving if the line was too long, despite your belief that waiting 20 minutes for a table at a nice restaurant is not a big deal? You must not hide your best stories deep within your website. Adopt the mindset that you must instantly inspire.
0. Keep in mind, a book-reading atmosphere does not exist with the Internet. People are not curled up in a big comfortable chair, turning pages beneath soft lighting. Rather, they sit in a chair designed for work, vigorously scanning, clicking, and scrolling. This is how people navigate through information online - so make sure your inspirational message is presented in the most convenient form.
0. Each page of your website should have an objective with the visitor in mind. Help the reader find answers so they can discover their own passion as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Emily can't wait for Fuzzy to wake up now that she knows everything is all right and how beautiful he will be. She's excited to see him fly free, to watch him soar as high as he wants to go. My promise to Emily is that Fuzzy will break out of his cocoon at any moment, and this is my vision for you. To help you see what is truly possible, to give this Information Superhighway a soul. Who better to replace mere information with inspiration than you, a champion of philanthropy?

"The two most engaging powers of an author are to make new things familiar and familiar things new." Samuel Johnson

About the author. Todd Baker is a Senior Consultant, Marketing and Strategic Planning for The Domain Group an International consulting group serving charitable organisations. For more information and ideas please visit www.thedomaingroup.com