Story Building Blocks

Fundamental elements of compelling stories

1. AN EFFECTIVE CHARACTER

✓ Universal need (often emotional/intangible rather than physical/tangible)

✓ Relatable for similarities (i.e. mother, father, etc.) or through connection to unexpected obstacle (i.e. "it could happen to me, too")

✓ Charismatic, yet authentic (not necessarily a perfectly polished spokesperson)

✓ Three-dimensional (What do others think of the character? What other interests/personality traits does s/he possess? Not solely defined by their need.)

✓ NOT the organization in most cases; the organization is a supporting character

✓ Consider confidentiality and/or ethical implications of asking someone to be your featured character

2. TRAJECTORY

✓ Plot that propels the story forward; think action!

✓ Choices/devices to consider:

- Where/when to start?
- Time sequence – linear, or flashback/forward?
- Pacing – get into action quickly or slow build-up?
- Whether/how to resolve the story?
- Setbacks or no setbacks? (as a way to acknowledge organizational failure/growth)

3. AUTHENTICITY

✓ Character's voice, perspective – and the perspectives of others

✓ Details; telling your audience how to feel vs. showing your audience and letting them decide how they feel (hint: the latter is much more compelling!)

✓ Avoid jargon

✓ Provide broader context about issue prevalence, past challenges/successes, etc.

4. ACTION-ORIENTED EMOTIONS

✓ Move people to action

✓ Choose active emotions (anger, anxiety, excitement, awe) vs. passive ones (contentment, sadness)*

✓ Follow up with a call-to-action in your content or presentation (or both)

5. A "HOOK"

✓ Lead with a sense of urgency

✓ Immediately provide a sense of whose story it is, what's happening at this moment in time, and what's at stake.**

* Berger, J. (2009). Contagious: Why Things Catch On. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
** Cron, L. (2012). Wired for Story. New York, NY: Ten Speed Press.