

# 3 Keys to Powerful Ministry Storytelling



**BBS &**  
ASSOCIATES



## Key 1 — Understand Why Stories Are Absolutely Crucial

A donor is not automatically inspired to give. Her responses are triggered by specific components of your communication with her.

(Why “her” and not “him”? Because most donor dollars start with the woman of the household, either sorting through the mail or her email inbox. She may check with a male before giving, but either way, chances are that it’s a woman who actually makes the contribution.)

*She may be thrilled with what your ministry is doing, but still not inspired to give.*

You may even ask her to give, to help you keep doing the thing that thrills her,



and yet she doesn't give.

Why?

Because she's

1. Busy.
2. Distracted.
3. Or a bad reader.
4. Or she has some residue of doubt about the value, the impact, of the ministry.
5. She's not as intensely committed to the ministry as you'd like her to be, certainly not as much as you are. So sure, it's good enough for her to enjoy consuming it for "free," but to get her to give, you have to climb over the hurdles of busy-ness, distraction, doubt, and more.

## **The single best weapon for winning this battle is a real story of the ministry's impact on an individual life.**

In her heart, the donor is looking for people she can relate to in some facet of her life, and whose lives have been directly impacted by the work of the ministry: someone who came to faith in Christ, a homeless woman who got a job, an abused child rescued and now thriving in school, a troubled marriage saved, a drug addict delivered, a suicide averted, religious freedom protected.

(If you have data about the people on your list that tells you more specifically what they care about — say you keep a record of who gives to which types of projects — stories tuned to those priorities will be even more effective.)

As the great fundraiser Tom Ahern (@ThatTomAhern) says, a true story is “the medicine that instantly soothes ordinary

cases of ‘the doubts.’ Credible testimonial leaps tall doubts in a single bound. Use testimonial often, everywhere. Testimonial quickly switches off garden-variety, low-grade skepticism.”

Commercial marketers have understood this concept for a long time. Erik Qualman, in his book *Socialnomics: How Social Media Transforms the Way We Live and Do Business*, reports that 78% of consumers reportedly trust peer reviews — affirmation of the company’s value from someone who actually used it — but only 14% will trust a company’s marketing or advertising materials. This has serious implications for ministries. We can tell the donor we’re worth supporting, but to “see” and “hear” the firsthand story of someone who was actually impacted by the ministry is far more powerful.

A Fundraising123.org whitepaper reports that in a survey of more than 400

non-profit organizations conducted by Network for Good (@Network4Good), 56% of participants said that stories have improved their fundraising results to some degree — and *none* noted any decrease. (The rest said it's too early to tell, or they're not sure how to measure.)

### ***How passionate should you be about collecting stories?***

One major ministry employed two full-time staffers who did nothing but follow up on testimonies. Testimonies were valued so highly that any call or letter containing the germ of a testimony was funneled to these workers. They would write or call the individual, conduct an interview, and, in some cases, follow up with a camera crew. The most compelling stories wound up on the ministry's television show, but dozens of less fantastic testimonies made their way into their newsletters, appeal letters, and — perhaps

most importantly — receipt letters.

- The personalized letter over the leader's signature which accompanied every donor receipt almost always included a brief testimony.
- Also in the receipt package was a "bounce-back" coupon — a generic response device designed to accompany another gift.
- As a result of the ministry's consistent sharing of success stories — evidence of the donor's investment bearing actual dividends in people's lives — the receipt package bounce-back coupon grew to represent as much as a *third* of the ministry's total gift income!

Down through the years we have seen ministries (more than we could list in

this eBook) devote themselves faithfully to the collection and re-transmission of testimonies.

- One ministry dedicates at least one intern a year to focus solely on gathering true stories of lives changed through the ministry's work.
- Another with missionary partners and staff worldwide provides them with a simple form for testimonies and asks them to fill in the blanks (and a photo if possible) whenever they come across a good story. The stories go to the staff member's "Regional Champion" (who receives not only testimonies but also prayer requests and other key information) — there's one Champion for each of the organization's 13 regions around

the world. The stories go into a program, and a Resource Team in the central ministry office reviews them monthly, asking the Champions to get more details if needed. Video crews also record testimonies in the field.

- A humanitarian organization's staff members carry cameras and gather stories and photos when they travel to the organization's field offices, and file them in a central online storage space via the team's messaging app. A social-networking staffer sorts them and follows up as needed. The home team also takes every opportunity to talk directly with field staff to catch any mention they make of stories as they're engaged in their daily work. (Field workers may not even realize they're telling a good

story.) The organization also schedules up to four visits a year by paid consultants — story-gathering professionals — to field offices; this improves the quality of story resource and, again, unearths stories that field workers may not recognize.

Far more common are ministries whose personnel sigh helplessly, “We never hear about stories like that,” or “We can’t afford to put any of our staff on that.”

The fact is, a ministry can’t afford not to pursue testimonies. Without consistent living evidence of the efficacy of your ministry, you aren’t inspiring your donors as deeply as you could.

***SOTO is your friend ... a very, very valuable friend***

At BBS & Associates ([@BBSAssociates](#)), we often refer to “SOTO” — the Story

Of The One. SOTO engages the donor because this is another human being, and it's someone affirming the truthfulness of the ministry's pitch. It's someone saying, "I know firsthand that this ministry does what it says, and it's awesome."

The average donor is far more interested in what happened to someone than they are in how your program works, or why.

SOTO is good medicine for a ministry's "manic depressive syndrome" — either communicating with too much information and not enough emotion, or the other way around. SOTO has the natural effect of leveling out either extreme.

If you're more inclined to raise money via *emotion* than information, SOTO provides some substance — hard evidence indicating that your ministry is actually accomplishing something with the donor's dollars. Not that you can use

a story and abandon the use of hard facts altogether — but a testimony helps.

If you're more inclined to raise money via *information* than emotion — not really comfortable expressing a lot of passion online, in media, or in direct mail — tell the “story of the one” in an appeal, and you almost automatically heighten the emotional quotient of your communication. Not that you can use a story and abandon the use of emotional language altogether — but a testimony helps. (One of BBS's core values is “We encourage ministries to document authentic results — not only the financial, but also the practical and spiritual.” We'd love to talk with you more about this.)

*Either extreme* — emotionalism or informationalism — undercuts a ministry's potential for building donor relationships. In both scenarios, the ministry fails to distinguish between being fascinated and

being fascinating.

Regardless of the ministry's motives, the donor does not want or need to know the details of the ministry's operation.

**How the ministry happens is not nearly as important to her as what the ministry *accomplishes*.** We must paint the picture of RESULTS in her mind.

*You can never talk too much about the success of your ministry, and SOTO is one of the most effective ways to communicate success.*

Testimonies sometimes nicely bridge the gap between what the ministry needs the money for and what the donor will sit still to learn about.

- “We’ve got to book the hall now in order to prepare for the outreach.” I don’t care. Tell me about Lorraine, who was strung out on drugs but somehow

came to Christ through the last outreach you staged.

- “We need new computers in order to process ministry correspondence and donations more efficiently.” I don’t care. Tell me about Patrick, to whom God gave a whole new life through your ministry, because someone like me gave generously! *Then* I’m happy to donate, and you can use the money to advance the ministry by meeting whatever the immediate operational need may be!

## Key 2 — Understand What Makes a Strong Ministry Story

What makes a good ministry story?  
*A life changed.*

- A good story is a vivid picture of what someone *was*, how they were *touched* by the ministry, and what *happened* to them as a result.
- A good story keeps you engaged in the dramatic unfolding of events.
- A good story has you cheering at the end, and wanting more!

Think of any movie you love. This is how it works.



Or think of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. He gives us wonderful detail. We see the son's arrogance. We can imagine him recklessly spending his inheritance, we can feel the hunger and smell the slop fed to the pigs. We experience that moment when everything changes — his change of heart. And when his father runs to him, we recognize the grace ... and we cheer!

***How well is your ministry telling its stories of life change?***

It's very important for the entire arc of the story to be presented. The individual was in one condition before, then the ministry connected with them, now they're in another condition. The best stories are the ones in which the transformation is very clear.

Here's an example, from an appeal letter sent by a ministry that rescues troubled teens:

...She was struggling — the weight of the world on her shoulders.

Her destructive behaviors were stacked like a string of dominos about to tumble: trapped in an abusive relationship, a prisoner to self-harm, confused about her sexual identity, dependent on alcohol to numb her pain....

When she contacted us, she summed it all up in one telling word: “exhausted.” She couldn’t hold on to this life much longer.

Thanks to you, she didn’t have to.

We listened. We comforted. We assured Mia she wasn’t alone. We connected Mia to the help she needed to escape the destructive holds on her life.

And then, we tackled the tough stuff: death and suicide. We gave her

good news about a better life — a life where Abba Father was in control. We shared the Gospel. Mia prayed to receive Christ as her Lord and Savior. She ended the call with four awesome words:

“You saved my life.”

My friend, I don’t share Mia’s story with you because it’s unique — but because it’s all too common. Her pain is shared by so many teens and young adults ... an entire generation of hurting, hopeless, lost, confused, and dying young people.

To this, I say enough is enough. *No more.* Because God has given us the tools we need to rescue them. To give them hope. And to save their lives....

Note that the story doesn’t include every detail, only the details that help engage the reader and make the point

clear. It also includes the donor, the reader, in the story: “Thanks to you....” The organization doesn’t stand alone as the hero of the story. The donor is a hero!

Here’s another example, from a humanitarian-aid group:

Luisa’s four children were always sick with stomach problems, parasites, flu, fungal infections of the skin and scalp. To stave off illness, Luisa boiled the water — when she could afford propane or firewood — and put a couple drops of chlorine in their drinking water. She boiled herbs as “treatment” when the chlorine didn’t work. She had few other options. The closest clinic was almost an hour away.

The children, meanwhile, were drinking from the river, where the villagers did their washing and provided for their animals. “Because

the river is flowing, it must be clean," people said.

But then we came to this little village of 575 people. We offered training in the importance of water purification, and how to accomplish it. For the first time, Luisa and her husband Catalino began to realize how bad the village water was. Even water that appeared to be clean could be full of bacteria, a danger to them and their children. "This training has opened our eyes!" Luisa says.

Now the family fills jugs from the village's new water purification system, and uses only this water. The children are healthy, they're in school every day — they have hope for the future!

They are helping with maintenance of the village water purification system. And

they're sharing their newfound understanding with their neighbors and friends. Some 70% of the village residents are now using purified water.

This community is being transformed by God's love, expressed through the miracle of clean water. This is ultimate impact ... thanks to the generous support of caring friends like you!

These are the kinds of stories that can make a significant impact on the donor or prospective donor. A story can open an appeal, or close an appeal, or appear in the middle of the appeal — this decision depends on numerous factors which have to be considered on a case-by-case basis. The key in any event is to include the story!

So we need to look for the success stories. The ministry's communications to its supporters need to feature stories of people whose lives are different because

of the ministry. If the ministry is actually accomplishing something of value, it is somehow helping people — but if a ministry never lets the donor meet those people, the ministry has failed to capitalize on its single most effective tool for persuading donors to be involved personally.

Unfortunately, if the ministry doesn't invest its energies in finding those “helped people” and capturing their experiences, then only the tiniest fraction of such true-life testimonies will ever surface.

The vast majority of ministries have no apparatus at all for collecting success stories — which is what “testimonies” really are — because they do not understand the crucial importance of sharing them with donors.

Some ministries, in fact, actually resist the use of testimonies. Maybe they've been turned off by the melodramatic weepers on late-night

charity infomercials. But rejecting the use of testimonies on this basis throws out the proverbial baby with the bathwater.

The true story of an individual makes a powerful visceral connection between the ministry and the donor. As a donor, I can relate to another human being — better than I can relate to your telling me about the ministry's operations or the ministry's vision or the ministry's reason for being — or even your telling me statistics about thousands of people helped.

Even if the ministry masks the identity of the individual to protect his or her privacy, the sharing of that story gives the ministry a certain credibility that no volume of statistics or celebrity endorsements can duplicate.

***How can you collect the elements of a good story?***

Many people are naturally good

storytellers. Others aren't. If you're dealing with someone impacted by your ministry who isn't a naturally good storyteller, you may find that some or all of these questions will help them share more of the detail, and the color, of their story.

This list isn't comprehensive; you don't have to use all of these questions. Let them be idea-starters. Adapt them as needed. Add questions of your own. (You can also ask these questions of current donors to your ministry, as well as people who serve with your organization. You may find great stories among these groups as well!)

1. How did you first become acquainted with or involved with this ministry?
2. When did this happen? Where were you located at the time? What was going on in your life?
3. What were your first impressions of the ministry?

4. How has the ministry impacted your life?  
What happened?
5. When did this occur? Where?
6. What kind of need were you facing?  
What kind of obstacle or challenge or  
opposition were you going through?
7. How did the ministry help you through  
this?
8. How simple, or difficult, was this  
process?
9. How did you feel about this experience  
at first?
10. How, if at all, did your feelings about it  
change over time?
11. How much of a surprise was this? How  
fully did you expect it, or see it coming?
12. How did this impact others in your life?
13. What kind of after-effects or side-effects  
have you experienced in your life as a result?

14. What other changes or differences have you observed in your life since this ministry-impact experience?
15. How has this experienced changed you? How are you different today than you were before this experience?
16. What's next for you? What do you foresee in the future?

(You'll probably need basic information on the individual, so ask for the following details:)

### *Logistics*

1. Name
2. Address
3. Phone
4. Email
5. What information should we withhold from publication?
6. Do we have permission to use your name and photo in written materials about the ministry?

## Key 3 — Implement a Plan for Getting Great Ministry Stories

**A**s ministry marketers, we find it much easier to talk about how we do ministry than what comes of it. The “story of the one” takes far more work than the “story of assembling the food boxes” or the “story of building the school building” or the “story of getting on six more TV stations to reach a million more people.”

A ministry has to set up systems by which the stories can be obtained. How can you systematically find testimonies?

*If your organization ministers primarily to the donor personally — a broadcast or teaching ministry, for example:*



1. Create a place on your website asking visitors to share how the ministry has impacted their lives. A “true story” blog page associated with your website is easy to set up, and gives people an opportunity not only to read others’ stories but to add their own.
2. Use social media to ask the question, “How has this ministry touched your life?”
3. Take a survey, via direct mail or email.
4. We often suggest soliciting testimonies from donors in a more-or-less-standardized area of the direct mail response form (the back, maybe?).
5. You can also routinely indicate “We’d love to hear your story” as part of your receipt letters — directing the donor to a specific landing page on your website and/or providing a special tear-off response form.

6. You can also establish an annual “Letter Week” as a tradition, where you ask people to share what the ministry has meant to them. (In any case, the more you feature people’s letters and stories in your newsletter — or on social media, your website, or broadcast — the more people will send you their stories on their own.)
7. Announce via Facebook and Instagram that you’ll be doing a live video at a certain date and time. In the live feed, announce that you’re looking for stories of lives touched through the work of the ministry. Let people respond by email, Facebook message, or online comment. Make sure you’re ready with an instant reply message to everyone who responds!

*If your organization ministers primarily to others, outside the donor family — if you’re a disaster relief group, a child*

sponsorship organization, or a Christian school, for example — you have a harder job. You'll do best if you make story-collecting a priority at the “point of sale” — where the ministry is actually occurring:

1. Ask your disaster relief caregivers to write up and email or text their reports to you, with photos and/or videos.
2. Or write to the caregivers who deal directly with the sponsored children in your program and ask for their impressions of outstanding or unusual cases.
3. Or get on a schedule of contacting each teacher in your Christian school — maybe once a quarter? — in hopes of hearing about kids making extraordinary progress ... or about kids making ordinary progress, but who couldn't have come to school

at all if it weren't for those donor-subsidized scholarships.

4. At a ministry event, give every attendee a card which asks them to tell you about the ministry's impact in their lives — and to give you contact information so you can follow up. Post on social media and give them the hashtag to use, inviting them to post their story in words, photos, and/or video.
5. For maximum impact, take a moment in the middle of the event to distribute the cards and urge people to fill them out.
6. Deploy a videographer (or someone with a cell phone) at your event to conduct "man on the street" interviews before and after the event, asking "What brings you to this event?" or "How has the ministry impacted your life?"

7. Give a volunteer or intern free admission to an event if they'll roam and collect stories from attendees. (Arm them with a question guide — as well as a camera and a photo guide, to help them capture both the story and a usable photo at once.)
8. Some ministries have set up a dedicated phone line with voicemail. They publish the number in their printed and digital communications, urging people to share their stories — and/or prayer requests.
9. In fact, if your ministry solicits people's prayer requests, you can always add a bit to your response along the lines of "We'd love to hear how God answers this prayer for you," plus a specific link, phone number, or address they can use to communicate further.

Another great way to communicate the success of your ministry is to feature

donor profiles — first- or third-person accounts of people who are involved in supporting the ministry, how they got involved, what they're doing, and — most important of all — why they're doing it.

You may well have other excellent ideas yourself. But all of these possibilities sink or swim on one bottom-line reality: You'll need an individual or a specific team of individuals designated to follow up on stories. *The goal is to get both the "before" and the "after" of each story.*

As stories or potential stories arrive at your doorstep, by whatever means, someone has to take specific responsibility to write or call back to get the details, to obtain the kind of color that turns that story into something that can really sing to your donors and prospective donors. In our experience, we can say pretty definitively that if you don't designate someone on your staff, or

a committed volunteer, to focus on story follow-up, it's unlikely to happen.

We'd love to talk with you more about this very important subject.

Please contact our own "story guru,"

Jim Alexander, via:

[jalexander@servantheart.com](mailto:jalexander@servantheart.com) or

(330) 665-5227.

Thank you!

# Who is BBS & ASSOCIATES?

## We are Ministry Development Specialists.

We strive to glorify and serve God by engaging people's hearts and minds — to extend His Kingdom by advancing a ministry's unique God-given vision.

By God's grace, with a growing team of professionals, we've had the privilege of serving more than 100 ministries over the course of a quarter century.

## Some of our services:

Donor Relationship Counsel  
Synergistic Fundraising Campaign Development  
Direct Mail Strategies  
Digital Strategies  
Donor Analytics and Donor Research  
More...

## Our Values

- We seek to glorify God together and recognize Him as the Source of all provision.
- We strive to work and act with integrity.
- We strive to carefully steward our God-given abilities in order to serve and empower our clients and each other.
- We strive to work as a team and treat each other as we would like to be treated.
- We seek to encourage ministries to document authentic results — not only the financial, but also the practical and spiritual.

We welcome the opportunity to talk with you about more effective storytelling and fundraising for your ministry!



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