

NARRATE IMPACT RESEARCH

The Numbers Behind Nonprofit Storytelling

How stories shape funding, engagement, support, and mission awareness. The data nonprofits need to tell better stories and avoid common pitfalls.

Storytelling is one of the most powerful tools a nonprofit can use to raise money, keep donors, and get people to care about their mission. But when it's done the wrong way, it can also cause real harm. This report breaks down what the research says about how stories affect funding, engagement, support, and public awareness, with real examples of organizations that got it right and some that got it wrong.

FUNDING

Stories Help People Give More

A famous 2007 study from Carnegie Mellon University tested what happens when you ask people to donate. One group read the story of Rokia, a seven-year-old girl in Mali who was facing starvation. Another group just got facts and statistics about hunger. The people who read Rokia's story gave an average of \$2.38. The people who only saw statistics gave \$1.14. That means the story group gave more than double.

Neuroscientist Paul Zak at Claremont Graduate University found out why. When people hear stories about a real person, their brains release a chemical called oxytocin. This chemical is linked to empathy and trust. In his experiments, people given extra oxytocin donated to 57% more charities and gave 56% more money. When a video ad triggered both attention and empathy, donations jumped by 261%.

2x

Story donors gave more than double vs stats-only

Carnegie Mellon, 2007

261%

Donation increase from empathy-triggering video

Zak, Claremont

114%

More funding for campaigns with video

Classy Platform

57%

Of YouTube nonprofit viewers go on to donate

Google/YouTube

82%

Of nonprofits use storytelling in fundraising

Network for Good

55%

Saw improved results after adding storytelling

Network for Good

90%

Of donors want data alongside stories

Storyraise 2024

22x

Stories remembered more than facts alone

Stanford GSB

The 2024 Storyraise benchmark report found that 70% of donors say they want stories showing the results of their gifts. But 90% also want data and numbers alongside those stories. The best approach combines both.

ENGAGEMENT

Storytelling Keeps Donors Coming Back

Keeping donors is one of the biggest challenges in the nonprofit world. According to the Fundraising Effectiveness Project, only 42.9% of donors gave again in Q4 2024. For first-time donors, the number drops to just 19.4%. That means about four out of every five new donors never give a second time.

Storytelling is one of the few things proven to help. Nonprofits that use storytelling well have a 45% donor retention rate. Those that don't only keep about 27% of their donors. Organizations that regularly improve their storytelling see a 34% boost in retention.

45%

Retention rate WITH storytelling

Nonprofits Source

27%

Retention rate WITHOUT storytelling

Nonprofits Source

1,519%

More from 5-year donors vs one-time

Nonprofits Source

7.5x

Cost to acquire new donor vs keeping one

FEP

On social media, story-based content dramatically outperforms alternatives. Posts with personal stories get 30% more shares. Social videos get 1,200% more shares than text and image posts combined. Nonprofits that tell stories on social platforms see engagement rates up to 65% higher. Email remains the top channel for inspiring giving, with personalized story-driven emails increasing click-through rates by 14% and conversion rates by 10%.

1,200%

More shares for social video vs text/image

M+R Benchmarks

65%

Higher engagement for story-focused nonprofits

SocialTargeter

37%

Nonprofit TikTok follower growth in 2024

Rival IQ

28.6%

Nonprofit email open rate vs 21% for business

NP Tech for Good

SUCCESS STORIES

Five Nonprofits That Turned Stories into Millions

charity: water

\$260M+ raised, 16,000+ water projects, 24 countries

Built almost entirely on storytelling and radical transparency. Their second hire was a creative director. The Birthday Campaign platform created over 190,000 individual fundraisers and raised more than \$35 million. One campaign started by 9-year-old Rachel Beckwith with a \$300 goal grew to \$1.2 million.

Humans of New York

\$15M+ raised through social media alone

Brandon Stanton raised over \$15 million with no traditional fundraising setup. Single campaigns raised \$3.85M for pediatric cancer, \$2.5M for one woman's medical bills, and \$1.42M for a Brooklyn school where the \$100K goal was met in under an hour. During the pandemic, HONY raised about \$8 million over 18 months.

St. Jude Children's Research Hospital

\$2B record year, 11M donors

Patient stories are the backbone of fundraising. 68% of revenue comes from households earning under \$75,000, proving emotional stories motivate giving regardless of income. Domino's raised a record \$19.6M through story-driven campaigns. Tri Delta sorority accumulated \$100M over 25 years.

ALS Ice Bucket Challenge

\$115M in 6 weeks, 3,500% increase

Over 17 million people participated, generating 10 billion video views reaching 440 million people. For every dollar raised, grantees attracted \$7.01 in follow-on funding, bringing total research impact to nearly \$1 billion. Led to five new gene discoveries and two FDA-approved treatments.

Pencils of Promise

500+ schools, 30K+ students, 4 countries

Grew from a \$25 founding investment in 2008 to raising over \$5 million per year by 2012 through grassroots social media storytelling. Average peer-to-peer fundraisers raised \$2,000 to \$7,000 each.

THE RISKS

When Storytelling Goes Wrong

The same emotional triggers that make stories effective can cause real harm when overused or done poorly. About 70% of Americans report feeling donor fatigue after an average of just four donation requests per month.

The Fundraising Effectiveness Project found a 4.5% decline in total donors in 2024, the fourth year in a row.



Compassion Fade

Research shows compassion starts to drop with just the second person in need. As numbers grow, people feel less, not more.

Poverty Porn

A 2024 study found negative portrayals of people in poverty caused viewers to see them as less capable. This strips people of dignity.

White Savior Framing

Comic Relief suspended sending celebrities to African countries in 2020. Kony 2012 reached 100M views but was rejected by communities it claimed to help.

Deception vs. Emotion

Donors care more about being tricked than being emotionally moved. Staged photos cause stronger backlash than genuine emotional stories.

TRUST

Transparency and Trust Pay Off

A peer-reviewed study of over 6,300 organizations found that nonprofits with GuideStar Seals of Transparency received 53% more in contributions the following year. Gold and Platinum profiles get twice the views, with donations averaging 11% higher. Nearly one in four donors has stopped giving because of insufficient transparency.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

What This Means for Your Organization

01. Combine Stories with Data

90% of donors want numbers alongside narratives, even though stories beat statistics in experiments. The best approach uses both together.

02. Keep Stories Individual

Compassion fade is real and starts right away. Going from one person's story to two already weakens the emotional response. Focus on one person at a time.

03. Prioritize Honesty Over Intensity

Donors react more negatively to being tricked than to being moved. Consent, accuracy, and dignity are the foundation of storytelling that actually works.

The nonprofits that will do best are the ones that treat storytelling not as a marketing trick but as a responsible practice. One that centers the people being served, pairs emotion with evidence, and earns trust through honesty rather than taking it through manipulation.

Narrate Impact

The Story System That Helps Nonprofits Show Their Impact

narrateimpact.com

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This report was compiled by Narrate Impact using peer-reviewed research, industry benchmark reports, and documented nonprofit case studies. For questions or updated data, visit narrateimpact.com/insights.