

TELLING YOUR STORY



Completing your planning steps for a new fund development initiative often feels like a jolt of energy to your agency, staff, and Board. When the moment comes to make actual calls or to attend real face-to-face meetings, paralyzing fear can bring all of that great momentum to a halt. As referenced in **Drafting a First Contact**, carefully choosing scripts, wording, and talking points is critical to conveying a strong message. Determining the best choices and narrowing the right information can be challenging. Remember you will learn from your mistakes, and as long as you are genuine, it's okay to try and fail. In fact, it's inevitable! You'll be able to revisit and refine your message over time to yield better results.

Know Your History

It's important that everyone speaking on behalf of your agency has a basic understanding of the history of the program. **Each person should be able to tell a concise review of how the organization began, who started it, why they did, and how it has evolved over time.** The history should show a passionate origin and a culture of bringing about change.

Brevity, however, is key! It can be disastrous to open a meeting or call with a lengthy lesson on the history of the community with extensive, boring details. **Be brief and be prepared to answer more follow-up questions.** Talk about present needs, not volumes of past information.

Keep to Key Topics

Everyone has a tendency to lose track of their thoughts when nervous. Before you approach a donor, be sure to have a firm grasp of the 4-5 main topics you aim to feature, and keep those close for reference if you feel you've veered off course. Beyond securing the donation, a loftier goal is to **deliver a message so clear and easy that donors can turn around and repeat it** to friends or family when explaining their choice. Keeping a donor's support will be difficult if the work of your organization is hard to describe.



Highlight the Larger Impact

While you might want to weave in some narratives of people who've benefited from your services, it is smart to **consistently bring focus back to the broader improvements in the community that your agency provides.**



Make Stories Identifiable

When you are telling your story, it can be very difficult to link the needs of a homeless family whose mother has lost her minimum wage job to the life of the wealthy business owner sitting in front of you. You may struggle to relate the population your program serves to the people you'd like to ask for support, but **keeping to broad themes can help in this matter.** Loss, medical issues, family crisis, and job stress are universal themes with which everyone can identify. Most parents worry every day about their children's care and education, regardless of income or situation, so any agency that helps families can build from that connection. It may take time, brainstorming, and creative thinking, but you will be surprised at the associations you can construct and use.



Use Illustrative Language

It may seem contrary to the "Highlighting the Larger Impact" approach above, but while maintaining broader themes, you should strive to choose detailed language about your organization. For example, instead of the generic "kids," use "preschoolers;" instead of "needy," use "families with children living in poverty." **You can still stick to wider community themes, yet use words that truly convey the details of your services.** A much clearer picture can often be painted with a relatively simple edit.



Highlight Uniqueness

Before you begin writing your stories, brainstorm the following five questions:

1. How are our services different than others offered in our community?
2. How is our staff and agency structure different than others in our community?
3. What do we do that NO ONE else does?
4. Why will we make better use of someone's money than another agency will?
5. If I were a person in need, why would I choose to seek help from our organization?

Chances are good that every individual and business with whom you speak about possible donations will have also been asked by a number of other similar nonprofits. **Something about your program MUST stand out and cause them to listen just a little more closely.** Perhaps your educational standards for your employees are much higher than other agencies. Maybe you collect far more data and measurements of your programs' outcomes, resulting in quantitative results that can show success to donors. Perhaps you are the only agency providing prenatal counseling for teen parents. Spend time looking for these special characteristics and then capitalize on them!



One way to tailor your story to certain audiences, while keeping the main themes and focus the same, is to **tell it from varying perspectives.** Although your 4-5 key topics and the unique qualities about your program you've chosen to stress should remain consistent, the lens through which the story is viewed can be changed. Possible ideas include testimonials from other donors, volunteers, staff members, community leaders, past or current clients, or children. See **Featuring Different Perspectives.**