

Using Stories to Recruit New Members

While “storytelling” (the art of conveying information or educating people using a story) has been a part of almost every culture throughout history, it was shunned by many nonprofits for decades. Instead, perhaps in an effort to be “corporate-like,” organizations have focused on data and “hard facts.” However, very recently, this trend has begun to change. Both corporations and organizations have rediscovered the tremendous value of “storytelling.” They have come to understand that:

There is no more powerful marketing tool than a story about the organization.

According to Andy Goodman, a trainer and national expert on storytelling, “We [the nonprofit world] remain a sector devoted to data and enamored of empirical evidence. And while we will always need hard facts to make our cases, we often fail to realize that the battle for hearts and minds starts *with the hearts*. The audience you seek will only give its attention to things it cares about, and caring is not an entirely rational activity. Consequently, it’s incumbent upon us to make an emotional connection *before* we start feeding them raw facts, and stories have this ability. That’s one of the reasons that they have been around for eons, and, to my mind, continue to be the single most effective communication tool at our disposal.”

Beyond “emotional” response, neuroscientists believe that they have identified a section of the brain whose sole purpose is to take in information and make sense of it by fitting it into the story of our own life. In other words, we are “hard wired” to receive and process stories. Stories make abstract concepts or ideas, such as “good government,” understandable, relatable, and even compelling. Very simply, stories are incredibly persuasive.

It is not difficult to see examples of how corporations have started to embrace storytelling. Ad campaigns have been developed around personal stories by supermarket chains, home improvement stores, and television stations. The League also utilizes this approach as part of the Membership and Leadership Development Program. LWVUS created the LWV Storybank, a vehicle to collect stories from members about the value of League membership.

This section of the handbook contains recommendations for the solicitation, promotion, and use of League members’ stories. The stories can be used in a variety of ways to create a personal connection between potential new members and the League.



The LWV Storybank

The Storybank is housed on the LWVUS website. To ensure that the Storybank is as robust as possible, it is very important that League members use the online submission tool on www.lwv.org to submit their stories. LWVUS will forward a copy of any story submitted to the Storybank to the appropriate local and state League president and initiative coordinators for local use. The Storybank form has mechanisms in place (such as an automated “thank you” to the submitter) to make the collection process efficient and easy.



How to Collect Your Members’ Stories

Via Letters/E-mails - Direct outreach to local League members is important. A personal letter asking them to submit a story is a good way to start. Members will feel honored that their personal stories can help put a “face” on the League and assist in membership recruitment. In a letter or e-mail, encourage members to use that online submission form on www.lwv.org. If you prefer to send letters (some members find e-mails impersonal), we suggest pairing the solicitation with one of your League’s regular mailings, such as a membership renewal notices or fundraising appeals. These mailings may actually improve renewal and fundraising returns as the members solicited will feel more connected to/invested in the League after telling their own story. A solicitation letter template is available.

Via Meetings - League meetings are perfect opportunities to bring up the Storybank. The next time your League gathers, rather than just asking people to participate in the Storybank, start by reading a personal story or asking one or two members to share their stories orally. This is incredibly energizing and a great way to remind those there about why they came to the League. Once they are engaged, explain what the Storybank is and how it will assist your League with membership recruitment. Conclude by asking members to participate by submitting their own stories. Members need



to know that their work of writing and submitting stories will make a difference. Remind members that stories do not have to be long (a maximum of 300 words) or about a large-scale project or initiative; succinct stories about what League membership means to them personally or what their membership in League means to their community will be very powerful tools in recruiting new members. Reiterate that every story, big or small, is welcome in the Storybank.



Via a Story Event - Your League may consider holding a “story event” where you spend an evening or afternoon explaining the Storybank, telling stories, and collecting more stories from League members. This is a great opportunity to capture stories from members who do not have access to the internet or a computer. Set up a “submissions corner,” where a member can sit down at a computer and submit his/her story on the online submission form. You may need to have one member assist those who may be uncomfortable working online. This event is a great way to introduce new members to your League as well. Learning from your League's "elders" is an excellent way to engage new members and encourage them to think about taking a leadership role in the organization in the future. New members will learn that it doesn't take expertise to be a leader, just the willingness to participate. Collecting stories from your newer members is also important as their “current” experience will be helpful in attracting new members.

Via State and Local Voters - Your local *Voter* (or newsletter), or any other regular publication (print or electronic) to members, is an easy way to solicit stories and promote the Storybank. The best way to capture the attention of your membership is to provide examples. Your League should include stories in the newsletter paired with information about the Storybank and how they can participate. Repetition is also important. Don't assume that members will know about the Storybank after you publish information about it in a single newsletter. Consistently having information about the Storybank and highlighting a new story every month as an example will establish this project as an important one – one worthy of members' time and efforts.

Via State and Local League websites - Your League's website is the public face of your League. Highlighting a member's story weekly or monthly on the homepage is a great way to personalize the value of membership in LWV. Stories also can be sprinkled throughout your website. For example, do you have a League member who has worked passionately on “Sunshine” issues? Then, add his/her story to the section of your site devoted to local government information. At the end of each story have the link for members to submit their own story to the Storybank and a link to your League's membership information for non-members to join. Remind members (through your other communications) to check out the League website to read the highlighted stories and to submit their own stories.

How to Use Stories

State and Local Voters - Some Leagues send their local *Voters* (print and/or electronic newsletters) not only to members, but also donors and people who have expressed an interest in joining the League. The LWVUS office follows this practice and hopes that your League considers the *Voter* to be a public communications tool, as well as a membership information tool. *Voters* should contain information about how to join the League and why to join the League, including personal stories. Stories can be highlighted in a monthly column format (promoting and soliciting more stories) or more subtly included in articles about issues and events. Your *Voter* is probably your League's most widely distributed communications mechanism and should be utilized to the fullest as a membership recruitment tool.



Speaking Engagements - Many Leagues have speakers' bureaus or are asked on occasion to make speeches on specific issues and/or about the League. Stories can be used to provide a more complete image of the League to your audience. It is important to stress that LWV's greatest asset is its membership. Because of the work of our members, communities are healthier, stronger, and more vibrant. The best way to show this is by sharing personal testimonials from your League members. According to expert Andy Goodman, "in a two-hour speech, people will remember a 2-minute story." You will need to judge the circumstance and audience first, but if appropriate, sharing

stories "from the field" of members' work will inspire others to join. Just make sure you have membership materials and information about how to join available at these engagements!

State and Local League Website - As was previously mentioned, League members' stories should be highlighted on the League website. Not only do the stories build goodwill within your League, but potential new members who are visiting your website will read them. The stories personalize the League and will make non-members aware that the League is a place where they can make a difference in the community. Stories that specifically highlight why a member joined the League or what impact the League has made in their life are particularly useful for drawing in new members. Of course, be sure to have a link to information about how to join or have that information prominently placed near the story. Quotes from stories also can be used and "peppered" throughout your site for an increased personalized impact.

Press Releases - In some cases, press releases can be strengthened with selected quotes from your members' stories. This can be done two ways.

- First, if you have a press release pertaining to a specific issue (e.g. land use, housing), search your League story database for members who have worked on those issues. Their stories can show how an individual's work can impact the whole community. Testimonials are powerful and may give reporters a new angle on the issue/story.
- The second way to use stories is in "soft" releases (e.g. the League's birthday, celebrating 50-year members). Select quotes and/or stories can be used to make the release more appealing by providing some specific achievements as well as "human interest." Personal stories, though not vital news stories, are regularly reported on because they engage readers. Be sure your communications or public relations chair has easy and quick access to your League stories in case a press release needs to get out fast or a reporter is on deadline.



Statements/Letters - Though it may not be appropriate or practical in all instances, if your League feels that a personal testimonial from a League member about a particular issue would strengthen your argument, your League should consider including stories from League members in public statements and letters. Personal stories can create a more powerful image for the reader or listener about the impact that your League has had on the community. Be sure that whoever is issuing the statement or letter (presumably your League president) is comfortable with the member's story being quoted in case they are asked about it later by the press.

Membership Brochures - Many Leagues create and print their own membership brochures. Short stories or quotes from stories are wonderful to add to your brochure to create a testimonial for League membership. The story selection should specifically highlight the value of being a member of the League. Potential new members will relate to the quotes and stories and will be more likely to join your League. If your League does not produce its own brochure, feel free to use the LWVUS- printed membership brochure (available through the LWVUS field support team), which includes stories from League members from across the country. Create and include an insert about joining your local League and put it inside the LWVUS-printed brochure!

Publications - Stories or quotes from stories should be considered for any publication that your League may produce. Study findings or reports, Voters' Guides, public newsletters, and others can all be membership recruitment tools especially with the inclusion of relevant stories. Please note that if you are using education fund monies to underwrite the cost of a publication, any direct "join" message and membership information (story or other) should be purchased with general/operating fund monies using a calculation based on the percentage of space used for the "join" message. If you are only including quotes from stories to underscore the main purpose of the publication, you do not need to do this.

Check out the "Tools You Can Use" section for a worksheet to help you and your League's members formulate their own personal story about the League! This is a great activity to engage your Board in recruiting new members. Look for other story-related worksheets, too.





SUCCESS STORIES:

The **LWV of Glendale/Burbank (CA)** includes a detachable membership form in every issue of their monthly *Voter*. They also have stressed their commitment to membership growth and outlined their membership goals in their newsletter. To help “personalize” the League to prospective new members, they often include a personal story as well.

In each issue of the **LWV of Beach Cities (CA)** newsletter they feature a member story entitled “Why I joined the League.” The LWV of Beach Cities has, like other CA Leagues, softened the language in the membership advertisement. Rather than using the word “application” on membership forms, they call it in “invitation” to join the League.

Each issue of the **LWV of Orange-Durham-Chatham (NC)** *Voter* contains an entire section dedicated to membership news. They feature bios and pictures of “honorary members” and welcome new members. They also provide information about dues renewal, a comprehensive calendar, as well as a member interest form (i.e., a survey of interests).