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How to Develop Your Theory of Change Into a Powerhouse Communications Platform

Nonprofits: Your mission is not enough for a compelling narrative. You need a theory of change that makes the case for what sets your organization apart.

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Today's social impact organizations must work harder than ever to communicate the value of their work and its impact. Between the sheer volume of online content and the diluting power of causewashing, many nonprofits are now fighting an uphill battle to cut through the noise. These organizations know they need to tell their story effectively in order to inspire action in the form of behavior change, brand engagement, or donations and grants. But many of these same organizations readily admit they struggle to translate their work into a compelling narrative. This is especially true for organizations engaged in complex, systems-level problems that are difficult to distill into easily digestible, attention-grabbing stories.

When it comes to telling your story, it's not enough for your social impact organization to have a mission statement. You must also develop a theory of change that maps out your unique approach to solving the problems identified in your broader mission. When communicated effectively, your theory of change makes a compelling case for what sets your organization apart. And it also helps you craft an authentic and impactful narrative that connects.

What is Theory of Change, and Why is it Important?

Your organization's mission is its big-picture reason for being. It tends to be broad — perhaps even as broad as, say, "reducing homelessness." Your theory of change, on the other hand, is a more detailed description of the specific methodologies your organization uses in its work and the philosophy that underpins them.

For example, let's say your mission is to reduce homelessness in a particular geographic region. How do you go about doing that? Are you building houses? Helping connect homeless people with jobs or job training? Addressing mental health or addiction issues? Your theory of change should acknowledge the complexities surrounding the big-picture problem described in your mission. It should then identify where in that interlocking system your organization focuses its efforts. And it should identify a benchmarking system to track the success of short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes.

Defining a theory of change benefits your organization in many ways by:

- Providing focus and clarity about where and how your organization should invest time, effort, and money.
- Allowing you to track your progress toward creating impact and reaching your mission with benchmarking.
- Putting your organization's work in perspective in terms of how it relates to broader issues, how it fits within the larger impact ecosystem, and where opportunities exist for collective action.
- Guiding your path for growth.
- Forming the basis of your communications strategy.
- Allowing you to connect more deeply and meaningfully with stakeholders.
- Helping you secure the right funding for the right sorts of programs and initiatives.

How to Develop a Theory of Change

If you don't already have a theory of change, start with the outcomes you seek and reverse-engineer the theory. How is it that you go about producing your desired outcomes? What specific steps must you take to achieve your goals? What makes your particular approach effective?

Your theory of change may represent the accepted wisdom about how best to approach your particular slice of a larger problem, or it may be more radical and disruptive. Either way is fine. Just be sure that your theory of change is backed by data proving its efficacy (or in the case of more innovative approaches, why you expect it to be effective). In addition, your theory of change should be measurable so that you can easily demonstrate impact.

Finally, your theory of change should be grounded in the reality of what your organization actually does *and* be forward-looking, too. That means it should identify a trajectory for growth, not just describe what you already do now.

Once you've defined your theory of change, plan to revisit it on an annual basis. Vet it against the work you've done over the past year as well as the work others in your space are doing. Make sure you have a clear stake in the ground — and that it still matches the work your organization is currently doing. Is it working? If not, your theory of change needs to be adjusted.

Remember: It's not enough to review your theory of change in strategic planning meetings and plop it on your website. Your theory of change should be active, not passive. It should function as your organization's north star, guiding all of its decisions and activities.

Translating Your Theory of Change into a Narrative that Connects

Many social impact organizations already understand that their theory of change should play an active role in terms of internal activities. But there's often a disconnect when it comes to harnessing the theory of change in external communications.

Here's the thing: Unless your theory of change plays a major role in your communications — from grant applications to marketing campaigns and everything in between — you aren't fully leveraging this crucial asset. If you are struggling to effectively communicate your organization's story to key audiences, then your theory of change is almost certainly getting lost in the shuffle.

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How to Effectively Communicate Your Theory of Change

Your social impact organization has a unique and powerful story to tell. Use our step-by-step plan to road test, refine, and effectively communicate your theory of change to your stakeholders.

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Your theory of change should form the foundation of your communication strategy. This may seem like a daunting task, especially if your theory of change is highly technical or complex.

The first step, then, is to translate your theory into a compelling narrative. This narrative is the story you will tell to the broader world to define your organization and what it stands for. In order to truly connect, your narrative must be:

- **Informative *and* emotionally driven.** Your organization's theory of change story won't make an impression if it's all facts and no heart. You need to make it personal by hitting an emotional nerve. To do that, your story should answer a series of so-what questions that help your audience understand the issue *and* get at the core of why they should care about your mission and approach. It's not enough to simply say, "the rainforest is being deforested." Unfortunately, unless the rainforest is in your audience's actual backyard, their next question is likely to be, "so what?" Answer those "so what?" questions again and again until it hits home.
- **Accessible.** Use language that is easily understood by your various audiences. Make sure to avoid jargon and insider-speak. Using words, references, and images your audience already gets will aid in their understanding.
- **Human.** Your organization's story must have a human dimension. This often means taking big-picture issues and translating them into smaller-scale, human stories. For example, let's say your work is centered around climate change. This is, of course, a major global issue that will ultimately impact everyone. But the threat is so decentralized and future-oriented that it can be hard for people to relate in a concrete, "here and now" sort of way. In this case, you might make your story more human by demonstrating the *local* impact of increasingly unusual weather patterns, including crop loss or a spike in homelessness due to major storms.

Once you've crafted your theory of change narrative, it's time to weave it into your communications strategy. Your story should be shared in a variety of ways, including video, thought leadership content, social media, interactive digital experiences, events, and marketing campaigns. Do it well, and you'll set your organization apart, foster a deeper connection with stakeholders, *and* reinforce your leadership status within your space.

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