



Disseminating Stories

How to Ask Someone to Share His or Her Story Publicly

It is essential to get a storyteller’s permission to participate in a storytelling opportunity. Even if the storyteller gives your organization explicit permission to “send any reporter” his way, it is important to talk to him about the opportunity.

This additional conversation allows your organization to update the story summary in case there has been a significant change in the storyteller’s life. It also provides an opportunity to answer any questions the storyteller may have about the opportunity and confirm his willingness to participate.

Determine who in your organization will be responsible for talking to the storyteller about a potential request. Depending on how your story bank is staffed, it may make sense for it to be an individual who has a working relationship with the storyteller, such as an interviewer. Or, if it’s a media interview, it can be someone who can help coach the storyteller before the opportunity, such as a communications director.

Talking to a storyteller about a request does not need to be an in-depth or prolonged conversation. In fact, it can be quite simple and straightforward. The best way to reach out to a storyteller is through a phone call. This will allow you to have a more in-depth conversation than you might be able to via email or text message.

The conversation should include the following elements:

- » Check the details of the story, and talk to the storyteller about any significant changes in his life that may have happened since you last spoke.
- » Discuss the storytelling opportunity, providing details about who, what, when, and where.
- » Answer any questions he has about the opportunity.
- » Ask if he is willing to participate.
- » Check for areas of concern.
- » Confirm that your organization has a consent form for him on file. If not, discuss the consent form.
- » Set next steps, including additional coaching, if necessary.

While most of these items are self-explanatory, the fifth item, check for areas of concern, can pose a challenge. Before working with a storyteller on an opportunity, it is important to ask whether he is concerned about anything embarrassing coming to light if he shares his story publicly.



Your organization may have already learned some of this information through an initial interview (and recorded it in internal comments), but it is helpful to have an additional conversation prior to any public storytelling opportunity. When someone is faced with a chance to share his story, he will often be more willing to disclose potentially embarrassing information than he might be in an initial interview.

Any public storytelling opportunity that includes full names runs the risk of an individual or organization searching for details of the storyteller's life. High-profile opportunities lend themselves to this more than other types of opportunities. Unfortunately, these details can be used to discredit the storyteller's experience. Understandably, some people are uncomfortable with details of their life coming out and any "public shaming" that may occur. It is important to have a frank conversation with the storyteller about anything he may be uncomfortable with prior to him sharing his story publicly.

A storyteller should leave this conversation with a clear idea of what is being asked of him. For example, if he has agreed to participate in an interview, he should know the outlet, the subject of the story, the format of the interview, and how he will get in touch with the reporter or producer.

While this conversation is straightforward and fairly simple, it's important not to rush it. Take time to listen to any concerns the storyteller may have and to answer his questions. For many people, it's a big deal to share their stories publicly. Some people may feel nervous, have lots of questions, or need to discuss it with their family members.

When asking a storyteller to share his story publicly, the person asking should demonstrate the same qualities of care and empathy shown in earlier encounters with him. This person will want to empower the storyteller and not leave any room for doubt or concern about your organization's intention to highlight his story.

While it is necessary to work with storytellers to make sure they are comfortable with the opportunity, there may be occasions where you are unable to accommodate their requests. For example, some opportunities may require the use of full names. If you encounter someone who is hesitant, unwilling, or unable to use his full name, this particular storyteller might not be the best fit for this request.

After the conversation, it can be useful to send a follow-up email to the storyteller to confirm the details of the opportunity. Depending on the request, such an email might include the name of a reporter who is contacting him, or the date and time of an event.

Throughout the conversation, the storyteller should not feel pressured or coerced to participate. He should remain in control. Sometimes, people will say no—the particular opportunity isn't a good fit, their schedules are tight, there's an illness in the family, and so forth. While that can be disappointing for your organization, it is necessary to respect the storyteller's decision. In these cases, it's helpful to have several different storytellers as options.



If the storyteller does agree to participate, your organization may wish to stay in touch with him throughout the process of sharing his story. Consider checking in after he has shared publicly. It is also a nice gesture to send a link to a story, video, or other materials that features his story. This additional support will continue your relationship with the storyteller beyond the request, and it will also provide your organization with invaluable feedback about the process.

Examples of How to Frame Your Request for Individuals to Tell Their Stories

Explaining a story sharing opportunity might look something like this:

“Over the coming weeks, our organization is launching a campaign on Medicaid expansion. We are interested in your participation in a teleconference we are hosting on June 1. You would speak for three to five minutes, sharing a bit of information about what expanding Medicaid would mean to you and your family. Your name would be featured on a press release and on the teleconference. Since the call is for reporters, your story may appear in multiple media outlets. Other speakers include our executive director and members of the state primary care association.”

- or -

“Our organization is hoping to feature on social media the people who signed up for health insurance at our event today. Would you be willing to let us share your first name, a brief quote, and photo on our Twitter and Facebook accounts?”

- or -

“We are working with a partner organization on a project to show the impact of the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) on families across the country. Our partner organization is [FILL IN THE NAME OF THE ORGANIZATION], and they provide public education materials to low-income families to raise awareness of CHIP. They are looking to highlight anecdotes in an upcoming pamphlet. The pamphlet would include a short paragraph with your first name and state. They would like to have a brief phone call with you to learn more about your story, and they may ask for a photo. Would you be interested in participating?”

In each these of examples, it is clear how your organization will highlight the story, how much information the storyteller will reveal and to whom, and the level of visibility the person can expect.

For the full Story Bank Toolkit, visit:
www.familiesusa.org/story-bank-toolkit

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