

Show, Don't Just Tell: Writing to Inspire, Motivate and Recruit Volunteers

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Your organization is always looking for great volunteers to embrace your mission, help carry it out and even help spread the word to others. The pool of potential volunteers out there is endless! And you *know* that many people would love to find a convenient way to help make a real difference in their communities. Volunteering with your organization offers them that opportunity!

There's just one problem.

How can you inspire, motivate, and recruit those potential volunteers? How can you use the power of your words to prompt a reader, listener, or viewer to move from the armchair to the work site?

The secret is all about showing, not simply telling.

Concrete images and specifics show potential volunteers exactly what you are about and why it matters. Vivid details help you build interest, add drama, and help your readers visualize the unique value you can bring to their lives.

You can show them precisely how they can work with your organization to benefit both themselves and their community. Here are a few suggestions, examples and ideas to move you in the right direction.

First Things First: Are You Highlighting the Benefits?



You undoubtedly already know how important your organization's work is. You live and breathe it every day. But your potential volunteers do not! They need you to spell out why your work needs to be done, why it needs to be done *now*, and how it will contribute to a brighter future for the community.

They also need to know how their involvement will help to address their specific needs and values. It's the classic "What's in it for me?" question, slightly tweaked to become "What's in it for me and *us* (the community)?"

For this reason, writing about benefits that matter to your readers is absolutely crucial.

Simply put, your job is to refine your text (your "copy") so that it makes your readers feel good about the benefits you are offering. You want them to feel so good that they are willing to take a chance on you with their time, money, energy, or other resources.

Your writing has to persuade them that your organization's work will help them achieve their goals.

Determine those Benefits

Benefits are the tangible and intangible outcomes you are striving for: the great results and powerful impact that your stakeholders will get from working with you.

Here are three related questions that can help you identify the benefits of your work:

- What does your organization's work *mean* for your reader and/or community— personally, professionally, financially, physically, logistically, spiritually, and/or emotionally?
- What will happen as a *result* of the particular features you offer? And how does that satisfy the needs and desires of your readers?
- For each feature you offer, ask "*So what?*" How does that lead to something better for my reader and/or the community?

List and Organize All the Benefits You Offer

You probably have noticed that most people who get involved with community-benefit organizations like yours are not looking only for a material benefit to themselves. Sure, they may be interested in the tangible things you can offer them. And they obviously value the work you do in your community. But they are also interested in the psychological and emotional benefits they can gain because of the nature of your work.

This fact defines socially responsible organizations, and you should take it seriously. It can help position your work in the forefront of your readers' minds.

To start you down this path, here are some sample types of benefits, both tangible and psychological/emotional, that your organization may offer to your volunteers. See how many apply to your work or to any particular aspect of it. Of course, your particular organization will offer many others.

Practical Benefits

- A convenient opportunity, despite their hectic lives, to make a difference in their community
- A chance to serve as a community resource—to share their good fortune or give something back in a way that matters to them
- Special recognition for their involvement or accomplishment
- Interactions with other people with whom they share values, beliefs, concerns, and struggles
- New skills and/or understanding
- Preparation for the future

Psychological/Emotional Benefits

- A sense that they are part of a winning team that is making the world a better place
- Feelings of being kind, generous, trustworthy, helpful, important, conscious, and contributing citizens
- Improved morale, excitement, or inspiration
- The knowledge that they are doing their part to solve a problem that directly or indirectly affects them
- The knowledge that they are empowering themselves and others to make their own decisions

Keep these factors in mind when you are trying to understand your readers (that is, "get inside their heads"). If your written pieces acknowledge and support these needs in your readers, you will be on the way to instilling a sense of your organization as an important part of their lives. You can do that by naming these benefits whenever they come up, or at least implying their presence.

Benefits: Example 1

An organization runs a homeless shelter for families. It offers warm beds, restrooms, and other facilities. It also hires child care workers and counselors, engages volunteers, operates a soup kitchen, and offers services to help residents find more permanent housing or jobs.

The *benefits* are the positive effects that those things have on the shelter residents and the community at-large. Here we are talking about the difference the organization makes in addressing the problems associated with homelessness, both short- and long-term.

Some of those benefits may be:

- Increased stability and nutrition in the lives of the homeless families
- Increased employment among homeless parents
- Fewer families living in cars or on the streets
- Less desperation, which often leads to crime, drug abuse, and other social ills
- The sense of being a community that cares for all of its citizens

Benefits: Example 2

An organization that provides massage therapy to cancer survivors might say:

By becoming a volunteer therapist at our clinic, you will play a vital role in ensuring that cancer survivors like Jose receive revitalizing, healing massages every week. You will be part of seeing your friends and neighbors enjoy happier, healthier, more productive, and (as suggested by recent medical studies) longer lives.

Turn Abstract Benefits into Visceral, Tangible, Personal Impacts

Bonus Tip

Interestingly, many marketers have found that people will reward you if you slightly understate, but then over-deliver on, your promise of benefits. If your readers are pleasantly surprised, they will come back for more.

Once you are clear about the benefits you offer prospective volunteers, it's time to think about ways you can bring those benefits to life.

Consider the difference between *telling* your readers about “basic nutrition and affordable housing” and *showing* them “three solid meals a day and a safe roof over your head.”

Most people can best process new information if they can “see” it. Others want to “hear” the sounds behind the words. And still others want to smell, taste, or feel what they are learning. The more ways we get to experience something, the better we can integrate it into our personal knowledge base.

Your readers might need to notice the fleeting sparkle of a firefly at your summer camp for city kids. They might want to smell the fresh, nontoxic aroma of natural paint as your group

refurbishes a schoolhouse, or of rich fair-trade coffee at the senior citizen meeting you hold, or of honeysuckle after rain in your community garden.

They may need to hear the giggle of a newly adopted baby or kids chasing each other in the playground of your alternative health clinic. They might be interested in tasting the pure water running through the river you just cleaned up, or the organic watermelon at your mentor/mentee picnic. Or, they might yearn to feel the soft fur of the sea otters your group rescued from certain death.



In addition, the more emotionally sensitive among us might want to know about the poignant moments, the compassion, and the personal challenges that are part of daily life at your organization. Families reunited, health restored, and hope established are just a few of the events you might draw your readers into.

How many times has someone said, “Do as I say and not as I do”—to no avail? That is because people need to be *shown* things. Realtors know that they need to show a property before they can sell it. Car dealers know that customers must test-drive a vehicle to get a “feel” for it. If you have ever tried to introduce a new technology to skeptical or resistant family members, you know that you need to *show* how the newfangled gadget will immediately benefit them and be worth the extra effort.

The idea here is that you should not draw conclusions for your readers, telling them what to think or feel. Instead, use your writing to prompt their own sensory or visceral experiences. Think of yourself as their eyes, ears, hands, taste buds, nose—and heart.

Personally speaking

By showing and not just telling, I find that I can better exercise my creativity in writing for community-benefit organizations. My poetic sensibilities often make an appearance when I conjure them up in this way. Although I am not much of a visual artist or musician, my computer keyboard and pen serve me well as virtual paintbrushes and musical instruments.

Use Metaphors and Analogies

Use figurative language to instantly convey new ideas or trends that may otherwise be difficult to grasp. Great ways to do this include using metaphors (comparing two things by saying that one thing **IS** something more familiar) and analogies and similes (saying that one thing is **LIKE** or

behaves AS something more familiar). Metaphors and analogies capitalize on familiar sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, and feelings.

Figurative language helps your readers organize complex information into easy-to-relate-to images. Great quotes and sound bites are made of this stuff. Just be sure to choose comparisons that help advance your brand and point of view; obscure references will obscure your meaning. Your metaphors and analogies should shine a light on your subject, not cast a confusing shadow.

Ask yourself: Can you liken your subject to a more familiar object, behavior, situation, or attitude?

For example, U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman used this effective metaphor to describe the 2001 United Nations climate change conference in Bonn (*The Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 2001):

[It] surprised people...The feeling was that, if the United States took its football and left the field, the game wouldn't go forward. But the rest of the nations found their own football, and they completed the game. They left the United States on the sidelines.

Here's an approach for an environmental group:

Like a beloved symphony playing after years of anxious silence, the morning birdsong has once again returned to our open spaces. For the past several years, the only sounds we could hear in these parts were the rumbles of heavy machinery clearing the way for a new landfill. But our environmental conservation efforts have changed all that.

You can also create metaphors and similes that allude to history or popular culture: books, stories, slogans, rhymes, movies, TV shows, websites, products, logos, songs, or well-known jokes or slang:

- *That corporation's appetite for market share at any cost is like Homer Simpson's appetite for donuts: insatiable!*
- *Online social networking websites—such as MySpace, Facebook, and SecondLife—are today's town squares.*

Another type of analogy you should consider uses the format: “saying or doing _____ is like saying or doing _____.” This technique allows you to make an emphatic point by conjuring up a comparison to something your readers are sure to recognize as extreme:

- *Denying today's students a global education is like seating them at a table with one shaky leg.*
- *Saying “Stephen Hawking is a physicist” is like saying “It's cold in the Arctic.”*
- *“Hypocrisy is like Idi Amin looking at Ghandi and going, ‘You're too intense!’” —Robin Williams*

Sometimes you would just love to use a metaphor or simile, but nothing springs to mind. See if you can freshen up, tweak, or enhance any of these common ones (found in U.S. culture) and compare them to your organization's work:

20-20 hindsight	All on the same page
All the options are on the table	Backfire
Biblical proportions	Bittersweet memories
Breath of fresh air	Bright idea
Carbon footprint	Chained to a decision
Cold and calculating, like a machine	End on a high note
Feverish pace	Food for thought
The genie is out of the bottle	Have your cake and eat it too
Icing on the cake	Life is jazz
Lift (or lower) the floodgates	Like a horse with blinders on
Meltdown	Money in the bank
Off the beaten path	Pandora's box
Pulling yourself up by your bootstraps	Sea change
Shades of grey	Sink or swim
Sit on the fence	Sweet smell of success
The bottom line	The lights are on but nobody's home
The world is watching	Throw out the baby with the bathwater
Toxic cocktail	Two-way street
Warm/cold reception	

Try your best to use distinctively modified metaphors or similes; better yet, invent your own to evoke a specific image. Some metaphors are so heavily used that they have become ordinary speech or clichés. If you are used to reading or hearing a metaphor or simile you are thinking of using, see if you can come up with a more precise or colorful one.

For instance, you might write about a "carbon crater" instead of a mere carbon footprint. Perhaps the "bottom line" is not that solid when the "balance sheet" does not account for all of the real social or environmental costs. Or, the choices might not be "sink or swim," but "sink or sink faster."

Warning!

Watch out for the two most frequent blunders in this realm: (1) Don't mix your metaphors (pair two completely different images); and (2) Don't overuse metaphors and analogies; constantly drawing comparisons can overload and fatigue your reader.

Present the Striking Details

Even if you want to stick to literal language, you can convey a lot by carefully choosing a few outstanding representative details. Details not only help clarify your meaning, but they can also help set the scene or describe the people or things in your piece in a memorable way. Great fiction writers take advantage of this secret, and you can too.

Sparkling details also invite your reader to get involved in the creative process alongside you. You are encouraging them to imagine, to draw on their own keen powers of observation, and to fill in the blanks. The idea here is that they will initially become involved in your work just by reading your piece!

Zeroing in on concrete details can also help prevent another common writing problem in values-based organizations. We tend to talk in abstractions because we work with the big picture: trends, patterns, projections, systems, etc. However, writing that way is an excellent way to *repel* your readers.

Instead, I suggest that you take a microscope to your work. I am talking about seemingly trivial fine points, such as exact numbers (e.g., 27 instead of “over 25”), precise names, shades of color, shapes, speech accents, clothing, decorations, etc. Even if you don’t end up using all of them in your final piece, such details show how familiar you are with your subject. And this encourages your readers to trust you as their interpreter.

Ask yourself: What captivating details jump out at you that will help your piece come alive?

For instance, you may be working with people whom you could simply talk about in the abstract: activists, neighbors, politicians, low-income families, or homeless veterans. Instead, share with your reader the unique details of particular activists, neighbors, politicians, low-income families, and homeless veterans. Create a snapshot in your reader's mind.

Striking Details: Example

My daily walks around the Guatemalan town meant that I constantly ran into indigenous women—from teenagers to grandmothers. I didn’t need an academic lecture on their dismal economic status; I could see it for myself in their dark eyes. Some begged for jobs as underpaid and exploited domestic servants (“*muchachas*” or “girls”). Others spent endless hours preparing and selling small fried snack foods on street corners. Once, at the end of the market day, I watched one dust-covered young mother work alongside her daughter, no more than four or five years old. They were gathering the family's dinner: any salvageable scraps the vendors had left behind in a huge heap of soggy, greenish-brownish vegetable rubbish.

If your organization deals with numbers at all—and that would include almost every organization—you can show your readers what those numbers actually look or sound like.

For example, the time it takes to do one volunteer activity at your organization —such as help a child struggling with her math homework twice a week—might be easy to compare with the time most Americans spend watching T.V.

Help Your Reader “Feel” the Action

People experience the world not just through their five senses, but also through movement—physical or emotional. If you can involve your readers in the action, you will engage even more of their interest, understanding, and memory. We all have read things that move us enough to make us laugh, cry, smile, or feel angry, frustrated, thrilled, etc. Sometimes mere words can incite my heart to race, or goosebumps to suddenly appear, or a chill to run down my spine. I am sure you have had similar experiences.

Ask yourself: What kind of action takes place in your piece?

That action does not have to be obvious to the naked eye (although it certainly can be). It can also include internal feelings, thoughts, or beliefs. It is your job to take your readers into that action, so they can experience it alongside your characters. Show your readers what brings about feelings in the people you are describing to them.

Action Details: Example

Every week we see children like Andy. He shuffles into the school cafeteria for lunch with his head down and hands fidgeting. He looks like he doesn’t belong here—or anywhere. But then he hears his name, he looks up, and spots his volunteer mentor waiting for him. A huge smile spreads across his face, and he suddenly stands taller and walks with a spring in his step.

But what if you, the writer, did not experience the story in question firsthand? No problem. Just get as close to the action as you can in your telling of it—as if you *had* been there. That means gathering as much firsthand experience as you can from eyewitnesses, photos, recordings, and the like.

Use Photos or Other Graphics to Complement Your Words



Do all you can to animate your words, and then add the document equivalent of a cherry on top: a delicious graphic or two.

Just remember to write a strong caption that relates your text to the image. I hate to admit this, but sometimes readers only look at the pictures. So the caption should do the same job as a headline: Get at your point in a compelling way that grabs the reader’s attention. And now that it

is easy to produce and broadcast video and audio online, you might want to consider adding moving pictures and sounds to your repertoire.

Client Confidentiality

Yes, it's essential to show the difference your organization has made in the lives of your clients and volunteers. But we often have to make sure not to violate terms of confidentiality. This should not stop you from using examples or details! For example, change identifying information but retain the kernel of the story. Use photos that only imply the client's presence, profile, or shadow. For example, if you work with children, you may want to display their drawings, handprints, or snow angels.

Try It Out!

Armed with a clear understanding of the answer to the question "What's in it for me (and us)?" you can let your prospective volunteers know about those benefits. Here's a simple exercise to get you started engaging your prospective volunteers by showing the benefits you offer (and not just telling about them):

Step 1: Choose a document (your own or someone else's) that seems a bit lifeless, abstract, or bland.

Step 2: Imagine that you have a state-of-the-art video camera or microphone. What images and sounds would you capture to illustrate the points the document makes? Would you stay in one place or move through different scenes? Would you do close-ups or survey the entire scene from afar? What or whom would you feature, or put off to the side, in the background, or outside the frame altogether? Think about examples you would use, and emotions or action you could show. What analogies could you draw? Take some notes.

Step 3: Now imagine that your audience members are blind and deaf, and they have a short attention span. It is your job to describe to them the most compelling things about what you just recorded. Grab your keyboard or a pen and start writing down these descriptions. Draw on the tips in this chapter.

(Bonus: If you have a real microphone or video camera, you might want to use this exercise to start planning a multi-media clip to use on your website or elsewhere.)

This article is expanded from an excerpt from Dalya F. Massachi's award-winning book, *Writing to Make a Difference: 25 Powerful Techniques to Boost Your Community Impact*. Learn more about this resource, as well as Massachi's other free and affordable services, at www.WritingToMakeADifference.com. Massachi can be contacted at dalya@dfmassachi.net.