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**ARC OF THE STORY &
THE LESSONS FROM HOLLYWOOD**



Arc of the Fundraising Story¹: Lessons from Hollywood

“...the great sweep of change that takes life from one condition at the opening to a changed condition at the end...”

– Robert McKee

Screenwriters have long approached their craft with careful attention to underlying control and process. Among other concepts, they speak of “story arc” as an organizing principle, and, by extension, a driver of a compelling audience experience.

“When you look at the value-charged situation in the life of the character at the beginning of the story, then compare it to the value-charge at the end of the story, you should see the arc of the film, the great sweep of change that takes life from one condition at the opening to a changed condition at the end,” says Robert McKee, the renowned cinema arts scholar. “This final condition, this end change, must be absolute and irreversible.”

Think of your favorite movie and you’ll likely recognize a significant story arc. Dorothy returns to Kansas with a new appreciation of home. Michael Corleone abandons his idealism to the riches and power of crime. Harry and Sally finally figure out that they were meant for each other. They’re all in different places at the end of the film than they were at the beginning.

Likewise, we leave the theater more moved, gratified, unsettled, happy, or sad than when we entered. At that moment, reflecting on the experience, we are

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– Frank Dickerson

not thinking about the twenty bucks we shelled out for the ticket and popcorn. Instead, we dwell on the implications of the story.

Furthermore, those implications did not necessarily require overt persuasion or argument on the part of the story teller. The story works because the story teller lets us witness the emotional journey of the hero. In fact, science confirms that humans are essentially hard-wired to mirror the emotions exhibited by characters in stories.

The Power of Emotion

Let’s move this conversation into the realm of nonprofit fundraising and ask ourselves: Why don’t all nonprofits use emotion and story in their appeals?

Frank Dickerson’s highly insightful report on his study of fundraising linguistics (published in September 2009 issue of the *Journal of the DMA Nonprofit Federation*) describes findings that argue for narrative (i.e., story) over exposition (i.e., recitation of facts and figures) in writing copy for fundraising.

In surprisingly many cases, reports Dr. Dickerson, “fundraising texts sounded cold and detached like doctoral dissertations, rather than warm and friendly like personal conversations. Rather than gaining reader attention with emotionally rich human-interest stories, these texts contained less narrative than academic prose. They contained even less narrative than official documents!”

In fact, some nonprofits may feel they are simply not branded for emotion. They may answer to board members who lead daily professional lives in very different business constructs. They may support a

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mission steeped in science (medical research), or they may fight global ills whose sheer scales invite a numerical focus (climate change, world hunger).

They may be led by an executive staff of MBAs and PhDs whose appreciation of the written word remains lodged in academia, leaders who confuse fundraising letter writing with expository writing, and who do not view it as a written record of an informal conversation, spoken from the heart.

In fact, in the aftermath of the economic meltdown of 2008, an increasing number of nonprofits are embracing the idea of using emotion at the heart of their appeals. However, emotion is only half the equation. The other half is story, and more importantly, the arc of narrative that can move prospects and donors even further down the road to more lasting relationships with their favorite charities.

Emotion vs. Story Arc

The recognized emotional “drivers” of effective direct response copy, attributed to Bob Hacker and Axel Andersson, are fear, greed, guilt, exclusivity, anger, salvation, and flattery. Most good copywriters, especially in the discipline of fundraising, lean heavily on these principles to drive response.

But even among nonprofits who recognize the value of human emotion in their appeals, many simply insert it as a tactic at the campaign level, and, by doing only that and no more, essentially leave currency on the table. That currency is described in B-school terms like retention, engagement, lifetime value, and brand loyalty, qualities necessary for nonprofits to nurture long-term relationships with their donors.

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Think of it this way: if emotion powers the engine of the fundraising appeal, then story arc should be the rails that the engine travels on, giving it direction and destination.

The Scope of World Famine vs. The Story of Bekke

Consider a fictional nonprofit organization battling the scourge of global hunger. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 925 million people in the world are undernourished. Poor nutrition plays a role in the deaths of 5 million children a year. That's 13,700 children a day.

This organization knows that numbers like these are eye-popping. But they also know that these numbers are not particularly compelling because they are not easy to grasp. They are numbers that describe a problem so vast that it is hard for a donor to see how a \$25 gift can help. They describe scale, not human impact. There is no story here. So this savvy nonprofit takes another route.

It sends you an appeal in today's mail that tells the story of one child far from your home. A child who is starving. That child has a name, Bekke. She has a family, a village, a back story. Bekke faces obstacles no child in your life has to face. She is powerless and vulnerable against a cruel and malevolent social ill called famine.

The writer wields those emotional drivers like a surgeon. You feel anger at the injustice, guilt that you have done nothing today to relieve Bekke's plight. Then you read about the mission of the organization and the role you could play in solving

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Bekke's dilemma. Here comes salvation. A gift today can be used in specific ways, to deliver food or perhaps medicine, to provide clothing and blankets, and mosquito netting to prevent malaria. The writer subtly compliments you by using phrases like "special supporters like you" and "I know I can trust you" and "you've been so generous in the past." Exclusivity and flattery.

Here the organization is faced with a tactical decision. Either report resolving Bekke's crisis in advance of your contribution ("Thanks to Organization and supporters like you, Bekke and her family are no longer hungry"), which in some ways belies the claim of Bekke's specific need, or leave her plight unresolved.

Like most nonprofits, this organization chooses the latter.

So far, emotion has packed a wallop, and if the appeal is successful you have relieved your sense of guilt and anger, invested in salvation, and in some way accepted the assertion of exclusivity and flattery by writing a check.

And so, the moment passes, until the organization's next appeal shows up in your mailbox, with a new story and crisis. You couldn't be faulted if, this time around, you may be a little more skeptical about the urgency and need.

Why? Because, for one thing, Bekke's story arc is still open. Will you ever hear about what happened to her? At the single campaign level, the emotion in Bekke's story did the trick, eliciting a contribution. But the story arc was not completed. You were left without a sense of closure for your earlier action.

And if the organization can finally tell you about her “end change,” thanks to your support, can it count on a continued relationship with you far into the future?

How would subsequent updates on Bekke and her family impact you? Stories about how they are faring, thanks in part to you? Perhaps the immediate crisis has passed but others have arisen. As Bekke grows up, you learn of opportunities that come her way, which could permanently change her future. Can you help her grab those opportunities? In short, is there an arc to her story?

And if the organization can finally tell you about her “end change,” to paraphrase Robert McKee, and describe it as an absolute and irreversible change for the better, thanks to your continued support through the years, can it count on a continued relationship with you far into the future?

Long Story Arc, Long Donor Relationship

There is a business model for this kind of fundraising. Child sponsorship organizations, dependent on a donor’s monthly support of a specific child, strive to continue the personal story arc. These organizations encourage a relationship to develop between donor and child, and by default, between donor and organization.

Of course, most nonprofits do not enjoy this model. But they can certainly draw parallels.

Cancer research organizations could forgo citing survivorship numbers and research investment dollars in favor of telling the story of one family’s continuing battle against the disease. Environmental organizations could focus on the ongoing struggle one Florida panther has keeping her kittens safe in their shrinking habitat, rather than counting the number of Everglade acres lost every year to development and climate change. And rather than talking about

the number of shelters they've built, a disaster relief organization could tell the evolving tale of a single displaced family in Haiti.

All of these stories could be revisited and moved along their arcs in a series of contacts, across a number of channels, over many months or even years.

Nonprofit fundraising writers need to take a lesson from Hollywood screenwriters when we create fundraising stories. Neuroscientists have proven that humans respond almost viscerally to the emotional content of, as Mark Twain said, “a good story, well told.”

And if we do it well, our audience won't pay any attention to the cost of the ticket or popcorn. Instead, they will be rooting for our story's heroes, and eagerly anticipating the sequel.



About the Author:

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John is a 35-year veteran of the direct marketing industry. Before establishing Direct Creative Group, he was a senior creative executive for Barton Cotton, CDR Fundraising Group, and Merkle, Inc., and a Marketing and Communications Director for the Environmental Law Institute. In 1982 he founded Direct Design, Inc., an independent creative studio specializing in direct marketing, which served national nonprofit and for-profit clients for more than 17 years. John began his direct marketing career as the Director of Creative Services for the Richard A. Viguerie Company.

John is a past board member of the Direct Marketing Association of Washington, a lecturer and instructor in professional development courses, and a winner of many industry awards.