Close Up vs. Big Picture Stories

The Role of Individual Examples in Advocacy Communications

Research and real-life experience, plus perspectives from the social and cognitive sciences, tell us that "putting the face on the story" can often backfire. In this memo, we explore the reasons why this approach can go so wrong – from diverting attention away from systemic factors, to inviting the wrong questions and judgments – and suggest other kinds of stories that are more likely to lead to constructive engagement.

The Power of Stories

Effective communicators are essentially great storytellers. People can absorb and remember a great story far longer than lists of statistics, and the right story can even help people hold onto facts and figures that otherwise wouldn't stick. Most important, the right kinds of stories convey a broader narrative that can help bring about lasting social change.

However, communicators often limit themselves to one particular type of story, one that can do more harm than good – a close-up portrait of a struggling individual:

* the mom who can't stay home with a sick child,

* the child who is facing obesity-related health issues,

* the father of four who can't get a job and is about to be evicted, and so on.

When we show these faces and tell these stories, we hope that audiences will engage with our issues in a new way, and care about them as they haven't before. We hope that they will step up to support a policy, write a check or volunteer their time.

And our assumption that these stories are bound to work is even bolstered by "proof." We ourselves are drawn in by these narratives – of suffering, of injustice, of redemption, of triumph. We know that journalists want to "put a face on the story," and that our fellow advocates feel this is important.

For all these reasons, communicators are often surprised when these stories backfire, when a listener offers responses such as:

* I don't get paid if I don't work – why should she?

* That kid's parents better stop feeding him/her junk food.

* That's sad, but what can you do when times are so tough for everyone?

One reaction to these responses might be to decry the state of American culture – how can people be so uncaring? Another might be to look for a more "sympathetic" individual to feature, assuming that racism or classism might be getting in the way of people's true sympathetic nature.

What we should be doing, though, is questioning the very structure of the story. The fact is that **close-up portraits of individuals are a type of story that, when treated as a main focus of communications, almost always works against building support for progressive policy change.**

Why "Close Ups" are Ineffective Stories

The idea that "putting a face on the story" is an effective communications approach can seem so intuitive as to be unquestionable. But in reality, there are very important reasons to question it. In truth, this kind of story can make it difficult or impossible to convey the big picture ideas we are trying to get across. Why?

Human stories can naturally seem like the WHOLE story. It is so easy and natural to focus on a face, and on the drama of an individual life, that attention to this dimension of an issue can totally block out the broader, systemic factors – factors that we know are real, critical, and typically unknown to our audience. A face on the story can make it even harder to focus on these broader factors, resulting in no appreciation for why structural, policy interventions are needed.

We have seen over and over in our research that participants tend to focus exclusively on individual stories once they hear them, and to forget or disregard the broader factors that a communication is trying to convey.

Once people focus on the drama of the individual story, they can easily arrive at conclusions that are the opposite of what we're trying to convey. When we tell a "Close Up" story, we invite audiences to focus on a very narrow picture of individual choices, abilities, good or bad luck, and so forth. That's what individual stories are made of. The result can be condemnation of the very individuals we are trying to help. The mom who is struggling to provide for her family "shouldn't have had so many kids," "shouldn't have moved to that neighborhood," "should have gotten more schooling so she'd have more options" etc. Time and again we have seen research participants react in these ways to an individual who struck us as so obviously sympathetic. The "face on the story" is a double-edged sword. It gets attention and is memorable, but easily leads to the wrong takeaway.

What to do?

It is easy to feel that we are damned if we do, damned if we don't. Individual stories and images engage attention, but often lead thinking down the wrong paths. So what to do?

The conclusion we at Topos have reached is that communicators must take on the challenge of finding vivid, compelling ways of telling the "big picture" story. How do we take the complex causality, the statistical patterns, the interventions that we know are so important, and convey them in ways our audiences can grasp and relate to?

One way or another, we need to make the wide shot come alive (to use a movie-making analogy), rather than quickly resorting to the close-up on an individual. Here are some suggestions for ways to tell compelling stories without the pitfalls of the individual close-up.

Stories of Place

We have found in many cases that it is helpful to talk about problems and solutions in terms of place. For instance, public investment in the arts makes sense because it creates more vibrant and prosperous neighborhoods – which is vivid and compelling, but without some of the pitfalls of a focus on individual plights.

Photo Credit: Scott Beseler

Solutions Stories

Stories that focus on solutions – successful programs, effective interventions, etc. – can be very powerful because they convey optimism and belief in the power of collective action. They suggest to people that social problems are perhaps not so intractable after all. For instance, a story about successful dropout prevention efforts at a struggling high school, featuring a volunteer who explains why this solution matters, would be a compelling story likely to encourage others to support the program. This story could even include 2 or 3 quotes from students, as long as the story stays focused on the solution.

Big Picture, with Faces

Once the big picture points have been established, then it can be helpful to offer individual stories in order to flesh out the point. For example, in research we have done on low wage jobs, we have found that it is helpful to first convey a big-picture idea like "X industry has lobbied to keep wages down for decades" or "wages are so low that full time workers qualify for food stamps", etc. Once the big picture is established, then individuals (more than one) can effectively support the idea with their own experiences – as long as their story stays on frame.

The bottom line: We can't and shouldn't eliminate people from our communications – it's a question of emphasis and ordering. While it would be nice if effective communication were as easy as "putting a face on the issue," communicators need to take on the challenge of making other factors just as compelling as the individual human interest stories we are all tempted to focus on. When we do this, we stand a better chance of building public support for lasting change.