

Impact Stories and the Power of One



Columbia Pictures

Think of the best movie you've ever seen. A movie that did more than just entertain, but impacted you — changed the way you look at the world. In fact, list your top three.

Got 'em? Now summarize each movie's theme with one word. So for instance ...

It's a Wonderful Life: Faith.

The Wizard of Oz. Self-sufficiency (OK, that's two words but we'll allow the hyphen).

Saving Private Ryan. Sacrifice.

Film critic Roger Ebert once wrote: "All good art is about something deeper than it admits." In other words, universal themes emerge — themes that resonate with people even if a story's characters and setting don't. Maybe the theme is courage. Or hope ... rescue ... justice ... redemption.

Now think about your nonprofit organization. Can you reduce your theme to one word? If you can, you've probably zeroed in on your primary impact. Next, you need to engage your audience in that impact. What is the observable change created? The change might be personal, spiritual, cultural, economic, social ... or likely some combination of those.

Let's say you operate a rescue mission for homeless and hurting people. You could spout statistics: Last quarter you served 4,000 meals, hosted 1,000 people overnight, graduated 12 people from your rehab program, received \$80,000 in donations.

All well and good. But stats aren't very relatable. Audience members can't wrap their minds and emotions around the collective predicament of a thousand people.

Instead, **show them one**. Let your nonprofit's single-word theme lead you to one person whom your work has served and who exemplifies that word. Tell that person's story and show how it intersects with your organization's. Let your audience form an emotional connection, not only with the person but with the story's universal, relatable theme.

There's your impact.

For our hypothetical rescue mission, maybe the impact theme is *restoration*. And maybe the person is Mary, single mom of two kids who got injured, lost her job and wound up hooked on prescription pain killers.

To tell a good story, be it in written or visual form, you need to understand how story works. Newspaper editor Jack Hart, in his book [Storycraft](#), explained it this way:

“At its most basic, a story begins with a character who wants something, struggles to overcome barriers that stand in the way of achieving it, and moves through a series of actions — the actual story structure — to overcome them.”

Simpler still: Bad interrupts good. Sacrifice and struggle are required. Good prevails. People are hardwired for this storyline.

So, you trace Mary’s life before, during and after her intersection with your organization. Her life falls apart. She comes to the rescue mission and enters the residential rehab program, where she perseveres to beat addiction, receive job training and get a new start. Today she lives a victorious, grateful life. In doing so, you connect your audience to the change you are creating together. They see their role in the larger story.

Do this well, and maybe people will still be talking about you 25 years later. When Roger Ebert wrote that line about good art, he was [reviewing](#) *The Shawshank Redemption*, which usually appears in lists of the best films ever made. It’s the story of a banker, wrongly convicted of two murders and sentenced to life in a New England prison. *Shawshank* remains so beloved because of its one-word, universal theme: hope.

“I believe part of the reason the movie is so important to people is . . . that in a way it works as a whole for whatever your life is,” lead actor Tim Robbins told [Vanity Fair](#) in 2014. “That no matter what your prison is ... it holds out the possibility that there is freedom inside you. And that, at some point in life, there is a warm spot on a beach and that we can all get there. But sometimes it takes a while.”

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