



Tell Your Stories ... By Telling Stories!

Basic geometry — the only kind I was ever able to pass — tells us the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Engineers and architects have built their careers around that fact. But communicators follow a different path, the one that says the best way to the reader's brain is through their heart. And the navigational tool of choice is [story telling](#).

Think about it. If Shakespeare was an engineer, he might have written, "It's not a good idea to kill people, especially kings." Fortunately, the Bard was not an engineer, and as a result he gave the English-speaking world some of its greatest plays, including [Macbeth](#), [Julius Caesar](#) and [Richard II](#).

Because the recently deceased Harper Lee (right) was a writer, not a geometry teacher, we have [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) as a powerful indictment of racism. Had she chosen a profession that valued straight lines and efficiencies, she probably would have said, "Racism is wrong," and let it go at that. But bland statements like that, even if they are true, don't compel you to *feel* anything. For that reason, readers quickly discard them.



Credit: Getty Images



Credit: alicewalkersgarden.com

“Getting people to feel something is a more powerful motivator than getting them to know certain facts,” Tina Rosenberg wrote in [Join the Club](#). Maya Angelou (left) told us, “People will forget what you said or what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” **Our most powerful memories — good and bad — come from our experiences and the stories we are told.**

By contrast, stringing together a series of declarative sentences conveys factual information that is quickly forgotten. Declarative sentences slide off a reader like rainfall off a roof, leaving no lasting impression.

Don’t get me wrong: the world needs engineers, architects and geometricians. Nuclear power plants and skyscrapers tend to perform better if they are designed by engineers, not poets. In the same way, the world also needs poets and storytellers, to inspire, delight and instruct.

I hope you agree that telling stories is the most effective way to make a long-term impression on readers. For the last few years, my belief in the power of story-telling has shaped my work writing content for utilities. Making points by telling stories takes more time and effort, but it has the potential to make a **longer and deeper impact** on readers.

I’m glad to say my clients tend to agree. I write several annual reports each year for utilities, and typically they are eager to highlight the good things they do for [stakeholders](#), including their customers, employees and the communities they serve.

That’s why, when I begin an annual-report writing engagement with clients, I ask about the good things they have done for their stakeholders. Then I ask for permission to contact those who have benefitted from these good deeds, so I can learn the details first hand.

Why? Well, the straightforward (dare I say, engineering) approach to telling a reader you care about those you serve is to say, “We care about those we serve.” Every once in a while, you may see an adjective tossed into that sentence, as in, “We care *deeply* about those we serve.” But that declarative sentence leaves no lasting impression on the reader.

Declarative sentences convey facts, but not emotions. **They don’t move hearts or minds.** They lack the color and detail you get when you talk to people who have personally benefitted from the actions of a utility or its employees that really, truly care about improving the quality of life in their communities.

But how about this: “We are so blessed to have [Roseville Electric Utility](#) employees in our community,” said Myla Sumabat, activity director for the Roseville Care Center, told me when I wrote the award-winning copy for Roseville Electric Utility’s 2015 annual report. “They are so generous and thoughtful.”



Source: Roseville Electric Utility

“Last year they bought and wrapped about \$1,000 of Christmas presents for residents of our elder-care facility. The employees are Christmas angels: they buy presents the residents request, in the color and size they specify, wrap them and place them under the Christmas tree. That way, all the residents have a present on Christmas Day. And all the presents fit and they are the right color!”

In a similar vein, most annual reports praise the dedication and commitment of their employees. But that falls a little flat compared to this, from the award-winning Omaha Public Power District’s [annual report](#) I wrote a few years back.



Credit: Omaha Public Power District

“Jake Lang knows all about the record heat wave that broiled southeastern Nebraska last July. But Jake isn’t a weather forecaster. He’s a line technician for OPPD, and he spent most of last July 35 feet up in the air in a bucket truck wearing about 30 pounds of protective gear.”

Consider this: “Matt Luders was throwing money down the toilet. Bob Starr was inadvertently sending water to the lake. Neither knew they had a problem until they were contacted by Sturgeon Bay Utilities,” their local utility. In writing that copy, I could have stated that “advanced metering infrastructure creates a lot of benefits for customers, including flagging unusual water-usage patterns”, but instead I detailed the benefit from the customers’ perspective.

I have other examples, but I think you get the idea. Within your communities, there are a lot of stories that reflect well on the good things your utility and its employees do. It falls to the communicators to dig those stories out, dust them off and package them in a coherent narrative.

Sometimes the staff communicators are too busy to find and write those stories. Or they have grown so accustomed to them that they fail to see them. In those cases, call me and I’ll find and write those stories for you. A fresh set of eyes, coupled with broad experience in the industry, helps me spot things others might miss. One client recently told me, “We never would have thought of telling stories in our annual report, but when we presented your idea, everyone nodded. And it was an unqualified success!”



So whether you call me, or you challenge your in-house communicators to make their points with human-interest vignettes rather than declarative sentences, find a way to tell stories about the [value of what you do](#). Use you customers' words, not your own, so the stories will resonate with your readers.