

Storytelling and the Power of Making Headlines

BY LESLIE KERNS, M+R STRATEGIC SERVICES

What does Raquel Nelson, a single mom from Atlanta trying to make ends meet for her three kids, have to do with transportation policy?

Until 2011, probably nothing. Then one regrettable evening, everything changed.

Raquel was on her way home from Walmart with her kids, groceries, and a cake to celebrate her two-year-old's birthday. When the family exited the bus across the street from their apartment complex after a hectic journey, Raquel had a choice: walk half-a-mile down the road to the nearest crosswalk or jaywalk the four-lane intersection.

There were no sidewalks and very few lights on the street. Plus, a mile is an awful long detour when you are handling three children and grocery bags. So like many apartment complex residents before her, Raquel decided to take the direct route and cross the street.

While the family waited in the median for traffic to pass, the four-year-old darted into the street. Raquel raced to catch him and as she did a driver plowed into them and sped away. The collision killed her son. And as she was recovering in the hospital, the mourning mother was charged and then convicted by a jury of vehicular homicide.

This story is heartbreaking. It is also powerful. But only if people know about it.

Unfortunately, throughout the trial, the public did not hear Raquel's full story. We were lucky enough to catch a newswire brief about the jury's decision during our daily scan of news clips for our work with the Transportation for America campaign. Even without the details, the story stood out to us because it made the findings in a new report we were promoting about pedestrian safety called 'Dangerous by Design' painfully real.

More than 47,000 pedestrians died on American roadways between 2000 and 2009. Without her story, Raquel's son was another sad statistic. With her story, his death was a wake-up call.

We immediately got to work with [Transportation for America](#) to fill in more pieces of the story and get in touch with Raquel and her new lawyer who were appealing to the judge for a retrial. Raquel agreed to work with us to spread the word about her story and raise awareness about the need for safer transportation systems in America.

Within the week, Raquel and her story were featured on NBC's Today Show, ABC, CNN as well as in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* and *Forbes*. We also promoted a petition on Change.org that attracted hundreds of thousands of signatures in support of Raquel. The petitions were delivered to the judge who ultimately granted Raquel a new trial.



Because of the media pressure and public outcry due to her story, Raquel was given a second chance and cities began to have a conversation about how to prevent this tragedy from repeating.

Why does storytelling matter?

The power of Raquel's story is proof of why organizations and campaigns need to embrace storytelling via the media to advance or protect the causes you care about. By finally telling this mother's story in the news, we were able to elicit a huge public response and make a real impact on her life and a nation's views on traffic design.

That's because there's magic in stories. Or as Professor Brian Boyd (*On the Origin of Stories*) and our friend Jonah Sachs (*Winning The Story Wars* and Free Range Studios) point out, our genes are wired for stories and human survival relies on them. From our perspective as campaigners, the explanation from literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall (*The Storytelling Animal*) makes a lot of sense to us. He says it takes stories to awaken the neurotransmitters that cause our brains to change.

Whether it's magic or science, everyone agrees that storytelling matters. That's because stories:

- **Are universal.** You may not be a mother of three who travels often on Atlanta buses. But perhaps you're a parent, you live on a similar street, or you're a regular public transportation user or walker. In other words, you can relate to Raquel because her story (and all stories) helps us bridge cultural, linguistic, generational divides.
- **Help us process information.** Our brains think in narrative structures, so stories help us remember facts and statistics we would otherwise forget or not comprehend. The 'Dangerous by Design' report we mentioned earlier is a 36-page paper full of amazing data and shocking maps of pedestrian fatalities in your neighborhood. But it took Raquel's story to help our audience understand and become concerned about the real consequences of the problem. The report alone was not enough to turn casual readers into activists ready to take action. But the story inspired people to sign the petition, retweet the articles, and tell their own similar pedestrian stories to friends and city council members.
- **Shape identities.** The stories we tell define the way our audiences identify with us and/or our issue. Take this very whitepaper for instance. What if we had opened with a sob story about how sleep deprived the BP execs were during the Gulf oil spill? How would that change your perception of M+R?
- **Make connections.** Each of us has a circle around us. No one can see the circle, but it keeps us from wasting time with people or information we don't think will be useful or helpful. Before we let people into our circle we want to know that they get us and we like to feel that we get them. Ten minutes ago, Raquel Nelson was a stranger to you. You've still never met her, but thanks to her story you feel like you know her enough to care about her fate and are curious enough to ask what can be done to prevent this from happening to me or anyone else.

Do you still need some convincing? Okay, pop quiz! Match each of these individuals with his or her cause:

Rosa Parks	Iraq War
Ryan White	Women’s Health
Matthew Shepard	Civil Rights
Sandra Fluke	Gun Control
Cindy Sheehan	Wildlife Conservation
James Brady	AIDS
Jane Goodall	Hate Crimes

Now match each of these statistics with a cause:

3.1 million	U.S. Green Jobs
5 million	Alzheimer’s
50%	The Pentagon
250,000	Darfur
2.2 million	Federal Employees
17 million	U.S. Food Aid

How many answer keys do you need? Only one? Yeah, we figured. That is the power of a story.

Each of the individuals listed above had personal stories that captivated the media and public, elevating their issue higher than any data-driven report, rally, or organizational spokesperson ever could on its own.

These legendary examples may feel daunting. But don’t be deterred. All of these stories – even the instantly famous ones – started off as needles in a haystack when it came to the cause they helped launch or push forward.

Why does storytelling *via the media* matter?

Despite pre-dating cave paintings, the subject of storytelling has never been more popular. Chances are that in the last few years you have read the Heath brothers’ thoughts on stories that stick or heard the aforementioned Jonah Sachs’ thoughts on

storytelling and marketing. Perhaps you even have a copy of M+R's sister-whitepaper [Storytelling and the Art of Email Writing](#) in your desk drawer.

So what else is there to say?

Yes, everyone has a story to tell and every story has value. But not everyone's story is a match for media. It takes a special kind of story to compel a reporter to write about an issue and then catch an everyday person's attention beyond the first paragraph in a newspaper article or the first 10 seconds of a broadcast story. And that's what's different in this storytelling whitepaper.

A Daughter's Story

After Alzheimer's killed Trish Vradenburg's mother, she was mad. She didn't see enough being done to stop the cruel disease. So she and her husband George founded [USAgainstAlzheimer's](#) to fight back.

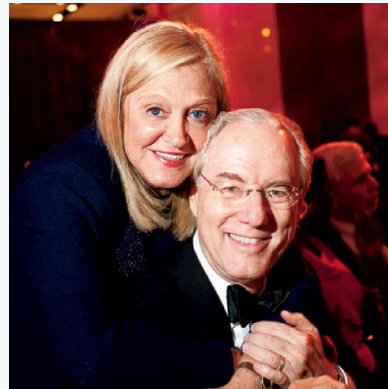
There are plenty of scary statistics about Alzheimer's, a disease that is currently killing 5 million Americans. By the time you turn 65, there's a 1-in-8 chance that you'll have Alzheimer's. These are strong numbers. But they haven't made enough headlines or convinced enough elected officials to champion the cause.

That is until the statistics are wrapped up in Trish's story.

It's personal stories like Trish's that have caused the organization to be featured in places like Fox News Sunday and *Washingtonian Magazine*. Everyone with a parent can relate to Trish's pain. And after hearing her side of the story, the "1-in-8" stops being a number. Suddenly it's a family member you're scared of losing – or a reminder of the one you already lost.

The tone of Trish's story has also elevated the organization in the minds of supporters. When you read Trish's story, you don't picture a woman hunched over a box of Kleenex. You see a boxer tying her laces, getting ready to kick Alzheimer's ass.

By telling her story in the media, Trish has energized thousands of other Americans to join her in the ring and tell their own stories. At last count, USAgainstAlzheimer's boasts 55,149 activists on Facebook — a 5500% increase in just over one year.



Instead of asking the usual question, "What kind of story will cause people to care?" – we're here to help you ask (and answer) another important question: "What kind of

story will attract reporters so it is told credibly as well as far and wide?”

Our goal for the rest of this whitepaper is to help you identify press-worthy stories and then get them in good shape to share with reporters.

At M+R we’re familiar with the many ways to tell stories in campaigns or to support causes – emails to supporters, constituent visits with congressional staff, animated videos shared on Facebook. But sometimes campaigns and nonprofits need an assist from the news media to gain power and momentum.

How do you know when the news media is the right medium to tell a story?

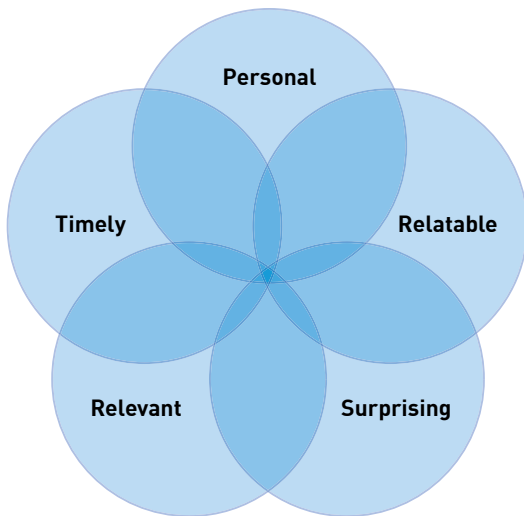
Do you want to reach, educate and/or influence new audiences?	✓	YES	NO
Do you want to remind current supporters you’re still relevant?	✓	YES	NO
Do you want to get complicated yet compelling data or a report in the hands of people who could or should be using it?	✓	YES	NO
Do you want decision makers to know that their constituents and influential people are on your side?	✓	YES	NO
And do you want to do all of this in an objective way that gives your cause credibility?	✓	YES	NO

If you answered yes, then read on because you should be telling stories in the media to help win on your issue.

What makes a powerful story for media?

The news media offers a loud microphone for your story to be heard by millions. So what is it that reporters, editors, and producers are looking for when they’re scanning their inboxes for stories to tell?

From our experience pitching stories and experts to reporters, these are the qualities that make a story press-worthy:



- **Personal:** A person's life is affected by a situation.
- **Relatable:** You can imagine being in the situation – and you don't like it.
- **Surprising:** The situation is unheard of or opposite of what you'd expect.
- **Relevant:** The story adds to a conversation or is related to an issue currently happening in your community or state, on Capitol Hill, or across the country.
- **Timely:** The time to tell that story is now.

A Federal Employee's Story

"We feel like we've been abandoned. We are a punching bag and we are being beat up constantly. I've seen some people in tears. It really hurts. I really love my job but we just can't put up with it anymore." – Jenny Votapka, a federal employee in Montana with 35 years of service

It's easy for Congress to repeatedly pick on federal workers as a quick budget fix. Americans don't often have a reason to stop and think about the people who inspect our spinach or give a seal of approval to the toys we give to our kids. That's why the National Active and Retired Federal Employee's Association ([NARFE](#)) has been busy the last couple of years telling the stories of federal workers.

One such story that caught the attention of *The Washington Post* was from a Montana woman who tended to the needs of the national forest service in her state. When we first heard it, we knew that Jenny's story had the makings of an awesome media story.

To Jenny, the issue was bigger than any pay cut. As her voice cracked during the press conference, you could tell that she felt personally attacked by Congress. Anyone whose hard work has ever been unappreciated could put themselves in her shoes. Jenny's story was also surprising – she wasn't "one of those" DC bureaucrats Americans think of when they think of federal employees. Lastly, her story was relevant to the national discussion about how to trim the budget and timely because there was a congressional vote on federal worker benefits scheduled later in the week.

Had we discovered that Jenny lived in a McMansion in a North Virginia suburb, her story would have been significantly less personal, relatable, surprising, and thus less press-worthy.

For the record, federal workers won the vote later that week.

How do you place your powerful story in the media?

Now you know why you'd tell a person's story in the media and what types of stories make headlines. That's all well and good – but how do you actually do it?

We could build a college course around these next five tips sections. But for now we hope this overview gives you a good foundation to start collecting and telling stories for your cause.

1. Get powerful stories

Remember Raquel? She didn't walk into our lobby one day and say, "Let's tell my story together." We caught wind of her story and worked with Transportation for America to engage her and spread the word.

Collecting stories to tell in the news media is a big and time-consuming job. It's worth it though when you see the big (or at least effective) results.

To make sure you leave no stone unturned when looking for stories, we suggest using multiple methods, including:

- *Storybanking*. Ask your supporters or your partners to submit their stories either through an online form or a paper handout at your next gathering. Let people know you want their stories in your newsletter and over social media, listservs, and forums. Don't forget to capture their contact information!
- *Social media*. Scan Twitter and your organization's own Facebook page to see who is active on your issue that you can reach out to directly.
- *Reading A LOT*. Pay attention to the media narrative around your topic and when you see a story match, be courteous but not shy about engaging the person.

2. Vet your stories

Getting great stories is a good start. Next, let the vetting begin.

We may think we're constantly scouting stories – but if scouting isn't built into your day, then you can be doing more.

If you're lucky you will receive more stories than you can use. Don't allow quantity to

become the enemy of quality. First narrow down your options by seeing which stories meet the press-worthy story criteria.

A Mom's Story

In the fight for clean air, some of the most press-worthy stories (personal, relatable, surprising) are about kids whose asthma is triggered by air pollution in their communities. The [American Lung Association](#) was bursting with data proving the health consequences of dirty air. But they had very few real stories to bring the charts to life and make headlines.



We helped the organization get and vet a targeted storybank so we could offer families affected by dirty air to interested reporters. Many of the stories were referred to us by asthma family support groups in states with politicians we wanted to influence.

When we called one mom in Pennsylvania for our vetting call, she sounded like a medical dictionary when describing how she cared for her two young asthmatic children. So far so good. She was also familiar with the American Lung Association but she wasn't sure why we'd be calling her about the Clean Air Act. She had never connected the dots before that the coal-burning power plant down the street from her house was contributing to her kids' asthma.

We started to doubt whether she was a good story-teller for the campaign after all. But then she said something that locked her in at the top of our storybank: "I support whatever it takes so I never again have to tell my eight-year-old he can't play soccer with his team today because the air will make him sick."

Once your storybank is a manageable size, it's time to contact the people who rise to the top of your list. Before you pick up the phone, create a vetting guide of questions you're going to ask people to help move along the conversation.

The best vetting calls actually start by giving your contacts a chance to vet you and get to know your organization some more. Most people you speak with will have never done anything like this before. So be open about your goals, how they might be able to help you, and what they should expect in terms of results and from you.

When it's time to start asking your questions, ease into it so it feels more like a discussion than an interrogation. Once you've broken the ice, start drilling down on the personal details of their story. These are the golden nuggets that will shine in your pitches to reporters as they pan through their crowded inboxes.

Listen sincerely – but also don't be afraid of interrupting and moving the conversation along. People are looking for guidance from you about what you want to know and won't be offended if you steer them back on track.

Before hanging up the phone, find out exactly what kind of media exposure the story-teller is comfortable with. Don't take for granted how brave it is for a person to tell their personal stories in the media – especially on the kind of campaign you're likely running. Some people are game for and good at national TV if there's an opportunity while others are only ready to write a letter to the editor. Respect their readiness and strengths and build on it over time.

3. Organize your stories

At this step in the process, your brain can start to feel frazzled. You may even feel overwhelmed right now just reading about getting and vetting press-worthy stories. So let's take a minute to talk about organization.

Please keep it simple. Don't let over-organization undermine your organization effort. A 6-column Excel doc or Google Spreadsheet is all you need for a great storybank. Suggested column headers: Name, City, 5-Word Story (for your convenience), Paragraph Story (for press pitches), Media Comfort, and Notes

Keeping and updating a simple database of your stories is so important. If you don't make a point to keep track of your stories and make notes on your conversations, you may as well not even collect stories. Without organization at the outset, you will reach a point after a few weeks where the list of stories you have grows too unwieldy and your memories of conversations you had with people fade. And when this happens, the natural response is to walk away and let the stories continue to collect dust.

Does this warning already ring true? It's not too late to refresh the story databank you've been sitting on for the last year (or three). Go back to #2, narrow your list, and rekindle the relationship with your top story-tellers. We bet they'll be happy to hear from you.

4. Let your stories loose!

As you write your pitches to reporters, match the stories to the right type of media. What’s a better fit for each of your stories – morning TV, op-ed, radio, local feature, *Time* cover story?

Customize your story pitches for the medium you have in mind. Don’t forget to include those personal details that bring your pitch to life and help paint a picture for the reporter of what their story could eventually be. Speaking of pictures, if you have a photo of the people you’re pitching you should include it in the email.

When you get that email back from a reporter that says, “I’m interested,” your job is not done. Reconnect with your story-tellers and prepare them for the interview. Provide talking points, do mock interviews with them, practice trick questions and pivoting back to the main message, and praise them to build up their confidence. You should also offer to join the call and listen – or accompany them if it’s an in-person interview.

A Green Business’ Story

During our work with the Rockefeller Foundation and [Blue Green Alliance](#) promoting American green jobs, we unearthed a story made for media. Jerry Holt is a wind worker in Pennsylvania who spoke with President Obama during his visit to the Fairless Hill wind turbine plant. Jerry was worried that if the wind production tax credit expired, he and his coworkers would lose their jobs.

We worked with Jerry in the fall of 2012 to place an op-ed about his concerns, initially pitching it to the Philadelphia Inquirer, the largest regional paper. When we didn’t get any bites with the Inquirer we tried CNN.com thinking the national issue would be appealing. Nada.

We were open with Jerry that the op-ed approach wasn’t working. And we asked if he’d be comfortable talking with reporters if we tried pitching news articles instead. He said yes. So we turned our attention to pitching Jerry’s story to regional reporters in Pennsylvania. A business reporter at the Philly Inquirer took us up on the offer and the next day Jerry’s story and plea to preserve the wind tax credit was featured on the front page of the business section.

Our persistence and Jerry’s patience paid off in the press and in the real world. In an eleventh hour vote to extend the wind tax credit through 2013, both of Pennsylvania’s senators voted yes.

Tax credit lives, but wind not whipping

A Langhorne turbine plant is not planning to increase production, but sees long-term help.

By Andrew Makuth
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

The extension of the federal wind-power tax credit as part of the fiscal cliff package was hailed as a victory Wednesday by renewable power advocates.

But a Bucks County wind-turbine manufacturer, where much of the workforce was furloughed in September because of a slowdown in orders, is unlikely to ramp up production any time soon because of the last-minute congressional rescue of the tax credit.

“I think it will take a little while for this to work its way to the manufacturing sector, but it will be a stimulus,” said David J. Rosenberg, the vice president of marketing for Gamesa USA, the Spanish wind-turbine manufacturer with U.S. headquarters in Langhorne.

The production tax credit was due to expire at the end of 2012, which sparked a frenzy of construction to bring a record amount of wind turbines into operation by Dec. 31. But uncertainty over the continuation of the credit meant that few new orders are in the works, and wind developers and manufacturers have laid off their staffs.

Gamesa’s plant in Fairless Hills is scheduled to complete its last order in a See **TAX CREDIT** on A12



A Gamesa wind turbine. More than half the company’s unionized workers are laid off.

If you don't get that email back from a reporter, stay dogged! Good placements don't necessarily happen overnight, even with the best personal story in your pocket. Try new angles and new outlets. At the same time, update your story-teller so she doesn't feel like she wasted her time. It's easy for people to get sky-high expectations and think they're going to be on the evening news. So be upfront and explain at the outset and throughout that the pitching process can take time.

5. Keep your story-tellers engaged

Maintaining relationships with the people in your storybank after the first pitch can be a challenge. But you have to do it so that you can count on your story-tellers in the future. It's natural for them to wonder what's happening on an issue a month after you've done some intense media work together. And it's understandable that they might get frustrated after dedicating time talking with you without an immediate media hit to show for results. Keeping story-tellers in the loop about what you're doing and hearing back from reporters and decision makers will help ease their curiosity and frustration and keep them involved for the next push.

Your simple database will help you with this correspondence. Here are some more tips from the best pitchers on our media team to nurture your ongoing relationship with story-tellers:

- After the initial push of a story, reassess which stories are likely to be effective in the future. You may find that you may need to narrow your story pool again in order to maintain the essential relationships.
- Whenever there is a big update on the issue, send your story-tellers a short note letting them know.
- Find a way to feature their story even if it doesn't make the news cycle. Include the story in a report, write a Facebook post about it, or showcase it in your organization's newsletter.
- If you go the social media route, take the opportunity to invite other supporters to share their stories.
- Consider treating them like your super-activists – invite them to an 'insider' campaign call, send them monthly updates, have a campaign staffer call them directly to check in/refresh once every 3 months.
- Say thank you in a special way. We all communicate in email a lot. Something as simple as picking up the phone will really show your appreciation.

Conclusion

Harnessing the power of stories takes a lot of time and energy but when the right story sticks in the media, it can give your campaign or cause a big boost.

We hope our advice about how to identify and gather stories that will attract media was helpful. We aren't able to work with every cause we care about so we want whitepapers like these to be as valuable as possible for your organization.

What other leftover questions do you have about storytelling? Or what other campaign challenges are you grappling with? We plan to host a follow-up webinar to this paper and write more guides on how to make the most out of storytelling and the media. So we would really appreciate hearing from you.

Please contact Leslie Kerns at lkerns@mrss.com with any questions or comments and we'll incorporate the feedback into our future projects.

About the Author

Leslie Kerns, Senior Vice President, Director of Campaigns, is an expert on strategic communications, media relations and integrated campaigns. A former attorney, Leslie leverages her public policy and advocacy skills to position, message and gain attention for non-profits, foundations and their campaigns. Since joining M+R in 2008, she has helped build and launch a national transportation campaign with Smart Growth America and Reconnecting America, brand a global client protection campaign targeting microfinance institutions and leaders with ACCION International, and develop an awareness campaign around juvenile justice for the MacArthur Foundation slated to launch this year. Leslie's other current and past clients include the Rockefeller Foundation, American Lung Association, USAgainstAlzheimer's, 350.org, GlobalGiving, National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association, and American Jewish World Service. Leslie joined M+R after helping to build the non-profit practice at Solomon McCown & Company in Boston.

About M+R

M+R Strategic Services is dedicated to helping our clients advance their missions in order to bring about positive change. We do this by helping organizations and campaigns we believe in develop smart and effective strategies, hone their messages, mobilize their members, build grassroots support, raise money, and communicate effectively with the media, the public, and decision-makers, both online and offline. Please visit www.mrss.com for more information.

