COLLEEN COOK & SCOTT WILLIAMS · IF POSSIBLE

YEAR-END STORY GUIDE

Find the stories you already have, tell them well, and bring more donors alongside this year-end

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KINDS OF STORY

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TRY-THIS EXERCISES



START HERE

YOUR DONORS ALREADY HAVE A STORY ABOUT YOU

We spend a lot of our time with nonprofit leaders talking about story: where to find it, who it belongs to, and how to tell it often enough to be heard. This guide gathers the parts of that conversation we come back to most, written down for your year-end.

Colleen & Scott

THE CONSTELLATION IN THEIR HEAD

Give anyone three random words, like collaborate, hope and listen, and within seconds they will have turned them into a story. Nobody plans it. Brains do this on their own.

> *"Stories are a little bit like constellations. So if we've got three data points, our brain automatically ties them together."*

Your donors do the same thing with your last few touches: a receipt, an event invitation, a newsletter they skimmed. Their brain connects the dots and tells itself a story about you, whether or not it's the one you meant.

Decisions are made with the heart first, head second.

WHAT THE INSIDE CAN'T SEE

> *"The people on the inside, they get it. They know it's like second nature for them because they have lived it. ... The people who are new to something or on the outside are just entering in. They don't know things in that level of detail."*

You watch the breakthrough happen in person. Most of your donors only meet it through a letter or a post, so the story has to carry what they missed.

TRY THIS

> *"What's the story in their mind right now about your organization, based on whatever your last five or 10 touches with them looked like?"*

Pull up your last five touches. Read them the way a stranger would. Write the story they add up to in one sentence.

THE HERO

YOUR ORGANIZATION IS THE GUIDE

THE HERO

The hero is the people served through the mission.

THE GUIDE

The guide is the organization.

THE DONOR

The donor comes alongside the guide to serve the hero.

"Most organizations view themselves as Luke, but you're not Luke. You're Obi-Wan Kenobi. You're the guide."

TWO WAYS TO TELL THE SAME STORY

THE ORGANIZATION AS THE HERO

We self-produce Broadway-quality shows in a historic theater that gives everyone in our community access to the arts.

THE PERSON SERVED AS THE HERO

A man in our community never wanted to go to the musicals. Then one night he took his four-year-old granddaughter to Peter Pan. When Peter asked the audience to clap if they believed in fairies, she jumped up and called out, "I believe in fairies." He started weeping and thought, "What have I been missing?" He has spent the years since bringing other people into that room.

The second story does what the first can't: it becomes the invitation. The people we want in that room have a hard time getting there, we know a path, and it needs help. "Are you interested in having a conversation about that?"

THE TEST

Read any sentence in an appeal and name the three roles. If the hero is your organization, that is the classic error. If you already fixed that by making the donor the hero, you made a different one. The hero is the person your mission serves.

WHO TELLS WHICH STORY

You tell the hero's story. Let a donor, a volunteer or a partner tell the story about you.

"A donor can say, this is why I give, because they do this."

37%

saw revenue go up after moving to community-centered messaging.

Source: Johnson Center for Philanthropy, 2025.

TRY THIS

Take one sentence from last year's year-end letter. Name the hero, the guide and the donor. Then rewrite it so the person you serve is the hero.

THE STORIES YOU ALREADY HAVE

1	2	3	4
WHAT'S HAPPENING	**THE NEED**	**THE IDEA**	**THE SUCCESS STORY**

"They need to hear about what's happening, the ideas, the problems, the needs, the success stories, all of it, in order to build that relationship."

A story can be small. A volunteer's first Saturday counts. So does the problem you haven't solved yet, and the idea you'd chase if the money showed up.

WHERE THEY COME FROM

The people you serve: what changed

Donors: why they give

Volunteers: what they see

Staff: what they witnessed that a donor never would

CAPTURE IT IN 30 SECONDS

When someone on your team sees something worth keeping, they send a voice memo, a text or a two-line email to one shared place. It gets shaped into a story later.

Build a story library. Collect stories from every perspective on your organization and keep them in your AI brain. Every grant, social post and donor letter you draft can start from them.

ASK PEOPLE TO DONATE THEIR STORY

We served as campaign strategist and marketing agency for Ashland University's comprehensive campaign. Its feasibility study capped the campaign at $30M. Leadership set the goal at $50M and went loud right away. In the first phase, instead of asking for money, the campaign asked people to donate their stories, then told those stories across social media, email and events. The $50M goal was hit 18 months early, and the campaign raised $100.6M.

One rule: every story involving a named or identifiable person needs documented consent.

TRY THIS

"What's that moment where your mission was served in a really inspiring way? ... It's probably the thing that, on the worst days, gets you out of bed."

Write that moment in three sentences. Send it to one person on your team today.

EVERYWHERE

TELL IT MORE THAN ONCE

Nothing about your mission got harder. The room got louder.

2.2%

of your own followers see an organic nonprofit Facebook post.

Source: M+R Benchmarks 2026, 180 organizations.

50

nonprofit emails reach the average subscriber in a year, and 31 of them are asks.

Source: M+R Benchmarks 2026.

3×

is what multichannel donors gave, against single-channel donors.

Source: NextAfter and Virtuous, 2021.

People rarely act the first time they hear a story. They act when it reaches them again, from someone they trust, as a personal invitation.

Offer content like a charcuterie board. Lots of variety, meaningful bites, selected by the diners.

Give people ways to engage before they're ready to give, so the story has reached them before the invitation does.

WHERE ONE STORY CAN SHOW UP

OWNED

- Website story page
- Blog post
- Giving page
- Email newsletter
- Appeal email series
- Text messages

SOCIAL

- Facebook
- Instagram posts and stories
- LinkedIn
- Short-form video
- Live video

MAIL AND PRINT

- Year-end appeal letter
- Printed newsletter
- Postcards
- Thank-you notes
- Annual or impact report

PERSONAL

- Major donor emails and calls
- Board talking points
- Volunteer and advocate toolkits
- Peer-to-peer fundraisers

IN THE ROOM

- Events and open houses
- Worship or community gatherings
- Speaking and presentations

PAID AND PARTNER

- Social and search ads
- Partner newsletters
- Local media and podcasts
- Grant proposals and reports

EVERYWHERE

MAP ONE STORY ACROSS YOUR YEAR-END

TRY THIS

Take a letter and turn it into a multi-channel campaign, sharing multiple stories. Pick one story from page 4 and map where it shows up each week from November 1 to December 31. Write the piece, then check every place it goes.

WEEK	THE STORY OR PIECE	OWNED	SOCIAL	MAIL	PERSONAL	ROOM	PAID
1		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

SEGMENTS

WHO NEEDS TO HEAR SOMETHING DIFFERENT?

"Are they already an existing donor that's been generous with us? Are they somebody who's never given but has been highly involved? These require different conversations."

HOW ONE YEAR-END PLAN SPLIT ITS LIST

BOARD AND CURRENT MAJOR DONORS

asked in person, before any public ask

MONTHLY PARTNERS

thanked first for walking with the organization all year, then invited, gently, to a year-end gift

BOUGHT A TICKET OR A RESOURCE, NEVER GAVE

the warmest, most familial voice

PEOPLE SERVED IN THE PAST

the gentlest voice and the simplest next step, with every touch reviewed first by the staff member who knows them

TWO RULES FROM THAT PLAN:

"The ask should never open below the reader's own last gift."

Every piece carries a segment tag, and a separate version gets written only where the message should change.

Some people get no invitation at all. In that plan, the people the organization was serving right now were left out entirely.

Watch which stories each person responds to. That tells you what they care about, beyond what they gave last year.

If you use AI for this: if your donor list goes into an AI tool, use your organization's own Team or Enterprise workspace, never a personal account. And add a line to your privacy notice saying AI is part of how you analyze and communicate.

TRY THIS

Name three groups on your list. Write the one sentence each group needs to hear that the others don't.

GROUP	THE SENTENCE ONLY THEY NEED TO HEAR

MULTIPLY IT

START WITH THE STORY, THEN MULTIPLY IT

You have to get your story straight before you amplify it.

HOW WE WORK

1

HUMAN-SOURCED

You are the source. Your team captures the stories and keeps them in one story library.

2

AI-MULTIPLIED

AI turns one story into the appeal, the emails, the posts and the giving page, in your voice.

3

HUMAN-GATED

You are the final yes. A named person approves every piece before it goes anywhere.

GIVE IT THE CONTEXT FIRST

"Every single story, you need to answer 100 questions."

A chatbot that knows nothing about you fills its gaps with guesses, which is why it sounds like everyone else. Give it your mission, your voice, your stories and last year's results first.

WHAT GOES IN YOUR MISSION BRAIN

- **Identity:** mission, values, founding story
- **Programs:** who each one serves and what changes
- **Impact:** outcomes, case for support, your story library
- **Audiences:** donor and constituent groups, and the tone for each
- **Voice:** preferred terms, banned terms, samples
- **Guardrails:** consent, sensitive content, who reviews what

WHERE AI DOES NOT BELONG

"Use AI to design the personal thank-you note. Use AI to help you figure out who gets those handwritten notes. But handwrite those notes."

MULTIPLY IT

ONE CAMPAIGN, MULTIPLIED

We built a 91-asset year-end campaign for a nonprofit in 8 hours. An agency would need 250+ hours for that work. At $150 an hour, that's a $37,500 fee.

91

assets in one year-end campaign

8

hours to build it with AI

250+

hours for an agency

$37,500

agency fee at $150 an hour

"AI is the greatest equalizer for nonprofits in history. It gives them access to the power and capabilities previously available only to large corporations. They simply need to know how to harness it."

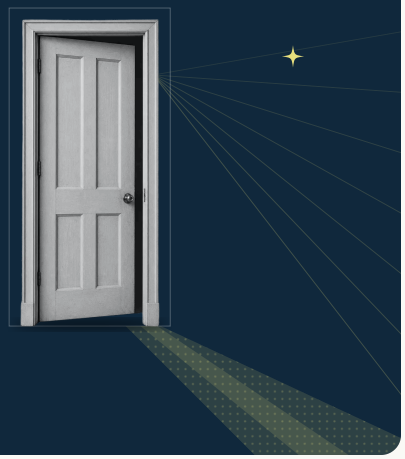
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WHAT COMES NEXT

THE STORIES ARE ALREADY THERE

Place the person you serve as the hero of those stories, share the story in more places, and let AI multiply your efforts.

IFPOSSIBLE.AI · HI@IFPOSSIBLE.AI





ABOUT IF POSSIBLE

WE ARE NONPROFIT FUNDRAISERS WHO FIGURED OUT AI

If Possible is Colleen Cook and Scott Williams. We have spent more than a decade at the intersection of nonprofit fundraising and technology, helping 100+ nonprofits raise $200M+. Today we help nonprofit teams build AI into the work they already do, in their own voice and with their own data.

11+	100+	$200M+
YEARS	ORGS SERVED	RAISED

YOUR NEXT STEP WITH IF POSSIBLE

LIVE, IN SMALL GROUPS 01

JOIN THE COHORTS WAITLIST

A small group of nonprofit teams each build one real piece of their work AI-first, live with Colleen and Scott, week by week. Join the waitlist to hear first when the next cohort opens.

ifpossible.ai/cohort

1:1 PARTNERSHIP 02

AI IMPLEMENTATION

For orgs ready to build across the whole team. We design the AI system your nonprofit needs with your leaders, then implement it with your people, department by department, until it runs.

ifpossible.ai/ai-implementation

FREE, EVERY WEDNESDAY 03

THE IF POSSIBLE NEWSLETTER

One issue a week: what matters in AI, what it means for your org, and one move you can make that same day.

ifpossible.ai/newsletter

FREE RESOURCES 04

THE REST OF THE STARTER PACK

All three tools in the Nonprofit AI Starter Pack: the Prompt Vault, the Readiness Assessment and the AI Policy Template. Plus The Art of the Possible, our articles on AI for nonprofits.

ifpossible.ai/starter · **ifpossible.ai/articles**