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STORYTELLING

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44 Highlights of the
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60 Tee Up to Raise Funds

Contents



Cover

16 Once Upon a Time

In his book *Storytelling Can Change the World*, Ken Burnett argues that there are only two types of stories: those that inform and entertain people and those that rouse them to action. Fundraisers, he says, too often rely on the former while avoiding the latter.

Features

22 Reach Out and Touch Someone

How stories help you share the value that attracts donors to your organization

30 Lights! Camera! Action!

How to create effective and relevant videos to highlight your organization's mission and raise more funds

38 The Art and Science of Storytelling

How to obtain what you need to tell a meaningful story

44 A Tale of the Slippery Stipend

The continuing saga of the *AFP Compensation and Benefits Study*

Departments

4 Chair's Message

Stories We Treasure

6 Worth a Look

14 Ethics

Building Trust Between Charities and Donors: The Importance of Transparency

52 Research

New Canadian Donor Insights Revealed: The Six Donor Segments

56 What's Working

Expect the Unexpected

60 Best Bets

Tee Up to Raise Funds

64 Prospect Development

Low Profile No Longer: Identifying Up-and-Comers in Your Organization

67 Technology

Social Media and Major Gifts: Partnering With Prospect Research

70 Management

Do You Know What Would Be Really Neat?

74 Your Career

On the Right Path

77 Resources

78 One More Thing

80 One-on-One

Ann Charles Watts, ACFRE

Expect the Unexpected

By PAUL LAGASSE



When the debate team of the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) at Bard College (www.bpi.bard.edu) in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., defeated the national champion Harvard team in a friendly contest last October, no one at Bard was shocked by the outcome. After all, the Bard team, a trio of inmates at the nearby Eastern New York Correctional Facility who participate in Bard's rigorous educational program for incarcerated men and women, had won its first-ever debate when it went up against West Point. "We know how talented our students are," explains Laura Liebman, director of development for the Bard Prison Initiative. "The outcome was not surprising at all."

What was surprising, however, was the sensation the story caused when it unexpectedly went viral several weeks later. At first, when an article ("Prison vs. Harvard in an Unlikely Debate") in *The Wall Street Journal* briefly spiked as the site's No. 1 story, BPI's small staff was

able to easily field the media and donor inquiries that followed. Then word began to spread on social media. First, there was a brief Twitter exchange about *The Wall Street Journal* story between then-Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and documentary filmmaker Ken Burns, who is producing a film about the Bard program. Then, the news website Vox (www.vox.com) published a feature on the debate that was widely shared. From there, the story exploded on Facebook and Twitter and on other media outlets, catching Liebman and the rest of the Bard staff off guard.

"Our understanding was that if the story was going to go viral, it would have done so right away," Liebman recalls. "So, we weren't anticipating more attention. But by Monday morning, we were being flooded with media inquiries. It suddenly felt like the whole world was calling."

In addition to those from reporters' seeking interviews, the calls included donors eager to make gifts and grant makers inviting BPI to apply for grants. What had started out as simply an inspiring underdog story morphed virtually overnight into a tremendous fundraising opportunity for the institution. But would BPI's staff have the time and capacity to take advantage of it?

Catching Lightning When It Strikes

Development officers know how to prepare for the uptick in giving that accompanies planned events, but sudden and unexpected surges in publicity like the one that hit BPI following the Harvard debate can send staff scrambling to capitalize on them before the moment passes and people's attention shifts elsewhere. "A lot of nonprofits don't consider what will happen when something unexpectedly goes viral," says Justin J. Ware, vice president for digital fundraising strategy at ScaleFunder (www.scalefunder.com), a Los Angeles-based digital fundraising platform for universities and nonprofits. "And when it does happen, they don't know the first place to start." Ware says that nonprofits can avoid that problem by taking three steps right now.

1. Ensure that you have, or can call on, enough people to staff up in response to a surge.



The Bard Prison Initiative debate team defeats the national champion Harvard College Debating Union. Credit: Peter Foley (for The Wall Street Journal)

2. Develop a formal response strategy that identifies who is responsible for doing what and when.
3. Employ a multichannel communications approach for mobilizing stakeholders and staying in front of the story as it spreads.

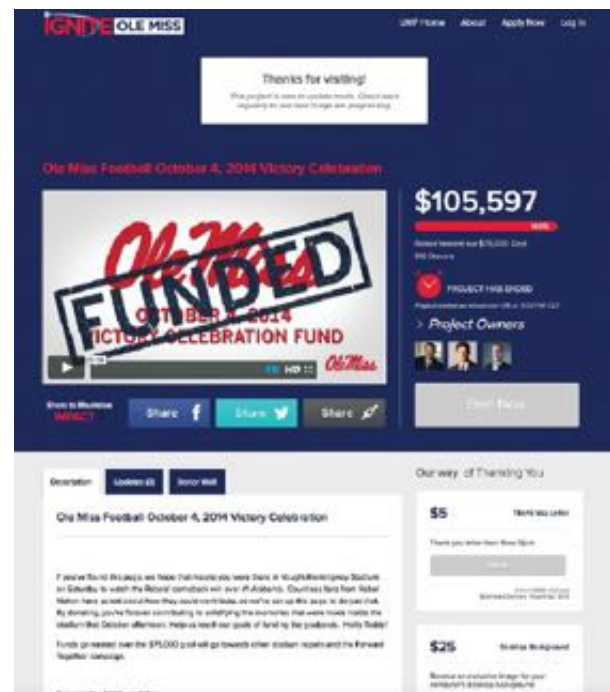
“When you build that capability, it’s not just there to catch lightning when it strikes,” Ware explains. “It should be part of a comprehensive plan that involves direct mail, phones, social media, a strong crowdfunding platform and other resources.”

That plan should include taking photos and even video of events. Not only will you have something to distribute through your own social media channels, but you also will have something ready for the press should it come calling. Also, prepare background materials such as participant bios and histories of the organization and its mission to hand out when needed. The responsibility for curating these materials should lie with a person who is tasked with anticipating media needs.

Ware understands that it is not easy for development and communications staff to make a winning case for developing a strategy to respond to extreme-case scenarios that may never come to pass. In an era of tight budgets, “better safe than sorry” just isn’t persuasive enough. Ware counsels clients to try buttressing their arguments with persuasive data, such as the overlap between the organization’s programs and popular trends, or accounts of recent media attention elsewhere.

To illustrate, Ware shares what can happen when you have the staff, strategy and outreach tools in place to capitalize on an unexpected opportunity. Following the 23-17 victory of the University of Mississippi’s football team against longtime rival the University of Alabama on Oct. 4, 2014, jubilant fans stormed the field and tore down the goalposts, resulting in a \$75,000 fine against Ole Miss Athletics, which it promptly paid. Hours after the event, however, Ole Miss Athletics Director Ross Bjork tweeted a photo of the celebration and joked that the people in the photo should help cover the expense. The tweet went viral, and donations immediately started flowing in, accompanied by significant media attention. The Ole Miss development office decided to capitalize on the response by launching the Victory Celebration Fund campaign on the fly.

Fortuitously, at that moment, the development office was putting the final touches on its new crowdfunding platform called Ignite (<http://ignite.olemiss.edu>). “We had to hurry up and finalize everything for the launch of the campaign,” recalls Angela Avery, annual giving coordinator at Ole Miss. “We finalized the layout



The University of Mississippi’s “Victory Celebration Fund” was launched overnight and raised more than \$2 million in just two days. Credit: University of Mississippi/ScaleFunder

and testing of the platform on Monday, Oct. 6, and we started planning the campaign with the athletics department at 3:30 p.m. the same day. The project launched the next day at 1 p.m.” This was less than 72 hours after the game had ended. The results were impressive: The \$75,000 goal was met in less than four hours, and when the campaign was suspended two days later, it was funded at 140 percent.

Taking advantage of the campaign’s momentum, the department simultaneously launched another campaign, “I Wear 38” (after the jersey number of the late defensive back Roy Lee “Chucky” Mullins), to raise funds for the Chucky Mullins Memorial Scholarship Fund, which provides scholarships to students with physical disabilities or exceptional financial need. This campaign raised almost \$103,000 in its first day and reached its full \$150,000 funding within a week. “I think the key is that you have to be ready to seize opportunities when they present themselves,” Avery says. “If we had done the prudent thing and waited a week and planned more thoroughly, we probably would have lost all the crazy enthusiasm and excitement that followed that momentous win.”

Based on the lessons learned from the two impromptu campaigns, Avery and the development staff now encourage project teams to build in time to prepare a campaign while also timing them to coincide with significant events that are likely to have significant audience response. “It’s all about creating a personal connection with donors to inspire them to be a part of the campaign,” Avery explains.

While I Have Your Attention

Just as the Ole Miss development office took advantage of the momentum built by the football victory campaign to promote its scholarship fund, nonprofits should be ready to capitalize on their own “overnight sensations” to promote other programs that donors may want to know about as well. That is what the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) in Washington, D.C. (www.humanesociety.org), did following the public outrage over the killing of Cecil the lion by an American big-game hunter in Zimbabwe in early July 2015. Within two days of the story’s breaking, the Humane Society’s social media, email, website, video and photo advertising channels launched a coordinated effort to encourage people to sign a petition calling on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to place African lions under the protection of the Endangered Species Act. The initial Facebook post, for example, reached more than 3.8 million people and was shared 34,000 times. “Trophy hunting is an issue that HSUS has been working on for a very long time,” explains Carie Lewis Carlson, director of social marketing at the Humane Society. “But until this tragic incident, it was never brought to the forefront.”

The Humane Society seized the opportunity to build momentum for some of its other core issues as well. For example, it encouraged people to call on airlines and UPS to ban the transportation of hunting trophies. Ultimately, more than 40 airlines worldwide agreed to implement the ban. The Humane Society also alerted



Within two days of the death of Cecil the lion in Zimbabwe, the Humane Society of the United States had launched a successful awareness campaign. Credit: Humane Society of the United States

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its supporters and social media followers to legislation being considered in Congress that, among other things, would permit the importation of polar bears killed by hunters.

Carlson explains that HSUS was able to launch these campaigns quickly, while the killing of Cecil was still being widely discussed, because it already had the pieces in place for just such an occasion. “The best thing to do is to be prepared with a plan if something goes viral,” Carlson says. “You should always be developing campaigns, creative and messaging that you think people will love and glom onto, though you never know what is going to resonate.”

The Humane Society’s plan broadly follows these lines:

- A vice president instructs staff members to drop what they are doing and prepare a response to a breaking story.
- Communications and program staff meet to hammer out the organization’s messaging.
- The organization issues a press release and sends out an initial tweet.
- An action alert or donation form is created and made available to supporters.
- Staff members prepare and roll out a formal marketing plan that includes assignments for all communications channels.
- Strategies are shifted in response to daily reports.


“An opportunity can happen to anyone at any time,” Carlson says. “Nonprofits should be prepared with an outline of how to activate when an opportunity arises to insert their brand into breaking news, something that is going viral or a trending topic.”

All Hands on Deck

So how did the Bard Prison Initiative staff fare following the debate victory over Harvard? “It was ‘all hands on deck’ for a few days,” Liebman recalls. “As is typical for any small nonprofit, we don’t have a large staff. Initially, we were just answering phones and responding to emails as fast as we could.”

When the dust settled, BPI calculated that the media attention had resulted in a 40 percent increase in gifts and a 40 percent increase in new donors. Furthermore, the geographic distribution of the donor base has widened dramatically as a result of the international attention. “It looks like I’m going to be doing a lot more traveling!” Liebman says.

The BPI-Harvard debate also may prove to be a turning point in the growth of the organization. “There’s absolutely no question that the Harvard debate and the media explosion around it has had a major effect on our efforts to secure stable revenue,” says Max Kenner, BPI’s founder and executive director. Though the donor base has grown dramatically, Kenner, who makes a point of sending a handwritten thank-you note for every gift regardless of its size, believes that this will not change the organization’s approach to donor relationships. “Our community is made up of individuals and institutions across the country to whom our work represents something meaningful,” he says. “The result has really been an affirmation of what we do here.”

What are the major takeaways from the experience? “During events like this, it’s really critical to have a strong team in place, people you can trust and really rely on,” Liebman says. “When you’re tested, that’s when you really see the strength of your team and your commitment to the mission.” 

Paul Lagasse is a freelance writer in La Plata, Md. (www.avwrites.com).