

Nonprofit 911 – December 8, 2009
Is Your Story Big Enough?
with Michael Margolis of Get Storied

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www.fundraising123.org or www.nonprofit911.org

Rebecca Higman: Now I am really excited to introduce our speaker. Our presenter today is Michael Margolis. Michael is the founder of Get Storied and is the author of the Storytelling Manifesto “Believe Me”: Why your vision, brand and leadership need a bigger story.

For nonprofits in the midst of ambitious change and repositioning, Michael counsels leaders on how to craft an authentic story that others can believe in. His unique strategies have direct impact on the levels of brand, finance, operations, and culture. But more importantly, Michael helps to shift how ideas, visions, and issues are perceived and embraced by others.

Michael began his career as a social entrepreneur helping to launch not one, but two innovative nonprofits by the ripe old age of 22, making us all feel a little lazy here; at least me.

He has since worked for dozens of world changing efforts, including projects for Ernst and Young, Marriott, NASA, the National Audubon Society, and the YWCA. Michael is trained in cultural anthropology and teaches brand storytelling at the executive MBA level for the Shulich School of Business.

His work and ideas have been features in Fast Company, Brandweek, Storytelling Magazine, and other places. Michael lives in the East Village of New York City and wants you to know that he more eats more chocolate than the average human.

So without further ado, I am happy to turn the floor over to Michael to get us started.

Michael Margolis: Rebecca, thank you. I appreciate all of your partnership in organizing and facilitating our call today. And I also want to thank Katya Andresen for recently reviewing my book and giving me the invitation to speak to your community.

So as you mentioned, for our session, we are going to be exploring how to uncover the emotional spark that turns current and potential supporters into true believers. And there are three things we are going to explore on the call.

The first is why fundraising appeals are increasingly falling flat. And my hint is it is not just a lousy economy I think we can blame. Number two, I am going to introduce you to the premise of my book, which is all about telling the bigger story. I will explain what

that means, and then how you can begin to shift your thinking and communications approach.

And then third, we will spend the bulk of the call talking about heroes and why every story needs a hero. More importantly though, I am going to unpack some of the challenges and the choices, and at times, the unintended consequences of the way many nonprofits frame their hero story.

Now, all my work is based on a simple premise. And that is that if you want to change the world, you need to change your story. I believe the change actually begins at the story level, and that the way that we perceive and experience reality is based on the stories that we tell and that we listen to.

This is basically how the world works. Whether we think something is real or false, whether we think something is important or not, whether it is worthy of our attention or it is just noise, it comes down to the story and whether we choose to believe in that story.

For example, we might just look at today's headlines. And I don't know about you, but I am aghast at what people are now calling Climategate, or at least that is what one person is coining it. It is basically the orchestrated release of information trying to imply scientists falsified the human effects of global warming. Rather coincidental, this is happening exactly at the moment that the whole world is gathered in Copenhagen for climate talks.

So just when we assumed, or at least I did, that climate change was pretty much a generally accepted fact and something that is a pretty serious issue we need to be addressing, you can see that there is still a counter story, and that the issue of climate change is fighting for legitimacy.

In many ways, every nonprofit and the issues you represent are waging some of these similar battles to the point of what sometimes feels like hand to hand combat, really trying to fight and prove their importance of what you are doing. You are basically trying to shift how people perceive what you do and help them see why it matters. And one could say that, at the end of the day, the best story wins.

What I would like to really emphasize is that I believe at the end of the day, this doesn't have to be an adversarial battle or a zero sum game, and that, often times, the mentality that we have for how we talk about our work can actually alienate more than it engenders.

And so, the premise of my book, in many ways, is that there is always an opportunity to tell the bigger story, to basically remind people of their shared humanity and connectedness.

And so all of this sets the context for today's exploration. So when you think about the classic hero story or structure, which is all very familiar to us, but in the context of the kind

of work that many of us are doing around causes, that classic hero structure can often do more harm than good, especially how it plays out in fundraising appeals.

Part of that is what I call the cycle of guilt or shaming others into supporting us. And what are the ways that we can actually shift that into a real, genuine, authentic, attention-grabbing message that people can truly believe in, and it makes them feel good?

And as part of this exploration, third is to really think about what are some of the essential truths at the heart of your brand and mission, and how to start thinking about those, because it is those truths that are the source of your passion. They are what invite and unite people rather than what drives away potential supporters.

So before I forget, I want to mention, for everybody on the call, that you all have a chance to win one of 10 complimentary copies of my new book, which I will be signing and mailing out to you. And so, there is a resource page I have created which is at www.getstoried.com/hero. By entering your email, you are also going to get a three chapter excerpt of my book "Believe Me." You will also get access to several other free articles and story resources, some information about my workshops and programs. I promise you won't start getting spammed, and you can opt out at just about anytime.

And then lastly, also, if anybody is interested in Twittering our call real-time, my Twitter name is @getstoried. So Rebecca mentioned the participant workbook. So hopefully all of you have that as a resource. It is going to provide you with a little bit of an interactive guide for listening and supporting the learning experience.

You will notice in the document there are a few blanks throughout the document. It is sort of my half-hearted attempt to keep you engaged on the call. I know it can be challenging to just be listening for 45 minutes. So I hope that those little blanks don't annoy you. They are there to just sort of encourage you to listen. And as Rebecca said, you can always listen to the text transcript down the road.

There will be a few times I am going to pause, and I am going to take 30 seconds to ask you to respond to a question or a reflection as just some ways to, again, really help you think about the ideas I am presenting and how they relate back to the work that you are doing. And as Rebecca mentioned, we will also then have 10-15 minutes of Q&A at the end.

So let's talk about fundraising, and really, the notion of why I think fundraising is increasingly having a hard time connecting with people. And I will begin with a little bit of sharing of my own, and that is my relationship with Amnesty International.

I have to tell you. When I was a teenager growing up in California, Amnesty International was probably my favorite cause. There was something about the larger message. And keep in mind, this was the mid to late '80s. Amnesty International, in those days, had really found its way into popular culture. There were these amazing human rights concerts. You had folks like Sting, and Bruce Springsteen, and Tracy Chapman

singing around the world, singing Bob Marley's "Stand up for your Rights." There was something about the organization that touched me very deeply.

Fast forward to just a couple of years ago. In 2007, I decided to join as a member. Now, over the course of the following 12 months, Amnesty International did the most effective and compelling job of alienating me from their cause.

For one, for my \$30 gift, I started to receive fundraising appeals every single month, or certainly that is what it felt like. And the tone of the message that was being presented to me was a tone of anger, and it was a tone of self-righteousness. And it really disturbed me.

Here was a cause that I was very passionate about, that I wanted to support further. I was totally bought into their core story. I had this amazing imagery and memory of what this organization meant to me. And yet the way in which it was acting or communicating to me as a member of donor not only was not making me want to give more, but actually turned it into a negative relationship with the organization.

There was basically no dialogue or engagement is really how it felt to me in their communications, just moral rapprochement. And so while they may be right, there are certainly huge injustices going on in the world, the style and tone for how they were communicating it didn't really give me an effective way to relate. And so I ultimately cancelled my membership. I wrote them a letter. And also, to no surprise, I received no response.

So I share that story with you. And again, like I said, I believe Amnesty is doing incredible important work, and I don't want that to be lost sight of here. But is unfortunately a potentially familiar story for all of us with many of the kinds of fundraising appeals that we receive that create a sense of dissonance.

And sometimes it is things like moralizing the message, or in guilt and shaming, and it has almost a verbal violence to it, a real sense of judgment against the world. And sometimes it is some of the old clichés of desperate pleas for help or these general platitudes of doing good.

And I would ask you, because I know we have all received these as consumers, as citizens. We all get mail. And often times these solicitations are unrequested. How do you feel when you receive these appeals in the mail? "How do you think you are supposed to feel?" is often the question mark I ask myself when I look at the materials that people are sending me. I am asking myself, "What is it that they were hoping that I would feel and act?" And often times it really makes me pause and wonder.

And then lastly, how many of these tactics are you possibly guilty of, one way or another? And it might be inadvertently. It might be subtly. But I would really encourage you to start thinking about that as we then talk about these ideas for really how to tell the bigger story.

So what I just described are, to me, a lot of old-school tactics that simply just aren't working anymore in what I call the "new-school" world. We all know we are living in what is really a new age of communications. And as part of that, people want and expect a human voice that they can relate to.

There are plenty of Debbie Downers and reasons to be depressed about the world. There are also plenty of reasons to be angry and despondent. And what I think most of us are looking for, out of all the things that we can be worried or concerned about, we are looking for reasons to believe. We are looking for the hope that things are going to get better. And we are looking for things that remind us of the inherent goodness of humanity.

There are also a lot of causes that are asking for support. There is a lot of competition when I am thinking about, "What are the issues that I am going to put my money in and invest in?" And I believe, at the end of the day, people want to engage something that they believe in, where it personally connects to their own personal story of who they are and the things that they care about.

So for me, for instance, one of the things I care a lot about is Africa. My father was born and raised in Zimbabwe and my family lived there for over 70 years. And so a lot of where I express my philanthropic giving and my volunteer time are with a range of causes specifically working in Zimbabwe and throughout Africa.

And for all of us, one way or another, the things that we get involved with, there is usually a reason, because of our own personal connection and sense of idea and how we relate to the issue.

So this is all something to keep in mind. There is one more issue that I want to touch on that is, I think, part of the challenge here. And it is what I would say is probably the greatest offense that many nonprofits...we are all guilty of. And it is what I call the "over rationalizing your story to death", even when there is actually a really great story to be told.

Now how do you know this is happening? Well for one, you know this is an issue if the spreadsheets are running the asylum and your people can't coherently and cohesively talk about the mission, talk about the work and the value your organization creates without using numbers as a crutch.

So numbers are powerful. Numbers are incredibly important with being able to think smart and effectively about the impact you are having, and to be able to manage resources effectively, but we also have a tendency to hide behind numbers. And we forget that numbers are a reflection of something else, and that we have to, at the end of the day, be able to actually describe that "something else", that intangibility. And those intangibles are actually the greatest asset at the heart of most nonprofits.

So a few years back, I was doing some work with NASA in their education programs. It is a phenomenal program; working in science in NASA education. It is a \$25 million program working in every state in middle schools, basically applying the NASA curriculum and translating it into science and math lessons for typical seventh and eighth graders. Phenomenal program. And yet, this program was on the budget chopping block as NASA was reevaluating all sorts of its expenses.

And they found themselves...My client in this situation had a stack of evaluations about a foot high. They had gone out to the latest academic institutions, had done extensive evaluation research to prove the efficacy of the program. And then they also had a one page brochure, and basically, nothing in between for telling the story.

So what we ended up doing was not only did we go and listen and engage, solicit the stories from the schools, from the teachers, from the kids and really package that together, but we also went back and connected the work that this program was doing to the NASA story.

See, NASA is one of the greatest sense stories of the 20th century. Huge scientific achievements, and it speaks to something that is larger than us, the general idea of we all look up to the stars in the sky and we dream of what is possible. And so, that became the story that we told in a campaign called "Everybody Dreams", because we recognized that senior brass at NASA, as well as legislators on Capitol Hill, they needed a reminder about what really matters.

What is the bigger story of both NASA as an icon, and why should we be concerned in the next generation, both at a practical level of science and math engineers, but also in capturing the imagination of our citizens and giving them something to feel proud of?

So now, there is a growing body of research that actually supports this issue or tension and the tension between numbers and the story. So there is a study in 2007 that was actually done by Carnegie Mellon that describes how data obscures our ability to care. It is actually discussed in an article by my colleague Andy Goodman, and he describes this a little bit further. In the research, it is called "The Identifiable Victim Effect" and that if you want to generate compassion, providing a face and a name is far more effective.

And it goes on to describe this further. For the sake of time, I won't go deep into, sort of, the vignette that really frames this example, which, again, is an available resource for you at my website under www.getstoried.com/hero. But the point is people relate more to personal stories than numbers. And when the numbers are particularly large, in the millions, in the billions, our mind, as well as our hearts, simply cannot relate and we turn to look the other way.

So this is something to really be thinking about. And the research, by the way, further distinguished that even when you tell the story, and that it is supported by the facts and data, that, from an emotional standpoint, that is less effective than just telling the story.

That might sound contrarian to what a lot of us believe and think, but it is a quite unique reflection to consider here in these dimensions of the storytelling. So let's talk about story a bit more, because I am sure many of you have heard about storytelling in one form or another. It has become a bit of a buzz word and a best practice tactic in the nonprofit arena.

I might sound contrarian, but I would say that actually, there is a bit too much emphasis on the tactic of storytelling, especially by nonprofits at what I would say is the expense of telling the bigger story.

You see, most nonprofit storytelling, however skilled it might be, the stories often continue to perpetuate some of the chronic clichés, social imbalances, the misperceptions by the public, and those systemic failures of philanthropy that we are all aware of but we don't really know how to fully address.

What do I mean by this? Well, if your fundraising appeal is designed to make people feel sorry for your cause or guilt them into giving, you only continue to marginalize the true worth of what you are doing. People forever will look down on what you do because you are reinforcing the exact imbalance you are trying to shift.

So that is really the point that I am trying to make here. Don't worry so much about how to tell the story. It is a lot more important to have a story that is worth telling. When the story is worth telling, the how almost takes care of itself. When you have a story worth telling, it becomes contagious. It has a quantum effect. People connect with it, they relate to it, and they want to share it with others.

This was a lesson, actually, that I began to really learn, as Rebecca mentioned, in some of my early days as a social entrepreneur. Often times, the ways that people think about a story or the story that they want to tell reinforces an old status quo.

So one of the nonprofits that I co-founded was called City Skills. This was back in the late '90s, and we were focused on technology workforce development at a time when half a million technology jobs were going unfilled. And we were working in urban inner-city communities, looking at the whole sector of how to gear up people for these new jobs.

Well, the constant tension was that everybody wanted to tell...And when I say everybody, I mean media, new potential partners, and people in the technology world, they often times looked at our work as a "save the inner-city" story. "Wouldn't that be great? Poor Johnny, down on his luck. Yeah! This will be the silver bullet that ends poverty."

When in contrast, what I always saw was a much bigger story, which was, "What are the skills that any of us need in order to thrive or survive in the new economy?" So notice the contrast. One is the "save the inner-city story", and it is a story that is really still perpetuating issues of race, and equality, and class versus the other story, which is a pluralistic story, which breaks down boundaries and reminds us of, "Whoa! Crap! The

world is changing here. How are any of us going to figure out how to navigate this? And how do we also take advantage of some of these opportunities?"

So my book "Believe Me" is a storytelling manifesto that really explores that shift in mindset. There are 15 storytelling axioms, and they are designed to help you find the bigger story.

So one of those examples, one of the axioms that I would mention, is axiom number one, which is people don't really buy a product, a service, or an idea. They buy the story that is attached to it. That same principle applies to your fundraising appeals.

When you think about the story that you are telling, what is it that you are asking people to buy into? And is the thing you are asking them to buy into something that people want, something that they relate to, something that they identify with?

Another axiom in my book is actually, "The power of your story grows exponential as more and more people accept your story as their truth." So the point here is that much of this is about belief and truth, but we can't force truth on others. People have to develop their own relationship and understanding and find a way to connect your story to their own world view.

And this, in many ways, reflects this new age of communications. We are all hearing about Facebook, and Twitter, and all of these new social media tools that are conversational. They are relational. And the ultimately also imply that nobody has the answers.

So with that in mind, there are some shifts that we all need to be thinking about in terms of the style of communications, in becoming more adaptive with how you construct your fundraising appeals and you tell your story.

So with that, let's talk about today's lesson and the notion that every story needs a hero. So what I would like you to do is to...actually, in your participant workbooks there is a section that says, "What is your definition of a hero?" I am going to give you 30 seconds to write down some notes. What is your definition of a hero? What does that mean to you? What does that mean to your organization? What does that mean to the story that you are trying to tell?

So here is my definition of a hero. A hero is a character at the center of a story who overcomes great challenge to fulfill their mission in support of the greater good and the balance and wellbeing of society.

So heroes come in all shapes and sizes; politicians, family members, cultural creative geniuses. And in many ways, our heroes serve as metaphors and role models for what matters most.

The great mythologist Joseph Campbell actually documented what he called “The hero’s journey”, and he showed how it is a universal construct that is actually found in every culture in every time in every civilization.

So there is a natural part of us that lives vicariously through heroes when we are actually not trying to live an epic life of our own. The hero format or structure is, in many ways, the most familiar basic structure within storytelling.

Some of you may have watched over Thanksgiving; CNN had their annual hero awards. Really smart marketing concept. For any of you who aren’t familiar, CNN began to profile ordinary citizens who had achieved extraordinary feats. And it is now a big annual celebrity gala. They profile 10 recipients a year. It is like regular, average sorts of folks. There is this one guy, Doc Henley, who created this thing, Wine to Water. And it is a creative fundraising tactic, and he is now providing clean water to 25,000 people in five countries.

Or then, another one over the holidays was Jordan Thomas, who is 20 years old from Chattanooga, Tennessee. He lost both of his legs in a boating accident a couple years back. And so he felt really blessed that his family was able to really support him with prosthetics, even as he was a growing child. And so he has since started a foundation and has raised over \$400,000 to provide prosthetics for other children.

Those are sort of phenomenal, iconic examples, again, just with popular culture. And part of why CNN’s hero awards works so well is it speaks to this general need for all of us, that every good story needs a hero. We want a character that we can root for, that we sympathized with, and that really helps us to get invested in what happens next. And if you don’t have a sympathetic hero for people to relate to, the story is not really going to connect.

Now, this issue of heroes gets tricky when we start to think about this in the context of nonprofits, and I want to unpack that a little bit. So the literal meaning, of course, of a hero is a protector or defender. And conventional psychology says that your message has greater resonance when you can identify a common enemy. That was basically the formula of the Cold War, or when you see some of these brand wars, whether it is Pepsi versus Coca-Cola, or Mac versus PC. They are drawing a line in the sand of, “Look. You are either a believer or a non-believer. You are either with us or against us in many ways.” And from a brand perspective for consumer goods, that actually...there is a psychology to it. Anthropologically, sociologically, you are reinforcing your tribal or group identity.

But that becomes a bit more complicated when you are a nonprofit and you are trying to bring your idea, your cause, or your issue into mainstream acceptance. So we are going to unpack that a little bit.

But I want to first mention, sort of, to think about heroes from the perspective of consumer advertising, because, in many ways, what we see with consumer marketing in

commercials is they follow a simple model. They put the customer as the hero of the story, whether they are selling sports cars or laundry detergent. But it is a story that, if I am a viewer, I can potentially identify with and see myself in the story. And if it is a story that either makes me smile, makes me laugh, or that meets a specific need of mine, well, as the story goes, it prepares me to become a buying customer if I am not already.

So I share that because when it comes to choosing the hero of your story, for most nonprofits, you don't always have the luxury of a clear customer. There is not that same luxury and benefit. Things get a little more complicated.

So I am going to give you a second just to think about this. Who is your customer? And hopefully you have given some thought to this. But still, I know that there are often times different levels to who you define as your customer. But this is a really important question as it relates to the process of strategic storytelling and finding your bigger story.

So with that, let's talk about the three common hero alternatives that, as a nonprofit, are really good starting points for thinking about the various possibilities and options. So understanding and reorganizing your hero story actually can be a really effective means of shifting how your cause is perceived. And it can have a direct impact and relevance to your fundraising appeals.

One of the things that I am seeing all across the landscape is that most institutions today are in some process of reinvention, that organizations are somehow moving from an old story to a new story to be part of your strategic vision, to be part of a repositioning. It takes many different levels. It also can be part of a reorganization based on difficult financial times and needing to develop a new business model or adjust the way things have been done.

But in that situation, you are, in many ways, really trying to introduce a new story into reality. And this describes the situation that a client of mine was in several years back. They are the largest woman's organization in Hawaii. And for several years, they have been really bleeding red and were on the brink of insolvency.

And the organization realized that they were going to transform their business model. And so what they decided to do was, a very visionary CEO, she decided to address, actually, some of these issues in the traditional philanthropic model. See, this organization is a 100 year old organization with a strong legacy and mission, but it had become, in many ways, a social service organization in terms of its delivery model or programmatic model. And from a fundraising or financial perspective, that wasn't working anymore.

And so, the organization has since, actually, shifted or evolved into becoming now a membership organization. And in the process, actually, we developed a new story. And in that story, it is no longer the rich elite women of Hawaii who are donors and supporting those less fortunate and women who are facing domestic abuse or going back into the workforce in challenging situations. But there were some inherent imbalances within this

stakeholder mix. And instead, the new story of membership is really a story about, “What does it mean to be a woman living in Hawaii? More specifically, what does it mean to be a working woman living in Hawaii?”

And that story has resonance whether you are an executive in the boardroom or you are working just to pay the bills. And we began to talk about the balances, the challenges of balancing work and family demands, which are fundamental to Hawaiian culture.

I mention this as an example for a couple reasons. For one, this shift in story has helped the organization to catapult itself into a huge multimillion dollar fundraising campaign. They have restructured their programs to support the new story. They are thinking and acting more like a business. They rebranded their downtown facility into a downtown women’s club with a mission. And they are still staying true to their mission. They are, in fact, actually setting themselves up to fulfill that mission in more effective ways.

The organization, of course, is still in this transition, but it began by recognizing how to shift the story focus. And this sets the stage for thinking about several of these different alternatives for thinking about your hero.

So there are really three basics to be thinking about. There is the donor/member as the hero. There is the beneficiary as hero. And then there is the founder or leader as hero. So let me explain these three real quick.

So the donor or member as hero. In many ways, this most resembles the classic is customer hero storyline that I mentioned in consumer advertising. In this case, your audience is often a financial buyer of some kind, whether they are a donor or a member. But they are not just donating or giving money, but they often times then are getting something back in return. And you want them to identify with that story.

So great examples of these are something like Peace Corps or City Year, which definitely leans towards that member model. But you see how they have taken an issue. For instance, City Year which is community revitalization, and they have reframed it into a year long service program for young people to give back to America. Completely different frame of mind.

Peace Corps, in many ways, is doing that as well, where, as a program, it has touched thousands and thousands of communities around the world. When you talk to an average Peace Corps volunteer, they will tell you: “Geez. I feel like I got so much more out of that experience than I possibly could have given.”

And, in many ways, Peace Corps, it doesn’t define its impact based on...It doesn’t define its impact based on what it is actually...Many of the projects, I guess, that Peace Corps volunteers actually do don’t always work, and you hear these stories from Peace Corps volunteers. But what you do hear and see is that Peace Corps serves, really, in a way as a diplomatic program of exposing people and creating new bridges of relationships, of

exposing Americans to the world and exposing the world to Americans in place that perhaps wouldn't have those opportunities to connect.

Now, so shifting gears to the beneficiary as hero. This is often the most common hero chosen by nonprofits. It is the hero that is often closest to the action and the direct mission of your organization. The challenge here is that it is really easy to start to tell a glorified overcoming adversity story which then can border on melodramatic and clichéd. And audiences are quick to tune out of that kind of story.

Take, for instance, the issue or the cause of homelessness. I haven't been homeless. Many of the people on the call, you probably haven't been homeless. And so if you tell a story about a homeless person, that is a story that is hard for me to relate to. But if you tell a story about the deeper themes at the heart of homelessness about feeling completely utterly alone and having to fend for one's self, or about having lost one's way, and the challenges of those experiences and what can happen when people come together and give you some support. I know, personally, that is a story that is a lot more relatable to me. And it starts to open up. It starts to expand the potential constituency that might identify with your cause or issue.

The third example here would be the founder or leader as hero. And in that case, so many of our nonprofits are led by charismatic figures, and the personal story of theirs often serves as a metaphor for the organization.

And this is really common in our culture, where we celebrate regular people who have inspired extraordinary acts. It sort of harks back to the CNN hero awards. The challenge here though is what happens when your story needs to live, and travel, and transmit itself beyond just that individual leader or founder?

So that is the potential pitfall if you frame your entire story and really put just your founder as the hero or at the center. You are created a personality that also leaves you vulnerable at times if your leader steps down or if there is some kind of transition.

So those are the three different types of heroes. You have got member or donor as hero, beneficiary as hero, and founder or leader as hero. Which of these heroes would you say your fundraising appeal is based on?

And you may find, by the way, that it could be a combination of. But what are your fundraising appeals based on? Which hero are you choosing? And I will share this, and that is that the ideal goal to keep in mind is when your hero can actually begin to merge the boundaries of donor, beneficiary, and leader and you are just telling the human story.

That is the lesson from the Hawaii organization, that instead of having donors and trying to tell a story to them, and instead of telling the story to beneficiaries, they actually chose to tell the member story, which was the most inclusive way, the biggest umbrella so that the bigger the tent they could build, so to speak, the more room there would be for people to locate themselves in that story.

And it also even addressed the leader-hero issue, because the CEO, who is a very visionary and charismatic person, she realized that too many people, her board, her staff, the community, were looking to her, wanted her to be the hero to transmit and carry the story. And she recognized, “No. The story needs to be something that everybody can own, that everybody feels like they have a piece of it and can represent it.”

So that notion of telling the bigger story, the human story, it is the secret behind Martin Luther King’s success, Helen Keller, Mahat Magandi, even Barack Obama’s presidential campaign. And of course it is fascinating to see, the way that he used story in his presidential campaign, how that has shifted during the administration in recent times, which could be the topic of an entire other telecall.

But hopefully those give you a few sort of contextual points. And I would sort of end with this. I know we have covered a lot of ground in very little time. So really, my intention in our call today is to introduce you to this idea and concept of, as you start to think about stories, and how you tell stories, and how those stories translate into fundraising appeals, there is an opportunity to tell the bigger story, because too often the construction of our stories reinforce differences that divide and separate instead of identifying the elements of the story which invite and unite.

So in terms of next steps, I want to suggest three next steps that is just common advice that I give to anybody that is going through this process when I am working with them. And these are things that you can start to really look at yourself.

So you want to start by looking at the common identifiers and connections that cut across your audiences. So number one is you actually first need to get clear on how your story needs to evolve. And when I say story here, I am talking about the big strategy or vision. There is probably some sort of old story or perception of where the organization is coming from and a new story or perception you are trying to create.

A really great exercise is to create a contrast frame. Just take a piece of paper, line down the middle, and actually tell sort of the before and after to try to illustrate sort of what is the shift that you are trying to facilitate.

Number two is to look at the heart of your mission, because within that, I guarantee there are more timeless, and universal, and archetypal messages that speak to our greater humanity, and that can move your cause beyond the narrow niche that you may have predefined, either that you have predefined or that other people have predefined for you. And that is the secret to really blowing up and expanding your potential reach and the relevance of your work.

And then third is to really be thinking about what kind of a hero journey can you tell? And what I mean by that is every hero’s journey has a traditional arch. And actually, in my book, I talk about the hero’s journey in one section, and actually speak about the part

of the hero's journey that gets overlooked, which is the long walk home. It is the second half of the story. So that is one thing you might enjoy within the book.

But the point being, when you think about that traditional hero's journey, we often think as the hero as the great protector, as going to battle. And so, is there a way that you can tell your hero's journey in a way that is more life affirming and not an adversarial story?

So those are the three things. And I would encourage you that you don't want to necessarily do these exercises in isolation. You need to engage the leadership of your organization in that conversation. Ultimately, you have to create alignment and consensus around the story. I mean it starts with the leadership team. And I have found many times these conversations are really difficult, and they are put off, and they are ignored, and they are punted because they touch on really sensitive dimensions of your mission and how you construct your work. But of course, these conversations are critical and fundamental to the continued relevance of your work in this fast changing world.

And then once you actually are able to get your leadership all on the same page...And that is a great exercise, too, by the way, to even go around with a flip video camera or just ask informally. Interview your leadership around what they think the big story is as an opening exercise, as an initial assessment. And you might be surprised with what you see with the alignment, and often times, the misalignment. Everybody sort of has a different perspective or there are competing storylines. So you want to bring that into alignment and consensus.

And then once you have done that, you then actually need to reframe how the strategic story translates across your branding, and your fundraising, and programmatic activities.

So I do have a one day program called The Big Story Workshop that is designed to really help a team go through this process and get aligned, especially for 2010. And I even identify \$50,000 of new income opportunities as an exercise for how to apply these story principles to very direct results and impact.

So you can also find out more information about this program. You can download the excerpt of the book, and you can enter for a chance to win one of 15 signed copies, again, at www.getstoried.com/hero.

So with that, I am going to leave you with just one last storytelling axiom in my book, and that is that storytelling, in many ways, is like fortunetelling. So the act of choosing a certain story determines the probability of future outcomes. So storytelling is like fortune telling.

Something to think about as you examine who is the hero of your story, what is the bigger story you are trying to tell, and how that supports the future you are actually trying to create.

So thank you for listening everybody. I think we are going to open it up to questions and feedback now. I am, by the way, also a very active social bookmarker on Facebook. So just search for Michael Margolis New York and feel free to friend me or connect with me through Twitter- @getstoried. Rebecca, are you on the line?

Rebecca Higman: I am indeed. Excellent. Thank you Michael. And thank you to everyone who has sent in their questions so far. I want to just dive right on in so we can get to as many as possible.

Our first one came in from Ruth, and I feel like Ruth might be feeling something that other folks on the phone can relate to. She says, “Our agency is so diversified with programs and services serving small children, 18 months old, teens, adults, families, disabled, and the aged that it is really difficult to take a single hero to represent what the agency actually does for the community. So would you then recommend that we use the agency and our services to the community as our hero when marketing the agency, rather than one of our constituents actually using the agency as a hero?”

Michael Margolis: That is a great question. When I said there are three common hero types or styles, those are really a starting point. So absolutely, there are other alternatives of who you make the hero of your story, and making your organization or the brand the hero is a possibility. So I do want to say that.

Now with that said, if you are going to make your organization or your brand the hero, it better be a really good story. And what I mean by that is you ideally have a story about your organization that speaks to innovation, that speaks to uniqueness, that is somewhat novel and that gets people excited. So you have to go back to that initial precept, which is it is not so much how you tell the story, but is the story worth telling?

So that would be the question that I would have in response. And the other thing I would say that I would be really curious about as a potential hero or subject matter for the story is to actually look at your community. So if you have all of these services directed to your community, what is special or different about your community, and how can you tell the community story in a way that reinforces people’s investment to their local story, and in turn, their investment and commitment to this organization in all the ways that it supports the community?

Rebecca Higman: Just as kind of a sidebar, a couple folks have written in. For instance, Marilyn says, “There is so much new information that she is going to want to go back and reread everything that you shared with us today, Michael, and really think about it.” So I just want to remind everybody that this call is being recorded and we will have a written transcript of it within a couple of days.

So by the end of the week, if you just visit www.nonprofit911.org, we really would welcome you to go revisit all of today’s information.

Michael Margolis: Thanks Rebecca. And let me add one thing to that Rebecca, because I think it is important point to reinforce. And that is the things that I am talking about here, there are no simple formulas. And I am very wary when people talk about storytelling, and I truly believe that becoming more conscious of the stories that we tell and choosing the right stories to tell really are one of the most impactful, intimate, and relevant ways to transform our world.

But there aren't necessarily shortcuts for this. It really requires stepping back and, really, some self examination, both as an individual, as a leader, as an organization. And also, at times there are aspects to that where every organization has blind spots and aspects of your own story that you can't see because you are in it.

So that would be the thing that I would strongly encourage anybody if you decide you want to start to go through this kind of a process, is to find the right consultant or facilitators that you trust that you feel can come in a quickly get a sense to understand your culture and your values. But then, really, to also be able to bring up the points about your story that might be the contradictions or where the creative tensions exist in some of those competing storylines.

I know this stuff is not easy. That is why I have also created a lot of resources myself, and why I chose to also write this book this fall in terms of publishing this manifesto, because I really believe we need to start thinking differently. There is a new mindset that we have to bring into this conversation if we really want to create change and innovation.

Rebecca Higman: Great. Let's see. We are going to jump ahead to Megan's question. This is the way I am reading your question Megan, and I might be adding something to it. So Megan says, "Hearing your thoughts on a relatable hero for each demographic makes me think about audience segmenting." So when she does her outreach, actually targeting different stories to different folks that are receiving it. So Michael, what are your thoughts on this, or how do you suggest beginning that process or kind of tackling that tactic?

Michael Margolis: Well, this is a great instinct to have and one I encourage. You can absolutely apply these concepts to creating psychographic and demographic profiles of your audiences, and creating custom messages for those different channels.

And so, I would encourage you to go ahead and do that. And, at the same time, there is the other issue of what is the larger brand story for this organization or agency, and how do you frame that story big enough so that can translate and have relevance across all of your micro-audiences or various different niche segments?

Rebecca Higman: Great. We have another example of an organization who would like a little bit of direction in terms of maybe if you have any suggestions on which hero might resonate the most.

So Valerie says, “Our foundation is based on programs which honor the spirit of the human-animal bond, and our first program is hospice for end of life pets. We have several heroes: the pet, the pet’s family, and the hospice team. So who do you feel is the best one to focus on?”

Michael Margolis: Hmm. Repeat that one again to me. First of all, the foundation and the way that you have framed your mission and cause is awesome. Definitely, you are touching on the bigger story, which is really about relationship and the way that people connect. I am intrigued. But will you repeat for me the different considerations?

Rebecca Higman: Absolutely. So Valerie says that the program is a hospice for end of life pets. The heroes that she has thought of already are the pets themselves, the pet’s family who is going through this, as well as the hospice team that is working with them.

Michael Margolis: Well, in this case you have a program which is dealing with end of life, which is an incredibly emotionally, gut-wrenching time in people’s lives. And pets are a part of our family. We have deep lasting relationships that even live on beyond the life of a pet.

So within those three, I probably would put the hospice worker...I would sort of push them to the side just for the sake of this exercise. It is probably really looking at either the owner and/or the pet. They are definitely both really important characters in your story, because your whole mission and cause focuses on the relationship between pet owners and their pets.

I don’t have enough information to necessarily recommend one over the other. I think it would depend on the assets that you might have with how you communicate your work, as well as the kinds of customers or constituencies you are going out to reach. But clearly, both the pet owner and the pet are central to that story, and it is the relationship that I would really be focusing your narrative around.

Rebecca Higman: Excellent. I see we have actually gone a couple minutes past the two o’clock mark, so I think this might be a good one to round up the call with, and it might be a good opportunity to summarize.

Brook just wanted to know if you could go over again how you define a hero so that they can start to think more about who the hero is at their own organization.

Michael Margolis: Absolutely. The way that I more formally defined it is really thinking about who is the character at the center of your story who is overcoming great challenge to fulfill a mission in support of the greater good or balance of society?

That is the most, sort of, idealized definition of a hero. Another way to think about this is just with any story, like, who is the protagonist? Who is the central character? In certain ways, while the hero isn’t always the narrator, often times, the way a story sort of is crafted, it is through the hero’s eyes, in a way. We are sort of tracking, like, what is the

journey this hero is going on, and ultimately, how is the hero bringing our world back into order?

That is really at an archetypal level, when you look at the hero's journey. It is a story about being at home, realizing the status quo, they way things are, won't work anymore. You go out into the wilderness, you find your way, you learn new things, you have many trials and tribulations, you develop this new sense of knowledge, and then the second half of the story, which is what I talk about in my book, is the long walk home, which is how you make your way back into village, back into society or civilization with your own new knowledge. But how do you transmit that new knowledge, how do you bottle that magic, in a way that others will connect with it despite the fact that they haven't gone on the hero's journey that you have?

So that is why I have also begun to really think about these dynamics of the hero. We often think of a hero in more of these adversarial terms. "We are going to battle! I am a hero! I am a warrior!" And I believe that classic construction is actually perpetuating a lot of the conflicts and the debates that we are actually trying to solve within many of our nonprofits.

So part of what I am trying to unpack through my work and in really engaging with a lot of different organizations is how do you shift your story into something that is less adversarial and more universal? And that shift is something that I think also tracks well with this new era of communication, social media, this new world that is more relational, as opposed to being rigid, as opposed to being fixed.

One quick example. Take a common debate like pro-choice versus pro-life. Forget the politics. But from a story perspective, that is such a challenging and difficult story to contend with or to work with because you basically have two sides who actually have each brilliantly... Well for one, they have each chosen smart heroes. In the case of pro-choice, it is a woman. And then in the case of pro-life, it is an unborn child.

So in each you have a character, and they are framing their issue at the universal level. They are talking about choice and they are talking about life. So it is really like archetypal sort of arguments versus archetypal arguments, which is why it is one of the most challenging, difficult, I think, social policy issues of our time right now, because of the way it has been framed at such a big level from both sides.

Rebecca Higman: Well thank you Michael. We really appreciated having you here today, and we are really excited to share all of the resources that you have made available to all of the call participants today.

So first of all, if you are interested in finding the participant workbook and, of course, the transcripts as they are ready, they will be posted at nonprofit911.org. And, of course, the link within the workbook that everybody should take a moment to check out after we end today's call is getstoried.com/hero to find out all sorts of other goodies that Michael has made available for free for everybody today. We are so excited about that.

So again, thank you everybody who called in with us today. We encourage you to join us for another nonprofit 911 call in the future. And thank you so much, Michael, for being with us today.

Michael Margolis: Oh, you are so welcome Rebecca. And I want to thank everybody for staying on the line and being a part of this call. And for anybody who didn't have their questions answered or for folks who did ask a question and feel I didn't answer it, or if I can offer further guidance, by all means, don't hesitate to send me an email. It is Michael@getstoried.com. I just love being in dialogue with people, so I do hope that today's conversation was able to provoke some fresh thinking and insights and is going to help to stir a new conversation back in your organization. And please do take a look at some of those other resources that can support you in that process.

Rebecca Higman: Excellent. Thank you, and thanks again everybody. Have a wonderful rest of your day. Bye-bye.

Michael Margolis: Bye-bye. Thanks.