



The State of Storytelling in the Nonprofit Sector

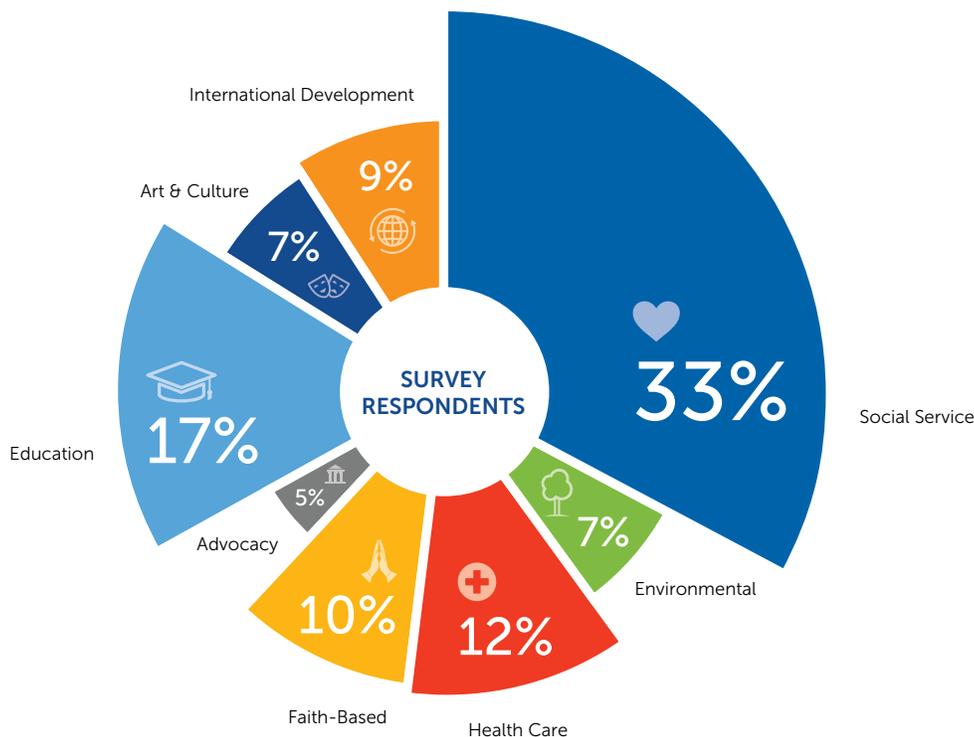
The State of Storytelling in the Nonprofit Sector

Stories have been a huge trend in the nonprofit sector in the past five years, but our sector has been telling stories for much longer. Year after year, we are committed to telling people about our work, progress, and needs. Each time we communicate these things, we are communicating pieces of the larger narrative about our organization.

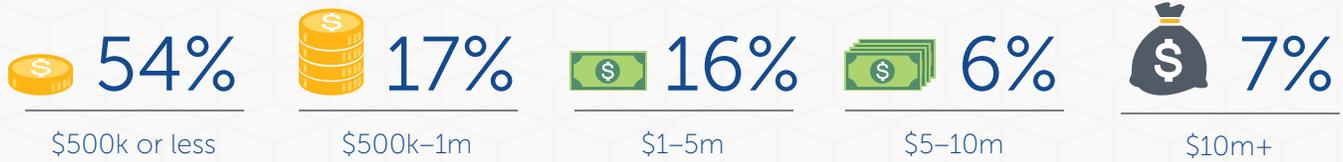
But things are changing, and storytelling is becoming a much more intentional act. Across the for-profit and nonprofit sectors, storytelling is a buzzword and communicators are consumed with telling stories that will engage their target audience. In the nonprofit sector, donors make up that audience. Our challenge is getting our current donors to give more and acquiring new donors who care about the cause. This is not a new or small task for our sector.

“The State of Storytelling” is a project that came to life out of an interest to know how the nonprofit sector is actually using stories and what results organizations are getting. Stories are constantly talked about as a tactic, but are they really helping nonprofits get better fundraising results?

Together, Network for Good and Vanessa Chase, of the Storytelling Non-Profit, teamed up to survey more than 400 nonprofits about storytelling. The nonprofits that participated represent a diverse cross-section of causes and organizational budgets:



ANNUAL BUDGET



After analyzing the survey data and conducting follow-up interviews with select participants, “The State of Storytelling” report was created to identify trends in storytelling and make key recommendations that can help nonprofits get better results from storytelling.

“The State of Storytelling” is just the beginning of a sector-wide conversation about the next frontier of storytelling. Join this conversation on social media using the hashtag #NPStateofStorytelling.

We hope you enjoy reading “The State of Storytelling”!

–*Network for Good and Vanessa Chase*

Sector-Wide Storytelling Trends

“Great stories happen to those who can tell them.” —Ira Glass

In the past 12 months, our survey participants reported that 82% have used stories in fundraising materials. Additionally, 75% said they use stories in donor communications. The widespread uptick in storytelling is not surprising given that stories are widely talked about as a best practice for fundraising. But what was surprising is how nonprofits are using stories.

Read

[6 Types of Stories that Spur Giving](#)

The top three most popular channels for storytelling are: social media (72%), newsletters (68%), and website (67%).

MOST POPULAR CHANNELS for storytelling



Social Media



Newsletters



Website

“Since using storytelling on a regular basis, we have seen so much donor/supporter activity on our website and on our social media sites. Our donors are engaged in our posts, and we see a lot more people being reached”

Overall, nonprofits are using a wide variety of channels for storytelling, including direct mail, email appeals, video, blogs, events, and face-to-face meetings. But when we asked nonprofits which of these channels had the best monetary improvement from stories, the results varied slightly.

We asked this question to understand if there were any discrepancies between how nonprofits are telling stories and what kind of results they are getting. A few interesting facts emerged.

Websites, which were cited as the third most popular channel for telling stories, tied for last place as the one that saw the least improvement from stories. Many organizations have a “Stories” page on their website, which is considered good practice for nonprofits that want to highlight their impact. The problems with these pages: 1) They might be static and not updated enough, 2) donors might not know about them, and 3) there may not be a direct call to action on the page. Any one of these issues could affect website response rates.

Video saw a significantly low improvement rate overall when stories were used. As a channel, video is an extremely engaging digital medium and seems like a prime opportunity for nonprofits to directly communicate with supports. The barrier to its use is twofold:

- **Technology:** Many organizations do not have video equipment or technical expertise for video editing and production.
- **The myth that the video must be a high-quality documentary:** [The optimal video length](#) is just a few seconds to three minutes, and videos with “talking heads” actually see higher engagement rates.

Direct mail seems to be the everlasting fundraising channel. While 61% of the surveyed nonprofits reported telling stories in direct mail, that channel that saw the second best improvement from stories, with 17% of nonprofits reporting an improvement. Although most nonprofits are focusing on the generational shift in wealth and philanthropic involvement by looking to millennials, they are overlooking a lucrative segment of donors: boomers. While many boomers are online, many are still responding to direct mail.

Read

[Best Practices for Sharing Stories](#)

Nonprofit Size + Storytelling Trends

The nonprofit sector has a diverse array of causes and organizations of varying sizes. For example, nearly 50% of registered nonprofits in the United States have annual budgets under \$500,000, and a significant portion of those are under \$100,000 annually. Among the nearly 1.5 million U.S. nonprofits, fewer than 4,000 have annual budgets exceeding \$100 million. Given the discrepancies in resources and capital available to nonprofits at these different budget levels, a couple of questions came to mind:

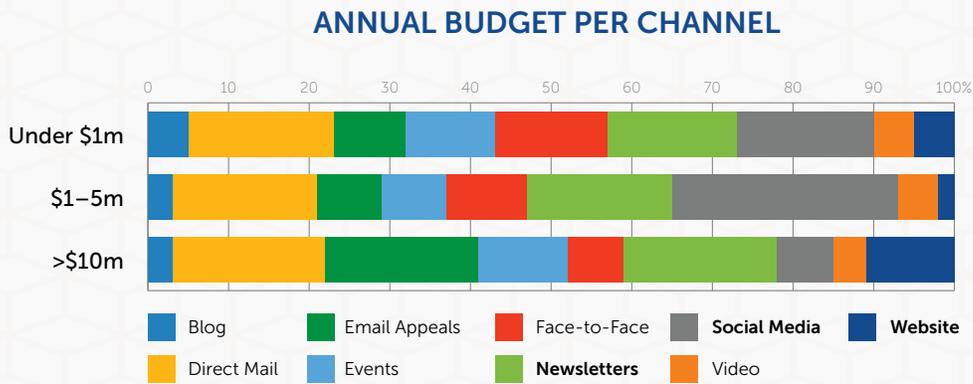
1. Does the size of the organization affect its storytelling?
2. Are different causes using stories differently, and if so, what results are they getting?

Read

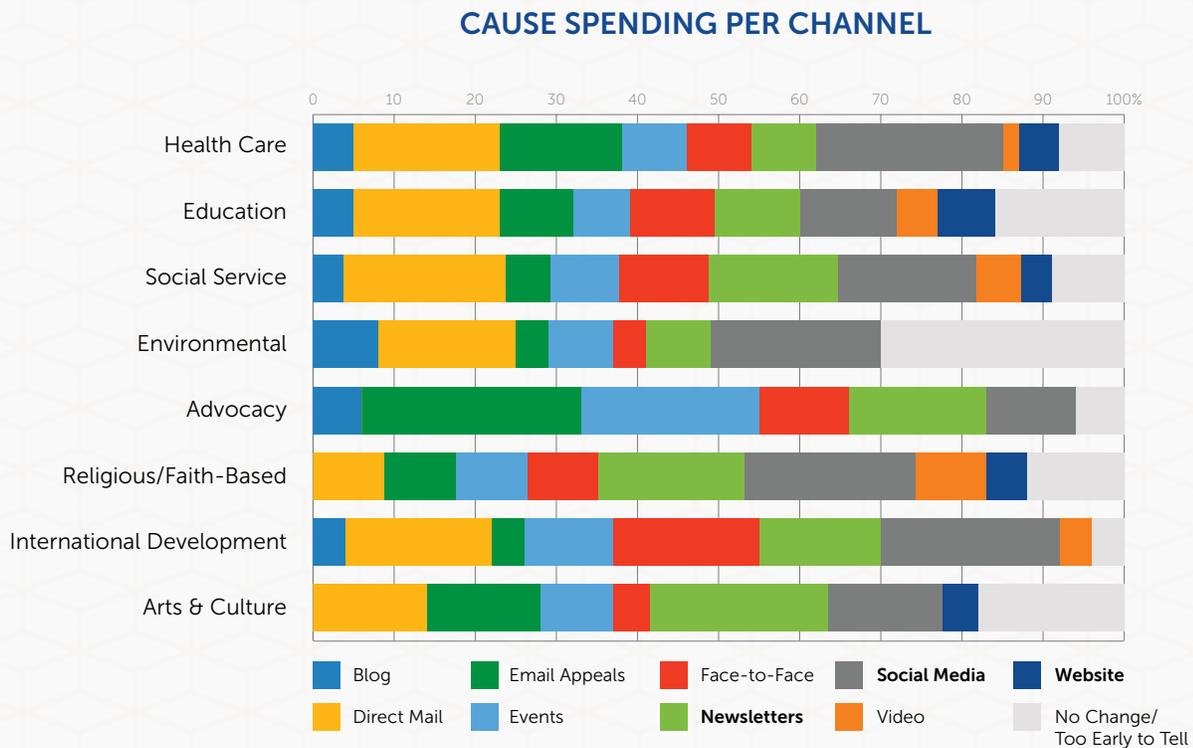
[Good Stories vs. Great Stories](#)

“*Since we started focusing our communications on storytelling, we have experienced a steady increase in monthly and end-of-year donations.*”

We segmented the data to explore these two questions further. The chart below shows which storytelling channels nonprofits in three different budget categories are currently using.



The chart below segment survey respondents by cause type and shows how different causes are using various storytelling channels. The percentages in the chart represent the number of nonprofit respondents that indicated they are using that channel.



Positive Impact Tied to Storytelling

Survey participants shared anecdotes about the positive changes they have seen from storytelling:

“*Web traffic has improved greatly since we introduced more success stories, but much of our fundraising is face-to-face, so it's hard to quantify results financially.*”

“*Personal visits to donors where we updated them on the work of the organization and stories about our youth resulted in a huge increase in our year-end gifts!*”

“*In a face-to-face, they can see the impact, and the money is given within a week or two of the meeting.*”

“*Amazing. It probably helps that we've also used matches. But we got checks—nice-sized ones—from members who had NEVER before written a non-membership check.*”

“*The engagement we receive on Facebook when utilizing storytelling is tremendous!*”

“*Twenty percent improvement in year-end giving.*”

The changes nonprofits have seen since using stories depended on how they were using them and if they were able to measure the impact stories had on the channel. The impacts listed above represent a small sample of the successes nonprofits have had with storytelling.

The wide array of opportunities to tell stories can be overwhelming. It is best to choose tactics based on what your organization is already doing to fundraise and on communication with donors that is showing signs of success. This indicates that you already have an engaged donor audience on that channel, which will increase the potential impact stories can have on fundraising.

The overall trend of storytelling on digital channels probably comes as no surprise given the uptake in online fundraising since 2005. With the move to increasingly digital fundraising, nonprofits are migrating much of their communications to the digital space.

Digital storytelling is still a new concept for many nonprofits. Although the basic concepts still apply in the digital space, there are many more dynamic and interactive tools that nonprofits can use to tell a story. Video, online discussions, and interactive websites are just a few examples.

- South Hill Community Center created a digital storytelling project as a part of its programming, but the project also functions as a wonderful way to connect donors to the people they support. The [website includes stories of people who live in the community](#). As you scroll over buildings and places, text and video pop up with a story.

Another emerging trend in digital storytelling is creating easy ways for people to share their stories. In this sense, nonprofits become story curators for their community.

- No Papers, No Fear: Ride for Justice has [a place on its website](#) where people can submit their stories about immigration. These stories are shared on the organization's website and social media channel. The benefit of nonprofits curating stories in this way is that they can gather more stories to share while actively cultivating their community.

“People are donating after reading our monthly newsletters. It used to be rare, and in the past year, we now receive about five donations per newsletter.”

Read

[Your Storytelling Questions Answered](#)

Recommendations

It is wonderful to see that many nonprofits are finding success with storytelling. As you read in the previous pages, success varies from channel to channel and across causes and budget sizes. That being said, many organization cited facing some common challenges.

As we look at storytelling in 2015 and beyond, we imagine these recommendations will help the sector reach the next frontier of storytelling—a frontier where our sector is known for its storytelling and inspiration.

Below are some recommendations to help your organization:

- Measure the impact of stories.
- Create a culture of philanthropy.
- Use more video.
- Create a storytelling strategy.
- Get more mileage from stories.

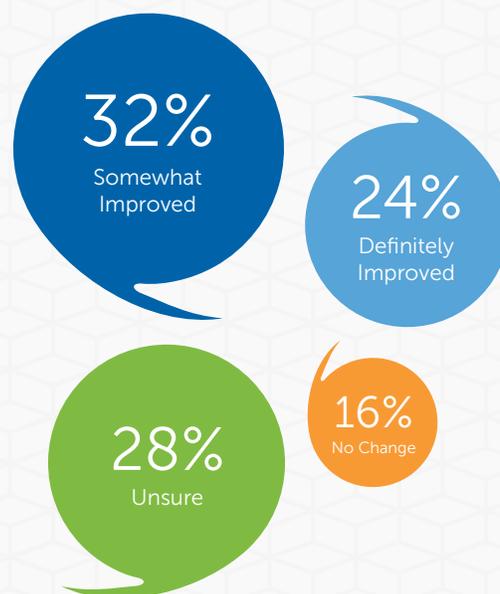
“ We include stories of our help in thank you letters to donors. We have over 75% repeat donors.”

Measuring the Impact of Stories

It is encouraging to see that stories have not negatively impacted fundraising. In other words, reading a story has not caused donors to give less or stop giving all together. Just over 55% of nonprofits said that stories have improved their fundraising results to some degree. But what is interesting about the 16% that saw no change and the 28% that said they are unsure is that many left explanations that it is either too early to know the results or they are not sure how to measure the impact of stories in their fundraising program.

Data measurement is a perpetual challenge for many organizations, especially those with limited capacity. But the benefit of data measurement is that when you have data that proves that something is working, you are able to make a case to senior leadership for buy-in. Since many organizations reported that getting buy-in for storytelling is a challenge, this could be a practical solution.

How has your
USE OF STORIES
affected your fundraising results?



NONE of the participants surveyed noted any decrease in results from the use of stories.

“Other board members do not understand the value of storytelling. They want to use just the mission statement and statistics.”

Testing Stories

Organizations should consider testing appeals or perform ongoing A/B testing to measure the effectiveness of certain changes. When testing an appeal with a story, consider creating two identical letters. In one of those letters, weave in a story. The idea is that you have a high degree of consistency in all of the other variables. You can select a random sample of donors to send the letters to test the story. This might be a total group size of 200 donors, with 100 donors getting the letter with the story and 100 donors getting the letter without the story. Once your organization starts getting donations from the letters, track the mean, the mode, and median gift sizes for each letter, as well as the total amount raised from each letter.

“It’s really hard to measure the impact of storytelling. We think it works and see it work during in-person events, but to measure the impact of digital media is very challenging. We also like to add an ‘action’ after a story – directly tie the success story to a donation for action”

Create a Culture of Storytelling

Maya Angelou once said, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” The nonprofit sector is full of great stories to share, yet there is a persistent problem with collecting and sharing those stories.

When asked what their biggest challenge was with storytelling, the vast majority of survey respondents cited collecting stories as their biggest challenge. If you are an executive director, fundraiser, or communications professional, you may not be on the frontlines of the work, and that can make it difficult to collect and share stories.

Organizations, however, that are good at collecting and telling stories have some fundamental differences that we can learn from.

1. Focus on interpersonal relationships. When fundraising and communications staff have issues collecting stories from programs staff, the heart of the issue is organizational silos. Silos originate from organization culture, and facilitating change on this level can be an uphill climb. But the good news is that breaking silos can start with you! You can start to repair relationships and set a new tone for interoffice collaboration and camaraderie. Focus on building interpersonal relationships with key people who will support your cause of breaking down silos.
2. Make time for storytelling. If you want your organization to tell more stories, start by making time for storytelling. Provide colleagues with more frequent updates about your work and the stories you hear from donors. Spend the first five minutes of a meeting inviting people to share updates from their work. This will give you potential story leads, and it gives staff a chance to personally connect and build rapport.
3. Allow staff to get in the trenches. You might be a fundraiser or in MarComm, but that’s no reason for you not to spend time in the program trenches. Talk to your manager or executive director about whether you can volunteer for one hour a month in program delivery or attend program staff meetings to be in the know about programs.

Read

[Telling Stories Through Email](#)

“Finding clients who are willing to share their stories has become a priority.”

Use More Video

In mid-2014, [Cisco forecast](#) that video would account for 79% of all consumer Internet traffic by 2018. This is an incredible update in video content, yet most nonprofits are not actively producing videos. The myth is that effective video must have a high production cost and be a polished final product. That is not case. Also, consider the facts that YouTube is the second largest search engine in the world and that including video in an introductory email [reduced the number of subscriber opt-outs by 75%](#). The nonprofit sector stands to gain a lot from video.

Here are a few tips to help your nonprofit make the most of video content:

- **Use a smartphone to record videos.** Sure, you could spend a lot of money buying fancy equipment, but it's not really necessary. Most smartphones have good cameras built in that will take excellent video.
- **Share bite-sized updates in real time.** When your organization hosts a program or event, attend and plan to capture updates from staff or attendees. Videos don't have to be long clips, just sound bites that give donors a behind-the-scenes look.
- **Make it easy to share.** Once someone watches a video, ideally you want them to share it on other social media channels. Make sure to include buttons that make sharing super easy for your audience.
- **Track your results.** After you have created and shared a few videos, start tracking audience interaction. What do people like to watch? What are they sharing often? These metrics will give you indicators about what is resonating with your audience.

“Donors want to hear stories, but I have a terrible time getting any details from staff.”

Create A Storytelling Strategy

We have known for several years that a multichannel approach to fundraising is more effective than relying on just one medium. This is where we take an appeal or campaign to multiple channels, like direct mail, email, and social media. The benefit of this is greater reach and more donors encountering the message. This same principle can be applied to storytelling.

Fundraising is still the bedrock of our work, but stories allow us to enhance fundraising appeals and messaging. The challenge is telling the right story during the right appeal and coordinating storytelling on an ongoing basis. Our recommendation is to integrate storytelling into your fundraising and communications plan.

To add storytelling into your fundraising plan, you need to know the answers to these questions:

- Which appeals are going out when?
- What is the ask?
- Who is the donor audience?
- Which story will work well with the appeal

As you integrate storytelling into your plans, you will find great organization and ease with stories.

“Response from supporters is measurably increased when stories are used to communicate needs. The best responses are the result of stories combined with current events.”

“We have been working to create a unified storytelling and editorial calendar across all of our channels. It is a work in progress, but the results of cross-channel integration of our storytelling across email, social, and video have had an impact on the quality of member leads and lifted donation amounts per member as well as overall member numbers. We also find that the process of developing an integrated ‘brand story’ helps unite our internal vision and pride in what we do.”

Get More Mileage from Stories

Stories are evergreen content, and considering how much time can go into creating them, it is wise to think about how you can use this content more than once. Volunteer Lubbock shared it's strategy for getting more mileage from stories:

Read

[5 Tools to Help You Collect Stories](#)

“Our redesign of our website, VolunteerLubbock.org, launched in November. We added a story piece as a main content feature. Since launching, we've been able to connect those stories through social media, and I've also been using them in email to donors. For example, before a visit, I might send an email that says, 'I thought you might like to read this great story,' or, 'We have a story up about this project you are interested in.'

“Ever since we started using stories on our website—and more and more in our donor communications—we're starting to see a steady uptick in total donors and donor giving.”

The strategy here is to have a “home base” for your stories (your website), and then to share those stories with a link back to your website. This is great for social media content, emails, and other communications. Not only does it provide you with a content stream of content, but it also brings people to your website.

Read

[Social Media Content is Sitting Right in Front of You](#)

Some Examples of Great Storytelling

Download

[Storytelling for Nonprofits](#)

[Nashville Rescue Mission's newsletters](#)



[Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children](#)



ARNOLD
PALMER
HOSPITAL
For Children

[YMCA's annual report](#)



[Ecojustice](#)

ecojustice

Cancer Care Connection: This organization hosted a walk-a-thon and asked participants to submit selfies about why they were "walking away from cancer."

[Example One](#)

[Example Two](#)

[Example Three](#)

About Network for Good

Network for Good powers more digital giving than any other platform. Since 2001, we've processed over \$1 billion for more than 100,000 nonprofits. We are Level 1 Audited PCI Compliant and our Donor Advised Fund is accredited by the Better Business Bureau Wise Giving Alliance, meeting all 20 of its standards for charity accountability. Plus, we're registered in every state for online fundraising.

We're a mission-minded organization, like you, and we're passionate about seeing good causes succeed. We also believe in the power of communities to do great things.

Our online fundraising solutions come with all of the support and coaching you've come to expect from Network for Good. We're here to help you connect with donors and create more successful fundraising campaigns.

Ready to get even more from your online fundraising campaigns?

We've got you covered.

We'd love to hear about your fundraising goals and how you're reaching out to donors online. We'll offer suggestions on the tools that are right for your organization and show you some great campaigns for inspiration.

To schedule a demo or find out more, contact us today: 888.284.7978, option 1.

Or [visit us online](#) to reserve a time with one of our fundraising consultants.



About Vanessa Chase

Vanessa Chase is an international nonprofit consultant, thought leader, trainer, and speaker. She's part of the next generation of professionals bringing change to the nonprofit sector and challenging conventions.

Vanessa founded the Storytelling Non-Profit in 2012 to help not-for-profit organizations articulate their impact to donors in a new way, using narrative techniques to generate greater personal interest and accountability, thereby improving their fundraising success. Today, the Storytelling Non-Profit provides consulting, training, and coaching to nonprofits around the world.

Vanessa's fundraising career started at her alma mater, the University of British Columbia. Other clients have included Union Gospel Mission, British Columbia Children's Hospital, Cancer Care Connection, Universal Outreach Foundation, Hope for the Nations, Boucher Institute of Naturopathic Medicine, Love Global Foundation, A Rocha Canada, Kokua, the Wellmen Project, and SHARE Family and Community Services. To date, she has helped these organizations raise more than \$10 million.

As a recognized expert in communications and storytelling, Vanessa has been invited to speak at a number of events and associations, including NetSquared Vancouver, Artez Interactive, UBC Impact Labs and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, Association of Donor Relations Professionals, the Nonprofit Storytelling Conference, and Blackbaud Conference for Non-Profits.

Currently, Vanessa is president of the Storytelling Non-Profit, co-founder of Stewardship School, and board chair of Women Against Violence Against Women. Although she stays busy with work, she enjoys cooking with her husband, reading, crafting, and corresponding with friends by snail mail.

