

Messaging with Dignity

Amplifying Voices



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www.sparcinsight.org

We are building healthier, happier communities for pets and people through the power of narrative change. SPARC shifts harmful stories and amplifies messaging that increases kindness, compassion, and respect for both humans and animals.

Amplify Voices

Stories are Powerful and Personal

Stories are powerful communication tools. A good story can influence, teach, and inspire. We feature stories of pets and people in our fundraising appeals, websites, talks, and social media because we recognize how they capture hearts and minds. We are motivated to share individual stories of pets and people because they are effective, and the results encourage us to share them even more.

Stories are also personal. We tell our stories all the time, which helps us show the world who we are and what we care about. When we talk about ourselves, we control the details—choosing what is shared and how. No one knows the reality of our lives like we do.

When sharing stories about pets and people, there is real tension between what is powerful and personal. When creating stories to get shares, likes, and support we may focus on putting together a powerful story but lose the reality of the person the story is about. For the sake of emotional, dramatic storytelling we may sacrifice accuracy, complexity, and a person's feelings. This can undermine peoples' trust in us and a willingness to work with us in the future. Often we may not know this breakdown is happening or that there is a problem.

If we want to do our best work for animals and people we need to rethink how stories are being told. We must find the sweet spot between what's powerful and personal in storytelling.

When we do this we:

- Respect a person's dignity. Dignity helps us build trust, connection, and longer-term work to help pets and people.
- Tell the most compelling stories because real stories from real people are the most powerful.
- Connect with people who are drawn to us because they see their lives and experiences in our work. The more we connect with people, the more we can help animals.

This quick guide is a roadmap to powerful stories that respect peoples' dignity. **We explore why amplifying voices matters and how we can put better storytelling into practice.**



*Our ability to help animals
expands when we listen
to the people connected to them.*



What does it mean to amplify individual stories?

Welcoming people to share their stories is essential in our animal care and well-being work. Amplifying individual stories includes two fundamental practices:

1 Creating space for individuals to tell their story. Our teams don't just talk *about* people, we create opportunities for individuals to speak *for* and *about* themselves. People served by our organizations share their life experiences with our donors, supporters, staff, and networks. We bring individual stories into existing spaces like blog posts, newsletters, videos, social media, webinars, and meetings. We constantly reflect on whose voices are missing and are proactive in welcoming those voices into our work and communications.

Even if we aren't responsible for media, messaging, or marketing, we help share the real stories of people who are served by our programs and part of making them happen. We are thoughtful about uplifting and bringing awareness to the voices of people who are often unseen or unheard.

2 Storytellers stay in control of their story. Asking people to share their stories is not about checking the boxes on our goals. We don't dictate the details or how someone describes what they have been through. Even if we make edits for clarity and effectiveness, the result is a story that feels accurate and genuine to the person who shared it.

We also get informed consent, meaning that a person who shares their story knows why and what will happen to their information. The storyteller can stop or end the use of their story at any point.



The Personal Side of Stories

We each know our story

Imagine someone in your life—a colleague, family member, or friend—is asked to write and publicly share a story about what life has been like for *you* and *your* pet. To do this, they don't ask you what to include or even if it's okay to do—they tell your story based on what they think is important.

What are the chances they would tell the story of you and your pet the right way?

- Do they know all the details of what your pet has meant to you?
- Would they be able to describe everything you've been through together?
- Are you okay with them publicly sharing your story without asking?

Chances are the answer is “no”—and this is someone who knows you! Now imagine your story is being written by a person who has only met you in passing...or not at all. The chances of them getting your story right are even slimmer.

No one knows your life experience like you do. It would be impossible for someone to share your story, in a way that feels true, without your direction and input. **If we want to tell stories that are accurate, they need to be shared and shaped by the people who experience them.**



A Personal Story: Spirit and his Dogs

Here is a story shared by a man named Spirit talking about his relationship with his dogs. Below is an excerpt—the full story is available as a video through [My Dog Is My Home](#).

Spirit tells his own story

“My name is Spirit. I’m presently homeless. I’m living in an Emergency Shelter right now. The one thing that is important to me is the care and love of my animals. My babies. This is Miniaga, this is Kyya. They mean everything to me and I mean everything to them.

I was staying at home taking care of my father but I was lonely. I decided to get a little bit of love by the name of Kyya. My father loved her at first. But as she became larger she would always knock him down because she would always want to be hugged and jump on him. So he’d say - if you don’t get the dog out, you need to get out. So that was the time where I said okay, I’ll get out. And I slept in my car that night.

I realized my love for my animals was the primary source of my joy and I felt that it was time for a change. I just one day got in my car and started driving.”

When Spirit tells his story, we hear about his deep personal connection to his dogs. In the longer version, he describes his experience being in a shelter for people experiencing homelessness. He then describes moving into his dream studio apartment, taking his dogs on daily walks, and his belief in working hard to make positive changes in the world.

The result is that we can see Spirit is far more than a simple label of someone who experienced homelessness with his pets. And we can relate to him—we share a love for our animals, dreams, aspirations, and a desire to make a difference. Spirit’s story demonstrates what it’s like when someone has a chance to talk about themselves and their animals. We can see a complete, real, and rich picture of who someone is in their own words.

Benefits of Amplifying Stories

When done well, creating space for people to share their stories—with details that feel true and meaningful to them—has many benefits. Respecting the dignity of the people around us is one clear benefit, but there are others:

- 1. Connect People to Our Mission:** We are drawn to people who describe the truth about themselves and what they have been through.¹ When someone tells their story, they convey real emotions and details.² Authenticity helps connect people to our work and mission for animals.
- 2. Have More Spokespeople for Animal Causes:** Hearing directly from people can build empathy, understanding, and awareness of issues. Individuals who are given a chance to share their stories can become some of the most powerful spokespeople for animal work.³
- 3. Counteract Negative Stereotypes:** Every person's story is unique. A person's experiences are shaped by who they are—background, culture, and identity. When people tell their stories they can challenge oversimplified and outdated ideas related to their identity or life circumstances. Personal storytelling breaks the mold of stereotypes.
- 4. Build Community:** Sharing personal stories creates connections and community among those with similar experiences and identities. We see and feel what we have in common—love of pets, family and friends, desire to be self-sufficient, and strength in overcoming hard times. We need all hands on deck to do our biggest, best work for animals. The greater our connections with people, the more we can accomplish.



Bringing Voices In



Amplifying Marginalized Voices

Unless we are from a particular marginalized group, we may not realize there are voices and perspectives that are missing.⁴ **People who are marginalized often face significant barriers that prevent them from telling their own stories and having their voices heard.**

We can all help uplift and amplify the voices of people who may otherwise be silenced. As we move through different spaces with various people and power dynamics, there will be times when individuals feel they have more or less opportunities to share their ideas and experiences.

For example, a woman may feel differently about sharing her ideas and experiences if she is in a room with other women than if she is in a room with only men. A Person of Color walking into a room where everyone is White may make different choices about sharing certain experiences and opinions than if they are with people who share their identity.

When we miss peoples' voices, we lose huge amounts of information and perspective. Having diverse voices on our teams has been shown over and over again to be essential to doing our best work. A team that encourages and listens to a diversity of voices makes better decisions and performs better.⁵

How Marginalized Voices Get Silenced

- **Retaliation:** People can face backlash when they attempt to speak out or share their stories. Fear of reprisal or negative consequences can deter people from speaking openly. Individuals who are marginalized have experienced discrimination and are likely to be weary of doing things that can result in more harm for them, their families, or communities.
- **Access to Resources:** Some marginalized groups face more limited access to technology, publishing platforms, or legal protections. This may prevent these individuals from sharing their stories effectively or safely.
- **Language and Cultural Barriers:** Pet guardians from marginalized groups may not have the opportunity to share their experiences accurately if they are unable to speak in their native language. Words and language are also connected to culture, and can be interpreted differently depending on a person's background. In addition, people read and write at different levels. Some materials may not be accessible depending on the person's reading level, or someone may not be able to convey their experience in writing.
- **Lack of Representation:** Media, literature, and historical narratives often prioritize the voices and experiences of more dominant or privileged groups. This means there will be voices and experiences that are missing. Not having the bigger picture of someone's experience creates stereotypes and misunderstanding because we cannot understand who people are.
- **Power Dynamics:** Power differences in society can silence marginalized voices. People in positions of authority or privilege may control the conversation, overshadowing or excluding the perspectives of people that hold less power. Power dynamics show up in our society, but also in our animal work (e.g. more powerful organizations vs individual pet guardians).
- **Historical Erasure:** Many marginalized communities have experienced historical erasure, where their contributions, struggles, and achievements have been overlooked or deliberately left out of mainstream stories and messaging. For example, this has been true for Indigenous and Black communities in the U.S. The result is we all have a more limited understanding of history and the experiences of many people in our country.

We can break down barriers that silence marginalized voices through our day-to-day actions. Recognize whose voice is missing, invite someone to tell their story, create spaces where original storytelling is welcome, and spend more time listening to people—especially those who have different experiences from your own (check out SPARC's guidance on [Empathic Listening](#)). We all benefit from building spaces for people to share the complexity and richness of their lives.

Beware the Risk of Tokenizing People

In an effort to demonstrate more diverse views and experiences we can sometimes invite people to share their story in a way that feels like “tokenizing”. This is when someone is asked to do something because a single aspect of their identity is the reason they are invited (e.g. “we need a BIPOC speaker”) and/or they are treated as a representative of their race, ethnicity, gender, or other identity or experience (e.g. we think that the experience of one unhoused pet owner represents what all unhoused pet owners think and feel).

Tokenizing hurts the speaker by ignoring that they are a unique, complex person, and harms work for animals by perpetuating stereotypes and stigma.

Controlling the Details

In our animal care and well-being work, we decide about stories—what details to include and what to leave out. At an event, in a blog, on social media, or in a video, we decide what’s compelling. Even on our social media and conversations, we consider *what’s interesting* and *what matters*.

We may also invite a pet owner or community member to share their story and then reshape it, asking someone to give a talk and then requesting they describe a situation or experience in a specific way because we want their words to help us achieve our goals.

We don’t intend to cause harm by reshaping someone’s story. Often, this feels like a win-win situation if we get to use a powerful story and the storyteller has a platform to share it. **The problem is that controlling the details of a story can be harmful.**

The Devil is in the Details

Problems start happening when we decide *what matters* and *what’s important* in a person’s story—without letting someone decide for themselves. For example - **what can happen when we take and tell someone’s story the wrong way?**

Misrepresentation	Even with the best intentions, a person’s experiences, motivations, or identity can get messed up in a story. No one can better describe an experience than the person who lived it. Misrepresentation leads to misunderstandings of who someone is and what they went through.
Loss of Authenticity	When a story is altered or inaccurate, it loses its authenticity and does not reflect the genuine emotions, struggles, and triumphs of the person involved. Real stories are the most impactful. Stories lose power when they lose authenticity.
Emotional Harm	If the retelling is insensitive or wrong, it can distress or harm the person the story is about, particularly if it exposes them to ridicule or backlash. People—especially those posting online—can be vicious and cause harm to people with their words. Emotional harm contributes to a toxic environment for us all to live and work in.
Spreading Stereotypes	Misrepresenting someone’s story can reinforce harmful stereotypes. When we share oversimplified ideas about who someone is, we give the wrong idea about them. Stereotypes create more problems for pets and people because we’re not discussing what’s real.
Undermining Trust	We damage trust and break relationships if someone feels their experience is misrepresented. People want to work with individuals and organizations who understand them and respect their stories and experiences.

How To Amplify Voices With Dignity

One of the most challenging parts of amplifying stories can be getting out of the way of the person sharing their experience. It’s not always easy to put our perspective aside so the storyteller has control. Our role is to ensure that when someone shares their story it is a helpful and positive experience for everyone involved. We create opportunities for authentic voices to reach our networks, supporters, and donors so we are all more connected to each other as we do good work for animals. **We can amplify stories with dignity through these practices:**

Before You Begin	During Storytelling
• Pave the way through relationships • Know about trauma-informed practices • Invite first-hand accounts • Gather stories before they are needed • Get informed consent • Build self-awareness	• Move out of the way • Ask about more than problems • Set people up to do well

Before You Begin

Pave the way with relationships

Think about the people in your life. When you feel close to someone, you share what you have been through. Learning about people’s experiences and asking them to share is far less awkward when you have built trust and understanding. **If your organization is missing out on hearing first-hand experiences, explore why you don’t have the kinds of relationships where you are regularly hearing from the pet families you serve and work with.**

Focus on building genuine relationships to open a channel for storytelling. In animal care and well-being, relationships are crucial for many reasons, and hearing about the life experiences of the people we work with is one of them.

Know About Trauma-Informed Practices

Asking someone to talk about their life and relationship with their pet can bring up painful and difficult memories. When talking about a traumatic experience, someone can feel like they are experiencing it all over again. Trauma is painful enough the first time around. We can’t ask people to tell stories in ways that are harmful to them.⁶

In addition, people listening to traumatic stories can experience “secondary trauma”. We can internalize someone else’s pain and have it affect us mentally, emotionally, and physically.

Trauma-informed practices are a way of sharing stories that minimize harm for everyone involved. Anyone who actively engages people in storytelling should have training on trauma-informed approaches.⁷

Invite first-hand accounts

We don't always have to go looking for stories—friends, community members, and clients may have stories and experiences they are already sharing with our staff and volunteers. If you have built trust and relationships with people, you will hear about what's happening in their lives. Instead of taking someone's story and repeating it for them, ask if they would be willing to share their own story. A first-hand account will be more potent than a second-hand retelling. **People deserve an opportunity to share their experiences.**

Gather stories before they are needed

When seeking a story that conveys a specific message, we make decisions about what matters based on our own needs. We may overlook meaningful experiences because they don't fit our immediate purpose, or we may alter or edit a story to include the message we believe is essential. **Gather and save stories before they are needed. You reduce the risk that your organization's needs influence a story in a harmful way.**

Instead of entering a conversation to get someone to discuss a specific issue in a certain way, listen to what matters to them. You will discover powerful stories and experiences beyond what you had imagined.

Get Informed Consent

A person who shares their story or image (in a photo or video) must understand how their content will be used, why, and who the audience will be. *Informed consent* goes beyond simply informing someone of what will happen; it requires us to ensure that the individual truly understands what will happen with their story and feels comfortable. **A critical practice is getting informed consent through a signed written document. See Appendix I for an example.**

For some individuals who prefer not to share personal information or have been misled by previous agreements, signing a form can be a sensitive process. The goal of a consent form is to protect the storyteller. The document should be clear and simple. Avoid jargon and complex language. The goal of *Informed consent* is to protect a person's control over their information and serve as proof of a fair agreement.

As part of the consent process, ask someone if they would like to approve the final cut of their video or written story. Even better, ask how and where someone would like their story shared—give people a chance to define the terms of how your organization uses their story.

Build Self-Awareness

We never enter a situation or interaction as a blank slate. We carry with us everything we've learned and experienced in the days and years before. How we think, react, or what we say is shaped, in part, by what we've been through—that morning, earlier that week, or even years earlier. When we spend time listening to people and welcoming them to share their stories, it's essential to remain aware of our reactions and responses. The more we understand why we think and feel specific ways, the better we can support the people and pets around us.



During Storytelling

Ask About More Than Problems

We build understanding and empathy from relatable human moments. To tell stories where people and pet owners are more than their problems, we need to ask questions and feature content beyond a person's struggles. For example:

- “What are you most proud of?”
- “What do you love (to do)?”
- “What are the best times you’ve had with (pet’s name)?”
- “How has (pet’s name) impacted your life?”
- Or ask someone to tell you about their family.⁸

Move out of the way

We can offer the time, place, and space for someone to share their story. We don't get in the way. We can be present and provide support without taking control or dictating how someone talks about their experience.

Speaking publicly or being recorded can be a stressful experience. Staying out of the way doesn't mean we leave someone to fend for themselves. We can be supportive and helpful even when we step out of the spotlight. For example, we can:

- Ask about what emotional support they have or might need before, during, and after sharing their story.
- Offer to provide feedback or talk through anything they are thinking about sharing.
- Offer to take notes or transcribe what they want to say.
- Ensure they have all the necessary information, from logistics to details about the event or the audience.
- Remind people that they never have to share more than they are comfortable with and that their boundaries will be respected.
- Check in on how the storyteller is feeling throughout the process.
- Stay physically present and engaged during in-person events.
- Follow-up after and see how they are doing, providing positive feedback about how things went.

When asking someone to speak publicly for your organization, it is fair to compensate them for their time. Pay someone a fair rate for the hours they spend showing up for your organization.

Set People Up To Do Well

To tell a compelling story, we need to understand who we are talking to. Anyone can benefit from support in thinking through the most effective way to talk about our stories. We don't dictate how someone describes their life, but we can prepare people to be successful with a specific audience. We can share who will hear or see the story and why certain information or ways of sharing are helpful. Ultimately, it's up to the storyteller to describe themselves and what they have been through as they see fit.

Sending people questions in advance can also be helpful. If someone knows what to expect, they can be more relaxed and give more accurate responses because they've had time to think through them.

Remember Storytelling is Cultural

People tell stories in various ways based on their culture. For example, in some cultures, storytelling lingers over details instead of going directly to the point. What we decide to describe and in what way can also be different. Our stories can include a lot of context, such as what happened before or around an event. Or we may focus more on outcomes, such as what the result of our experience has been.⁹

If a person's description feels too quick or like aimless meandering, consider why. We may get frustrated not because someone is telling their story incorrectly, but because it's different from how we were raised and taught to tell a story.



Telling Another Person's Story

Sometimes, people want their story shared, but they don't want to be the one to share it.

That's okay. Work with the person to ensure that even if you or someone else is sharing the story, it still represents the person and their reality.

- Discuss with the person how they would like their story to be shared.
- Ask what is essential to include.
- Ask if they would like to review the final materials. If yes, share any final transcripts, stories, or recordings for approval.
- Even if someone doesn't request a final review, check in with them about the details and make sure they are comfortable with them.
- Let the person know how it goes! Especially if the story receives a positive response and feedback, pass along the good messages.

Bumps in the Road

If People Lie or Forget

Sharing original stories does not mean we have to assume people are perfect – always truthful, always right. Even when we live through something, it can be hard to remember every detail. People will sometimes forget, stretch the truth, or lie on purpose.

People lie for many reasons, including—not trusting the listener, feeling shame about a situation, wanting to avoid conflict, or trying to fit in.¹⁰ Lying doesn't always mean someone has bad intentions.¹¹ People can lie to protect another person or someone's feelings.¹² People may not tell the truth because they are not in an environment where that feels like a good idea or safe thing to do. Leaving out details or getting them wrong can also be unintentional. For example, a person in crisis cannot always remember details due to the way our brain stores memories at stressful times.

Creating an environment where being real and genuine is welcomed and championed is essential to amplifying voices. Most people have good intentions and do their best to share personal stories that represent what is true for them.

A person's story is also a reflection of their reality and how they experienced it. If a person is recalling a situation where all the details, like dates or order of events, are unclear, consider that they may not be necessary to include. Specific timelines are typically not the most important parts of a story.

Someone's reality may be different from yours—you can experience the same moment or event in a different way. This doesn't make someone a liar, it makes us all human. If a person shares a different perspective on a situation you were part of, first approach it with curiosity instead of criticism. There is often more than one side to a story.



Do we have time for this?

One of the biggest hurdles to ensuring someone maintains control over their own story is a resource we are always short on—time. We see the need to build a relationship, check in with someone, or go through a process of editing and review and think—“*That’s nice, but it’s not realistic at all*”.

Of course, we often need to move quickly, have limited capacity, and even fewer resources to spare for storytelling. It’s true that engaging people in telling their own stories can be time consuming, but it doesn’t always take more time and the results are worth it.

The question is not whether we have time for better storytelling, but whether we are willing to invest time in messaging that will make our work for animals better, stronger, and more long-lasting. If we stick with the status quo in our storytelling, we will stick with our problems too.

Changing how we do something can take effort. Once it becomes the norm, better storytelling can feel as efficient and streamlined as the ways of working we’re currently used to.

Case Study

Amplifying Stories in Action

My Dog Is My Home is a national nonprofit dedicated to expanding access to shelter and housing for people experiencing homelessness and their companion animals. As part of their work they created an exhibition featuring stories of “The Experts” – those who live or have lived the experience of homelessness with a companion animal. The stories are captured in short films and have been made available to the public free of charge for educational and advocacy purposes. You can visit their website to watch the videos. *My Dog Is My Home* encourages people to share these films widely.



Spirit, Kyya + Miniaga



Myra + Prince

Conclusion



Good practices for amplifying voices are helpful for everyone. People in media, messaging, and marketing will need to think about these practices a lot, but we can all pass the microphone and give someone a chance to share their story.

- If you're on social media, like and share first-hand accounts of people talking about the things they have experienced.
- Listen to and share the stories of people with identities different from your own.
- If you manage a team, invite staff to share their story instead of always being the one to describe what is going on.
- If you introduce someone to a group, check that what you say reflects how that person wants to be portrayed.
- If you're involved in community programs, explore ways to elevate the voices of the pet families served so they contribute to (or lead!) storytelling about the work.

In every instance, keep a careful eye on what's happening. Is someone being given a chance to share their experience in their way? Are we editing to meet our needs alone, or are we preserving the authenticity of the personal experience? Are we getting a more detailed picture of someone, or are we perpetuating stereotypes?

When pet owners, community members, and colleagues tell their stories, it is more effective, supports trust and relationship-building, and helps us better understand the lives of everyone in our communities. Amplifying voices is for all of us—a chance to leverage the profound power of storytelling to help animals and the people who care about them.

Appendix I

Informed Consent Form

Consent for Documenting Personal Stories video, audio, or image.

Service Guarantee

Sharing your story or experience is your decision. <<The organization>> will not offer additional money or benefits to you for sharing your story. If you choose not to share your story you will not lose access to any services and resources you currently have and/or future services through our programs.

Why We are Asking for your Story

- Educate our audiences and increase their understanding of our work
- Inspire audiences to support our work by donating money, volunteering, or advocating for our cause.

Generic responses are provided above. Please customize these to your mission and program.

Our Audience Includes:

- Staff and volunteers at our organizations
- People at other organizations that work with us
- Followers and subscribers via social media
- Donors (institutions, companies and groups of individual supporters) who support our work by providing funding and other resources.
- Media including newspapers, magazines, TV and radio.

Generic responses are provided above. Please customize these to your mission and program.

How Your Story Could be Used

- Posted on our website <<insert website url>>
- Used for marketing purposes, including: brochures, flyers, billboards, advertisements, newsletters, etc.
- Shared on social media: instagram, linkedin, tiktok, facebook, etc.
- Shared with partner organizations and funding organizations
- Public media outlets, including: newspaper, magazines, TV, radio

Giving Permission

I, _____, understand that my story, photo and voice are my own and hereby grant my permission to << the organization>> to:

- | | | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| ☐ Record my voice | ☐ Interview me | ☐ Take photos
of my image | ☐ Videotape me |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|

Name, Image, and Voice

I understand the information I provide may be edited and shared both immediately and in the future.
I consent under these conditions (please check one for each):

Name *check one*

- ☐ My real name can be used
- ☐ Use a different, fictional name to protect my identity

Image *check one*

- ☐ My image can be used
- ☐ My image can only be used if parts are concealed to hide my identity

Voice *check one*

- ☐ My voice can be used
- ☐ My voice can only be used if it is disguised to protect my identity

☐ **Other conditions or considerations (describe below):**

Right to Retract Consent

I understand that media shared on the internet may be shared and accessed by people around the world. I have the right to change my mind at any point and retract consent after the creation of the video, recording, or other materials.

If I retract consent after my story has been shared publicly <<the organization>> will remove my story from any media or platforms where they have direct control. If the organization does not have direct control, they will make a reasonable effort to have the story removed.

Contributor signature: _____ Date: _____

Guardian or witness: _____ Date: _____

Organization signature: _____ Date: _____

Endnotes

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Gratitude

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