



Stories are data

Collecting, managing and sharing stories with care

Stories can be a powerful form of data for social enterprises. This tipsheet offers some practical tips on how to collect, manage and share stories respectfully, even when time and resources are limited.

Stories as a form of data

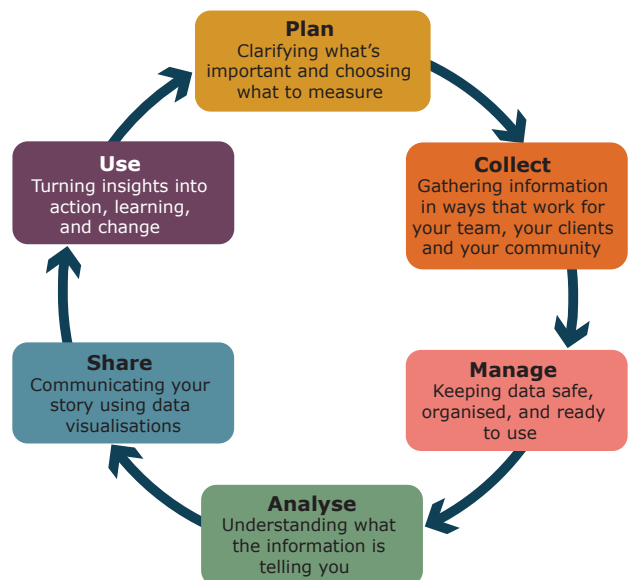
When people hear the word 'data', they often think about numbers, which is **quantitative data**. Quantitative data is helpful to answer questions about 'how many?' or 'how often?' or about the financial side of a social enterprise.

Stories are also a type of data, known as **qualitative data**. Qualitative data helps to answer questions about people's experiences, opinions and feelings. When it comes to impact measurement, stories can be particularly helpful for understanding what kind of change people value most, and the unexpected outcomes of your social enterprise (whether positive or negative).

Stories can be a great way to communicate the impact of your social enterprise; however, take the time to think about the different audiences for your impact measurement work. Different audiences have different needs, so it's worth thinking ahead about what your key audiences will find credible and useful.

The data cycle for stories

The data cycle is a way of understanding the journey that data takes through your social enterprise, from planning through to using the data.



It's just as important to think about how your qualitative data will move through the data cycle as it is to think about your quantitative data.

Ask yourself:

What kinds of stories do we need?

How will we collect consent?

Where will stories and consent records be stored?

Do we have time to analyse and use everything we collect?



Collecting stories

There are many ways to collect stories, including free-text survey responses, logs, interviews and focus groups.

Story collection should always start with clarity and consent. Explain why you would like to collect the story and get consent for how it may be used and where it may be shared. People should have choice and control over how their stories are used. Sharing should be voluntary, and people should be confident that choosing not to share their story will not affect the services or support they receive from your social enterprise.

Remember that if you're going to share someone's story as a case study or vignette, it might not be possible to de-identify them, especially if you're working in a small community.

Who tells the story?

Kate Marple at Who Tells the Story has some helpful guidance on person-centred, ethical storytelling. Her storytelling guide has practical tips for partnering with your clients and communities to tell stories in empowering and respectful ways.

whotellsthestory.org/resources/guide

She also has a useful resource on nuanced consent conversations that help people understand what they are agreeing to and the potential consequences of sharing their story, without feeling any pressure to participate.

whotellsthestory.org/resources/consent

Managing stories

To manage your stories, you will need a way to track who provided the story, confirmation of their consent, and how they have agreed their story can be used. It will also be useful to track or tag common themes and the impact areas that this story demonstrates. A good management process will make it easier to find useful stories later and reduce the risk of sharing something in a way the person did not agree to.

This might seem like a long list of requirements, but you can keep things simple when you get started, especially if you're on a budget. A spreadsheet in Excel or Google Sheets may be enough for your early work: use one row for each story, and columns for the information you need to track.

Over time you might invest in a more structured set up, such as using SharePoint metadata to tag files, setting up a database system like Notion or Airtable, adding items to your existing CRM (customer relationship management) platform, or investing in specialist story management software.

Sharing stories

You might share stories in the form of short quotes or in longer case studies. Make sure you connect the stories back to your mission or intended impact, and how the story helps to demonstrate what your social enterprise is achieving or learning.

Build in a review step before publishing or presenting a story, to make sure the way you're sharing it matches what the person agreed to.

Lastly, remember that your stories of change should reflect the values of your social enterprise. When putting stories in context, use respectful, humanising language that avoids deficit framing and recognises people's strengths, choices and context. Language matters!

Learn more about framing and language

Community Legal Centres NSW has collated a range of resources from different social justice organisations that include practical tips on respectful language and recommendations on how to craft effective messages.

clcnsw.org.au/talking-justice