

Living Proof Advocacy

Field Scan Results

Living Proof Advocacy Mission

“Living Proof Advocacy helps purpose-driven individuals and organizations unleash the power of personal stories to advocate for positive change. We do so by providing communication coaching, consulting services and coaching certification to everyday advocates, nonprofits, public agencies and communication professionals working on today’s most important issues.”

Introduction

Living Proof Advocacy partnered with Wilder Research to better understand how advocates and advocacy organizations evaluate the impact they make when using spoken, live personal stories as a part of their advocacy.

To inform this work, Wilder Research conducted a literature review to better understand what are identified best practices in using personal narrative storytelling for advocacy and how advocates can use evaluation to understand the impact of their storytelling. We also conducted interviews with those working in the field to better understand how they use stories, what successes they achieve through them, and what barriers they face in doing this work.

Living Proof Advocacy provides coaching to organizations to help them make a bigger impact with their storytelling. They center this work around five qualities of a well-told story:

Living Proof Advocacy’s Five Qualities of a Well-Told Advocacy Story

“Advocacy Stories are Focused”: Effective advocacy stories focus on key messages that are aligned with the advocate’s goals and tailored to the audience. The advocates also connect those key messages to moments in their story as a means of demonstrating the messages’ power and importance.

“Advocacy Stories Point to the Positive”: Effective advocacy stories focus on positive change: either the positive change advocates have experienced in themselves, or positive change they hope to see in the world (which the audience can become a part of).

“Advocacy Stories are Crafted”: Effective advocacy stories are carefully honed to be specific to their audience and context, use language that makes the story come alive, and include attention-grabbing and memorable “hooks.”

“Advocacy Stories are Framed”: Effective advocacy stories use “framing statements” to shape how the audience perceives and responds to the story, and both frame and reframe the story to specific audiences and situations, so that the story—and the storyteller—aren’t misunderstood or dismissed.

“Advocacy Stories are Practiced”: Effective advocacy storytellers are practiced, so they can strike a balance between using their natural speaking style, being genuine, and being confident.

Methods

Wilder Research and Living Proof Advocacy worked together to develop an interview protocol to address the ways in which organizations are utilizing storytelling for advocacy work and how, if at all, organizations are evaluating that work. The full interview protocol can be found in the Appendix.

Living Proof Advocacy compiled a list of clients who use storytelling for advocacy work, as well as organizations they knew of who utilize storyteller advocates. Staff at Living Proof Advocacy sent a pre-notification to respondents they had personally worked with to invite them to participate in an interview. Wilder Research staff followed with a formal invitation to participate in an interview and sent two reminder emails to those who had not responded. Eight organizations were invited to participate in an interview, and five completed an interview.

Wilder Research conducted the interviews in September and October 2019. Recordings of these interviews were transcribed, and Wilder Research staff conducted thematic analysis of these notes. The following report summarizes our findings.

Storytelling for Advocacy in Practice

Organizations using storytelling for advocacy

While respondents came from a wide range of advocacy fields—from mental health, to injury prevention, to homelessness, to farming—all spoke to the centrality and importance of personal storytelling in their advocacy work. While respondents primarily serve in a supportive role for their organization's storytellers, one reported also being a storyteller advocate herself.

The respondents' organizations utilized personal, face-to-face storytelling for their advocacy, which was often publicized by both traditional and social media. Many interviewees reported also providing formal training for their advocates related to storytelling, public speaking, and interacting with the media and legislators.

"We saw that there was an uptick in unintentional injuries and fatalities, specifically in the areas of motor vehicle and opioids. But... the statistics don't bring light to, don't bring a sort of face and a heart to what's out there. So the organization made a conscious effort to actively seek people who could tell their stories of loss or survival in the hopes of putting a face and a heart to the data that we provide in a lot of different formats."

How organizations learned to use personal storytelling for advocacy

Organizations learned to use personal storytelling for advocacy in several ways. For some, the practice of personal storytelling for advocacy was introduced by their founders. For example, one mental health advocacy organization was started by individuals whose families themselves had been impacted by mental health issues and who had their own personal stories to share. Because of their founders' own stories, the organization began the practice of empowering other individuals to share their personal stories. Another organization founder created a set of principles for personal storytelling, which are still valued and used to train the organization's storytellers today—over 30 years after the organization's creation.

Other organizations used formal storytelling training (including Living Proof Advocacy training) to become more effective advocates. These trainings helped them to “professionalize” and standardize their approach to using storytelling for advocacy, and to do so in an effective way. For those organizations, learning from experienced storytellers was an integral part of their learning process.

"I just think that since we were started by people who have their stories to tell, it just naturally grew into, that's going to be the base of our organization, is empowering those individuals [to share their stories]."

Important aspects of storytelling to make a difference

Interviewees emphasized a number of important approaches or aspects of storytelling to make a difference:

- Show change: be honest about the struggle and difficulty that people can experience (“don’t sugarcoat it”) — but also show that, with support, progress can happen.
- Speak from your own experience as a storyteller, and do not attempt speak for others.
- Include a call to action, so that people can leave the story feeling hopeful and empowered to make a change.

"Make sure there's a call to action at the end... Just don't just tell a story and make people leave feeling hopeless or powerless like they can't do anything. Always give something of a call to action that people can do when they leave that day, or a week later, that they can do to empower them to also make a change."

- Connect with your audience. Find what common ground you have with them, so you are able to connect with their values.
- Understand what messages and values your story is conveying.
- Use dramatization so that people can empathize with others, lose themselves, and experience what other people have gone through.
- Grab people’s attention by using authentic and relatable stories.

Some respondents noted that they rely heavily on Living Proof Advocacy's five qualities of a well-told advocacy story and consider them to be essential in their organizational approach to storytelling.

"I find that authenticity and relatability have a lot of power. I think that making sure that these stories are well told, but are told with honesty and authenticity, and that have the ability to relate to the audience. If people can relate, they're going to sit up and listen. That can make all the difference."

Unique approaches to storytelling for advocacy

Interviewees highlighted the approaches their organizations took that were unique compared to others in their field. Organizations reported:

- Having advocates who share their personal stories face-to-face—not only over traditional or social media.
- Centering those with personal experiences (e.g., individuals who have mental health conditions, their families, farmers) as experts on a topic—not scientists or policymakers.

- Telling the whole story, "warts and all": not just what worked and was successful, but what did not, and mistakes that were made.
- Maintaining a balance of "80% positive and 20% negative" so stories focus on positivity and hope.
- Ensuring that their storytellers are a part of a large group of other storyteller advocates who have similar experiences; being able to say so bolsters the impact of that individual's story.
- Providing extensive training so that advocates are able to tell their own stories in a way that is both authentic and well-crafted.
- Focusing on emotional engagement, not policy.
- Strategically tying educational information about the overarching social issue to the personal stories being told.

Telling a mental health story is not an easy thing to do. We encourage people to do a lot of thinking and preparation and practice and crafting— we don't just throw people up there; we have training and coaches and one-on-one practices for people to really craft their talk, and I don't know if other organizations do that. I feel like other organizations are either more formulaic or more organic, where you can say anything. One thing that is more important is we haven't mandated what people say— we let people say what they want to say, we just make sure that it's crafted, has key messages, that it's hopeful and has a key call to action.

Advice for other organizations

One interviewee emphasized the power and impact of using personal storytelling to advocate about social issues, beyond the potential of facts and statistics:

"Storytelling is a great way to communicate... the heart and face behind the data... People will remember a story, but they won't remember a number."

Several interviewees spoke to the importance of being authentic, open, and honest, and in particular, transparent about the difficult parts of the story—especially with regard to a story's potential for emotional connection and impact.

"You can connect with people on a deeper level when you're willing to open up a little bit and tell the harder stories."

Other interviewees highlighted the importance of taking the time to provide storyteller advocates with adequate training (to "tell the stories right"). One interviewee recommended learning from others in the field about what works and what does not, and instead of "recreating the wheel," continuing and building off their prior work.

Additionally, one interviewee stressed that, when stories are about sensitive, stigmatized or potential traumatic subject matter, organizations need to emotionally support their advocates and provide them with self-care strategies.

Challenges organizations face in supporting storytelling for advocacy

Nearly unanimously, interviewees stressed the large commitment of time, effort, and resources it requires to train effective storytellers. This commitment was required on the part of both their organization's staff (to train storytellers, assist in practice, and provide feedback) and the storyteller themselves. One interviewee discussed

how, if storytellers are not adequately trained and prepared, and they do not do well, it both reflects badly on their organization and is a difficult experience for the storytellers themselves.

Other challenges named included developing criteria for selecting storyteller advocates, the logistical challenges of training storytellers across distance and different time zones, having a sufficient number of trained storytellers, ensuring compensation for their storytellers' time, and the high turnover of volunteer storytellers (which necessitates constant re-engagement and re-training).

To overcome these challenges, one interviewee emphasized finding an expert partner in storytelling and investing in their training. Several interviewees also discussed the importance of acquiring additional funding to support their organization's work. This funding was used to hire more staff (to be able to provide more one-on-one training for their advocates) and provide stipends for their volunteer storytellers. However, as one interviewee mentioned:

“Obviously paying people would probably keep them around a little bit more, [but] I think it also does come down to engagement. If they feel like they're part of the movement, if what they're doing is making a difference.”

Outcomes and impact

Anticipated outcomes

Ultimately, the work of the different organizations interviewed revolves around building awareness and empathy.

Education and awareness outcomes included:

- Building awareness among farmers of how they can build environmentally and financially resilient farms, as a way in which to contribute to a clean and healthy environment.
- Spreading awareness among community members of the importance of affordable housing as a means by which to combat homelessness.
- Understanding the prevalence of mental health issues and decreasing the stigma associated with them.

Emotional response outcomes were targeted both at those directly implicated by the issue and those in the broader community who are less familiar with the issue. Advocacy efforts aimed at groups that have been impacted by a given issue revolved around inspiration and empowerment, to give them hope and to encourage them to drive progress in the issue by doing things like drafting legislation to change laws in their state.

Externally focused work focused on creating a situation in which the audience could empathize with those experiencing a given situation, such as mental health issues, homelessness, or avoidable tragedies. By creating empathy in the audience, advocates hope to change both attitudes and behaviors. These included examples such as:

- Counteracting “not in my backyard” attitudes and encouraging greater community support for new affordable housing development after hearing stories of people who previously experienced homelessness.
- Changing stigmatizing perspectives of mental health in the broader community.
- Encouraging the audience to feel the impact of avoidable tragedies to encourage safe behavior.

Respondents were asked if any unanticipated outcomes had emerged from their work. They predominately discussed how their impact has in certain cases been greater than they anticipated. Respondents mentioned examples in which those who had heard stories or gone through an organization's program went on to draft legislation in their state, an advocate who went through an organization's workshop went on to create their own non-profit, and other organizations have approached respondents' organizations to partner on specific projects.

Evaluation

Barriers

Respondents discussed the difficulty of evaluating the impact of storytelling for advocacy. Some barriers to evaluating their work include:

- **Difficulty creating evaluation tools.** Respondents discussed the difficulty of measuring the outcomes they look to achieve in their work. Measuring changes in understanding and emotional connection can be difficult, and determining if those changes in attitude lead to changes in behavior on a longer-term timeline can be especially difficult. Respondents frequently mentioned a desire to measure impact of their work in a quantitative format.
- **Lack of capacity.** Smaller organizations in particular struggle with having the time or resources to be able to conduct evaluation of their work.
- **Emotional events.** Distributing evaluation tools immediately after storytelling events might not be appropriate. Emotional stories might intend to strongly affect audience members; distributing a survey immediately after these types of stories might not feel appropriate to the storyteller or others coordinating the event, and might warp the perception of the experience for audience members. One respondent working in the mental health field noted that they do not distribute surveys for those events that are especially emotional.
- **Lack of a counter-factual.** Organizations generally do not receive feedback from audience members who have not been strongly affected by an experience; those who are greatly affected in a positive way are more likely to reach out to say that they have had a positive experience. Because of the difficulty in reaching all audience members, organizations oftentimes only hear from those who have highly positive experiences.

Formal evaluation efforts

Existing evaluation work is limited, but some respondents noted that they are using surveys to measure the impact of their work. These include surveys of their organization's membership to understand their attitudes and behaviors, as well as surveys of audience members at events hosted by the organization, which measure the impact of stories on audience attitudes.

To understand their impact, organizations will often rely on anecdotes or testimonials from those who have heard stories from storyteller advocates. Others see their membership or audience sizes growing as evidence of positive impact. One respondent noted that after events, they will sometimes have politicians reach out to have advocate storytellers join other events and speak highly of the organization during the course of their work.

Pressure to evaluate

Respondents largely reported that they do not face much pressure from funders to evaluate their work, with several noting that funders are generally sympathetic that advocacy storytelling is difficult to measure.

Still, some respondents noted that they have gotten a push from funders to provide information on their outputs, such as the number of people who have gone through a training or who were present at a storytelling event. Others have received feedback from funders that it would be helpful to have more information on outcomes of their work. This included a push from funders to measure attitude change and pressure from potential fiscal sponsors for organizations to prove they make an impact in order to receive support from the sponsor.

While respondents reported that evaluation was not required by stakeholders at present, all discussed the various ways that evaluation would be helpful to them in improving their work, securing additional funding, and making the case for others to partner with them.

Appendix

Living Proof Advocacy Evaluation Scan Key Informant Interviews

Hello, my name is [Interviewer name], and I'm with Wilder Research. We are working with Living Proof Advocacy and its founders, John Capecci and Timothy Cage, to better understand how advocates and advocacy organizations evaluate the impact they make when using personal stories as part of their advocacy. We have been working closely with John and Tim on this study, and they identified you as someone who could help us understand the impact of personal narrative storytelling in advocacy work. We are also speaking to a handful of other organizations.

[If unfamiliar with LPA:]Living Proof Advocacy helps purpose-driven individuals and organizations unleash the power of personal stories to advocate for positive change. They do so by providing communication coaching, consulting services and coaching certification to everyday advocates, nonprofits, public agencies and communication professionals working on today's most important issues.

We wanted to talk with you today to get more information about the advocacy work you and your organization have done using personal stories and how you know it's made an impact. If you've done anything to systematically evaluate your impact, we're interested to hear about that, as well.

Again, our focus is on spoken, personal stories that your advocates tell in order to support your mission or deliver key messages.

Your insights will help Living Proof Advocacy provide evaluation resources to those they work with. The feedback you provide will be summarized along with responses from other interviews, inform the work of Living Proof Advocacy, and to develop an evaluation toolkit. In addition to key themes that we will summarize from all the interviews we conduct, we might spotlight specific examples from your responses.

We want this work to be helpful for you and all advocates telling their stories to make a difference, so if you would like, we'll share the findings from this interview and others, as well as a related literature review, back to you.

I would like to record this interview to make sure that I capture all of your feedback. The recording will be used only to ensure that my notes are thorough and accurate. Please let me know if you do not want me to record the interview, otherwise I will turn it on now. [If no objections, proceed with recording.]

Do you have any questions before we proceed?

[Confirm name and title/role of person, confirm area of advocacy]

Introductions

1. Tell me a bit about yourself and what brought you to this work.
 - a. How long have you been at your organization?
2. Tell me a bit about what your organization does to advocate on behalf of [topic area].
3. Do you yourself ever share your personal story to advocate for your organization, or does your work consist primarily of supporting advocates who share their stories?

Outcomes

4. What outcomes is your organization trying to achieve through your personal narrative advocacy work?
 - a. Do you think you're achieving those outcomes or making progress toward them?
 - i. If yes: How do you know you're achieving them or making progress?
 - b. Were there any unanticipated outcomes?
5. Has your organization done any evaluation to determine the impact of your advocacy on these outcomes?
 - a. If yes: Probe for details of evaluation, ask them to share any documentation or tools
 - b. If yes: Do you think that this evaluation was helpful to you (and your organization) in improving impact or making your case to others, such as funders?
 - c. If no: Why haven't you done any evaluation?
 - d. If no: What would you be interested to learn from evaluation?
6. Do any funders or stakeholders push your organization to evaluate your impact?
 - a. If yes: What have they said they want to learn more about?
7. Were there or are there other organizations that are advocating for these same issues? If so, how does your work overlap or intersect with their work?

Process of the work

8. How did your organization learn how to effectively use personal narratives for advocacy?
 - a. What does your organization consider to be the most important approaches to or aspects of storytelling to make a difference?
 - b. Is there anything your organization does when using personal narratives for advocacy that's unique or out of the norm of what you've typically seen in this arena?
 - c. What's one piece of advice you have for other organizations who want to use personal narratives for advocacy work?
9. What are the biggest challenges your organization faces in using personal stories for advocacy?
10. What are the biggest challenges your organization faces in supporting personal narrative advocacy work?
 - a. How has your organization overcome challenges or otherwise adapt?
 - b. What has your organization learned from those challenges?

Thank you very much for your time today. The thoughts you shared will be very helpful to our research.

Wilder Research®

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For more information

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