

Forefront

Ask a Consultant
February 3, 2021

This session was the first of a two-part series looking at how nonprofit organizations can use data to tell their story. This one focused on internal storytelling and featured Sarah Armstrong, Margaret Conway, and Arthur Padilla, with Suzy Lee of Forefront moderating the discussion (a meeting in May will focus on how to use data in external storytelling). The questions and answers included the following:

Where do you tell organizations to start?

- Assessing readiness is important—organizations should know what they need and what questions they want answered.
- Staff should validate their own success and know that they can do what is needed. They might be doing some data collection work already, with some of the information contained in annual reports or other items.
- Data takes many forms—it's not just numbers or other purely quantitative measures. Pictures, stories, experiences, and more can also serve as part of the overall data picture.
- Starting with those closest to the work can help generate clear description of desired outcomes and what success looks like.

What are data points that we don't usually think of as data points?

- Capturing in-the-moment responses to creative work and messaging can help generate feedback and let those who worked on the media see the immediate responses, which can enhance their experience.
- Gathering feedback in a conversational way or as part of doing normal business can help it feel more natural and comfortable.
- Gathering short responses from a wide range of participants, possibly using tools like short videos, can help show some overall trends in a program and point to where changes may be needed.

When you have data that is not typical, how do you translate that into something that looks more like data and tells a larger story?

- Be clear in the difference between outputs and outcomes, and focus on outcomes that show what effect an organization is having. This could include changes in people's knowledge, behavior, or self-perception.
- Look at how gathering stories and other information can build community among participants, which is a positive outcome on its own. Having a learning community can be part of an organization's routine.
- Building organizational capacity to learn and understand outcomes can help staff and stakeholders internalize data.
- Using atypical data does not mean there is no place for traditional data such as surveys and interviews; multiple sources can be combined to make a larger picture,

When getting consent from people about how you will use their stories and information, what do you need to keep in mind?

- It is possible to tell an organizational story without exploiting individual hardships. People need to be seen as more than just deficiencies that the organization fills.
- Be clear with people on what information about them will be used and how, and ask for their permission to use it.
- Allow people's voices to be heard not only in the end result of data gathering but also throughout the process to shape how information is collected.

How do you talk about the information that is gathered, and what are the strategy, program design, and impact implications?

- Having a playful approach to data makes it more accessible, which encourages stakeholders to use it and think about it.
- Theory of action mad libs (where stakeholders were able to mix and match activities and possible outcomes) and a chenille stem art project (which allowed participants to look at where various actions and effects intersect) are a few examples of ways to be playful with data and encourage engagement.
- Multiple sources of data allow organizations to triangulate based on what they know, combining all the sources to look at the things they show together that might not appear when they are separate. This can combine quantifiable data sets with more qualitative sets.

What public data sources have you found that are useful and reliable?

- The U.S. Census Bureau has a range of data on many subjects, often available at the census tract level.
- The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning had data snapshots about each Chicago community area.
- Local governments often have a range of data available on their websites.
- Chicagohealthatlas.org has health data for Chicago communities.
- Local community foundations often serve as information hubs for their area.
- State and local school boards have a lot of education data.
- O*NET OnLine from the Department of Labor has employment and jobs data.
- The federal government in general has a lot of data sets, including longitudinal data.

What are the best free tools for sharing data?

- Google apps require some learning, but some training is available for low cost or free, and use of the apps is free. Google Sheets has easy-to-use analytic tools.
- Panelists said SurveyMonkey was their preferred survey tool.

What are some ways to use the data you collect?

- Customize it for particular audiences. Often this means making it compact and visual. Infographics can be useful.
- Volunteers particularly want to know their efforts make a difference. Board members often want data compact and easy to understand.

2020 data will look different than any other years. How can organizations account for that?

- Funders will understand that 2020 is unusual. The important thing will be to show how organizations emerge from that year.
- Document how the pandemic affected an organization and how it responded.

What is one recommended step for organizations to take?

- Ask yourself key questions: What does organizational work mean? To whom? And what questions remain unanswered?
- Get feedback from stakeholders.
- Don't collect data you don't need!

Has anyone pushed back on a request for data from funders?

- Sometimes this is necessary—for example, when protecting the privacy of clients served.
- Some data collection requests may create an undue burden, which could detract from mission. Organizational leaders should be clear when this is the case.