

How to engage communities: Why the power of storytelling really works

Storytelling can play a powerful role in strengthening community engagement activities and enriching people's lives. As thousands of people across the UK take part in National Storytelling Week (28 January-4 February 2012), it's worth considering how you can use effective storytelling to engage, educate and inspire your target audiences.

So why does storytelling help engage such diverse groups?

1. Stories are social

This is the reason office gossip spreads like wildfire. Research shows that if you want to transmit messages effectively through groups of people, you should make your message social, specifically **about people interacting together**. This is consistent with the 'social brain hypothesis' that human intelligence evolved primarily to deal with social information.

2. Stories empower both the teller and the listener

In one study, a series of statements were passed through a chain of participants, in a similar way to the children's game of Chinese Whispers. It was proven that statements with a social content were transmitted **more frequently** and **more accurately**. Each telling of a story empowers the next listener to share the information and feed the imagination of yet more people.

3. Stories create an emotional connection

A story is an **emotional experience**, which helps us to create visual images we're likely to remember more readily than straightforward facts. So if you want your influence to last, stories are far more likely to stick in people's minds.

Working in the heart of communities, we've successfully used the natural preference for storytelling to develop campaign designs which lend themselves to word of mouth communications and encourage people to **'pass along' key messaging**.

Whether it's public health, community safety or environmental sustainability, we've found that storytelling can help highlight a range of issues. A couple of recent examples include our **'Conversations with the Community'** in Coventry and our stop smoking work on Salford Legends, where ex-smokers' experiences were brought to life through their **personal stories**. We're also currently working with primary and secondary-school children to develop a **'story of recycling'** to engage them in more environmentally friendly behaviours.



To discuss how we can help engage your communities and inspire them to act on your messages through compelling storytelling, why not get in touch?

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