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The Power of Storytelling: Guidance for the Creation of Testimonials



Why this guide?

Stories focused on personal experience have potency and power. A highly relatable story can bring understanding, create empathy and be a pathway to change.

A personal story can offer a potent tool to prompt behavior change and build support for public policy for tobacco control, healthier food environments, road safety, overdose prevention, alcohol policy, and other critical health concerns.

We offer this guide to share decades of experience in providing first-person stories of survivors and witnesses—known as testimonials—as a means to connect with an audience on an emotional level and drive both behavior and public policy change to save lives. Throughout our work in strategic health communication, across media channels from billboards to broadcast to online, Vital Strategies has found that stories of people’s experiences can change lives and norms for millions.

A personal story can be harnessed to:

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|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Create a sense of urgency around an issue by showing the human suffering involved. | <input type="checkbox"/> Provide opportunities to gain support from the media and the public by building broader understanding of public health issues. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Introduce the people behind the statistics, changing a dry data point into a heart-breaking reality. | <input type="checkbox"/> Shift paradigms by showing the need for a systematic approach to a problem, such as creating smoke-free workplaces to protect the health of all. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> More fully engage viewers to encourage them to come forward, share their own stories or change their attitudes and behavior and reconsider unhealthy norms and habits. | <input type="checkbox"/> Illustrate an issue in a meaningful way so that it can be added to the political agenda and encourage policy action. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Upend taboos on discussing cancer, drugs, violence and other difficult public health issues. | <input type="checkbox"/> Show social proof of a public health problem. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Change social norms around wearing seat-belts, smoking, consuming alcohol, using drugs, and other issues. | <input type="checkbox"/> Counter industry efforts to normalize unhealthy behaviors. |

Why share stories? Evidence from Tobacco Control

Mass media campaigns that reinforce the health consequences of smoking or other unhealthy behaviors are considered best practice when seeking behavioral and policy change. Most of the research on this topic comes from tobacco control initiatives over the decades.

Evidence-based tobacco control campaigns have been found to be effective for the reduction of tobacco-related harms as well as having a positive impact on youth initiation. Evidence from the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States has found that ex-smokers have repeatedly affirmed that personalized concern about the health harms of tobacco smoking is a primary motivation for quitting.

Qualitative post-campaign evaluations have found testimonials to be emotionally engaging and largely successful in countering smokers' reasons for delaying quitting and their beliefs that they are immune from tobacco harms. [Evaluations from testimonial campaigns in England](#) found they achieved strong personal relevance, with the majority of smokers agreeing the campaigns were relatable and "aimed at people like me."

The most effective campaigns to encourage quitting:

<p>Contained dramatic or shocking elements such as images of clogged arteries or amputations.</p>	<p>Showed people in a highly emotional state.</p>	<p>Featured people suffering in midlife.</p>	<p>Clearly made the connection between a behavior and a health condition, (e.g. smoking and a tracheotomy).</p>
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From our experience, we have also found that stories of personal experiences of tobacco-related harm, either to the person telling the story or to a loved one, can be a powerful tool to counteract industry normalizing of tobacco as something fun, cool and glamorous. We also know that tobacco control testimonials, including ones as long as several minutes, are widely shared on social media.

In addition, we found that sometimes when a story is shared on social media, others come forward to tell their stories as well. This story from Indonesia is a good example:

When Vital Strategies shared the story of Ike Wijayanti, a woman who needed a tracheotomy as a result of exposure to secondhand smoke—part of a campaign on social media in Indonesia on tobacco’s harms—it inspired Robby Indra Wahyuda, 26, a former smoker who had developed throat cancer despite quitting. His posts of his surgical scar and good-humored jokes about his tracheotomy “hole” trended on social, drew media attention and was shared by thousands of people. Robby was excited when Vital approached him about filming a video for broadcast. But it wasn’t possible—a month later, he was gone. Instead, with Robby’s mother’s help, Vital shared a compilation of home videos of Robby along with his mother’s wish that “there be no more” Robbies. When a video of Robby’s story ran on YouTube, half a million people saw it in the first month.

Selected Testimonial Videos from Vital’s Library

Some of Vital’s testimonial campaigns are available for viewing here:

TOBACCO CONTROL



[Ike and Robby \(Indonesia\)](#)

TOBACCO CONTROL



[Mukesh’s Story \(India\)](#)

OVERDOSE PREVENTION



[Nicole’s Story \(United States\)](#)

FOOD POLICY



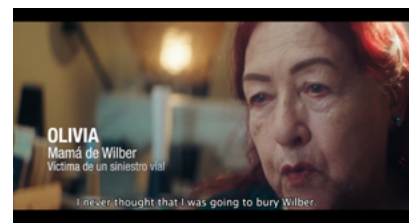
[Fabiano \(Brazil\)](#)

FOOD POLICY



[Lennon \(Jamaica\)](#)

ROAD SAFETY



[Olivia’s Story \(Colombia\)](#)

How To Create a Testimonial

Selecting Storytellers

What makes a good story?

A good story has a simple, linear structure that illustrates a point you are trying to make, for example, that drink driving can kill. It should be a story that is credible, relatable and sympathetic, and engenders an emotional reaction from the viewer.

What makes a good storyteller?

Storytellers must be willing to share their personal story with the public. Are they willing to appear alongside other speakers at a news conference, a policy roundtable or in a television interview, for instance? They must understand that their story may be used to generate materials such as billboards. It's important to explain that they may not be able to control what happens to their story; their story may be in the national news, it may go viral, and there may be backlash from tobacco or alcohol companies. Storytellers should also consider the effect telling their story will have on their family and others.

Finding Storytellers

To find storytellers, reach out to health advocacy groups, doctors, nurses and hospital counselors who may be able to put you in touch with patients who are willing to share stories about how their lives were affected by the issue you are addressing. You may be able to find leads on social media and in news articles too. To be sensitive, encourage health advocates or professionals to make the first approach when possible.

Make sure your storyteller:

Is of legal age to speak about their experience. If the person affected is a minor, consider that a parent or guardian might be willing to speak on their behalf.

Has experienced harm that can be attributed to the product in question by a health professional, for example, a car crash attributable to alcohol consumption.

Is able to articulate what happened to them and defend a call to action such as the importance of raising taxes on unhealthy products.

Story Selection

Find stories that depict serious and dramatic harms or consequences. This tends to be most effective, especially when the harm is apparent, such as a visible tumor or amputation.

Consider testimonials from people from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic or racial groups. Narrowing the storyteller to someone who is low-income, or of a particular race or ethnic group, can perpetuate stereotypes.

Additional Storytellers to Consider

Doctors and other health professionals witness health harms firsthand and can also tell powerful stories. Doctors are seen as highly credible sources of evidence-based information and are generally well respected and thought to be believable subjects, though this may vary according to country context and culture.

[SEE MUKESH'S STORY](#)

Parents who have lost a child can be particularly heart-wrenching storytellers and effective at changing hearts and minds. In Colombia, a woman who shared her story of losing her son, Julian Esteban, to a speeding driver, helped to convince lawmakers to pass legislation to reduce speed limits, a law that, though known to save lives, was not popular with the public.

[SEE FERNANDA'S STORY](#)

Loved ones left behind when someone dies, or those who were harmed because of another person's behavior, such as secondhand smoke or drink driving.

Interviewing Storytellers

When interviewing storytellers make sure to:

<input type="checkbox"/> Be compassionate and empathetic.	<input type="checkbox"/> Write down your questions in advance but be ready for the conversation to veer off in directions you may not have anticipated.
<input type="checkbox"/> Listen closely. Be relaxed but attentive.	<input type="checkbox"/> Include questions that elicit emotions such as “How did you feel when...?”
<input type="checkbox"/> If they aren't sure where to begin, ask them to start at the beginning.	<input type="checkbox"/> Based on your meetings with the storyteller and what they have told you, think about what you hope they will say, and ask questions to elicit that. Don't script them or tell them what to say—let them find the words.
<input type="checkbox"/> Don't be judgmental or render blame. You don't want to stigmatize anyone.	<input type="checkbox"/> Ask storytellers to repeat their answers if they go off point or ramble.
<input type="checkbox"/> Be patient and let the story come out naturally. Don't be afraid of long pauses—it can take time for a person to find the right words.	<input type="checkbox"/> Make sure to always include the question, at the end of the interview: “Is there anything else you want to add?”

[SEE APPENDIX II](#) for sample interview questions

Technical Guidance

Approach

Testimonials can be used in a variety of formats throughout your campaign. Consider creating a video, for broadcast or streaming, a still picture for posters and print ads, cards for social media, as well as press conferences or launch events with the storyteller in person. Think through how you plan to use the story and make sure the storyteller is comfortable with your plan.

Pre-Production	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Get permission to verify the story with the storyteller’s doctor to confirm that the cause of the problem is related to the issue you are addressing, such as tobacco or alcohol use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ask for family home videos or photos, which can be useful to show the subject when they were young, or for people who died before their story was able to be told.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Set up an initial interview to make sure all involved understand what is expected in terms of time, and the ways that the materials will be used. You can do this by phone or teleconference, but in person is generally best. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Film in a quiet space without background noises.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Since not everyone you interview will be selected, make this clear from the start. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Consider doing the interview in the storyteller’s home. Keep the background and surroundings free of clutter so there are no distractions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> If it’s okay with the storyteller, get some sample video, as you are looking for someone with on-camera presence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Make sure you have the necessary consent forms, and that you have carefully explained what’s involved to the storyteller. <u>SEE APPENDIX I</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Meet the person’s family or those closest to the subject so there are no surprises and make sure someone can support them through the process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare a list of questions. <u>SEE APPENDIX II</u>

Production

When creating a video, consider working with a production agency and/or a freelance editor who has experience working with subjects on sensitive topics or producing testimonials online, for broadcast or digital streaming.

Consider who will interview the storyteller. It needs to be someone who is empathetic, patient and respectful so that the storyteller will open up and speak freely.

Depending on your budget and dissemination plan, you can use a cell phone with a camera of 50 MP or above to capture a rough, documentary-style interview. But consider hiring a cinematographer or videographer to capture broadcast-quality images if this is your goal. It's also possible to use photographs with captions.

Make sure to get panning shots, wide angle, medium shots, close-ups and extreme close-ups to show the emotion on a storyteller's face or any damage to their body. A variety of shots will give you more options when editing. Don't be afraid to get multiple takes. After one or two questions, check that the tape is recording, that the image is what you want, and that the sound is working.

Editing and Post-Production

When editing the material ensure it tells a concise and simple story with emotion at its essence. Make sure it is clear that the story is about a cause (the health issue) and a consequence (the harm experienced by the storyteller). Edit out asides. The final material must be respectful and avoid stigmatization or blame. Your goal is to create clear and respectful materials that can elicit empathy.

Call to Action

Consider your call to action – what are you asking the viewer to do? With emotional advertising it's important to give your viewer a chance to act. Do you want them to change their own behavior and quit smoking, for example, or join a movement to encourage policy change or sign a petition? Let them know with a final line following the testimonial. Also consider who is the best person to deliver this line. The storyteller? An actor?

Dissemination

Plan the Dissemination

Before disseminating a story, show the final product to your subject to get their consent. Make sure their loved ones are also aware.

Create a dissemination plan. Consider your budget and how best to get your story out and think through how you plan to promote it. Dissemination channels could include:

<input type="checkbox"/> Paid social media ads	<input type="checkbox"/> Websites
<input type="checkbox"/> Broadcast and streaming channels	<input type="checkbox"/> Partner cross-promotion
<input type="checkbox"/> Outdoor media such as posters and billboards	<input type="checkbox"/> Email outreach
<input type="checkbox"/> Pitches to journalists as part of an earned media strategy	<input type="checkbox"/> Blogs

Live Events: Media Attention

Bringing a storyteller to a live event can encourage the media to cover an issue in a way that is relatable and compelling and makes an issue more tangible to people. When bringing a storyteller to an event, make sure they are comfortable sharing their story and talking to the media. Have them tell a simple, linear story that illustrates your point, for example, that drinking sugary beverages led to Type 2 diabetes.

Sharing a story about one's illness or drug use can be highly emotional and difficult for the storyteller and their family. Our overdose prevention program staff offers these thoughts on how to interview a storyteller about a highly personal, sensitive and potentially traumatic subject.

- A doctor or nurse can help you identify people who might like to share their stories. Let a trained nurse or counselor with knowledge in the field reach out to the person or family first. Ideally, that person should be on hand for the interviewing and filming as well.
- Do not push people to tell a story they aren't comfortable sharing. Often people are discussing deeply personal or traumatizing moments. While you want them to share, this cannot be done at the expense of a person's comfort level or mental health.
- Be open and flexible to changing your original message. Sometimes after hearing a person's story you may realize it is more insightful and poignant than the original message or campaign slogan you had in mind.
- Make sure the story is theirs to share, and that they have permission from the other people in the story to share this information.
- Be mindful of catching people off guard. Make sure the story is already known to the person's family, friends, or community before they share it publicly.
- Be ready with a plan should there be a backlash on social media or other channels. How will you support the storyteller in this situation? Know when to respond to negative feedback and when not to.

Practical Considerations

Make sure to get necessary permissions and consent forms when using a story publicly. A sample consent form is available in [APPENDIX I](#).

A storyteller should not be paid or coerced in any way to tell their story, but consider providing one-time compensation for their travel and time.

Consider legal and ethical concerns when distributing a personal story. As part of risk management, consider seeking legal advice or a legal review of the materials you create. The interests of the storyteller, their family and your organization need to be considered.

Obtain written confirmation from the storyteller's doctor that the illness is related to the issue you are addressing, such as tobacco or alcohol.

Understand that a storyteller may decide to withdraw their participation at any time. Honor that.

References, Resources and Relevant Publications



Use of mass media campaigns to change health behaviour, *The Lancet*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4248563/>



Testimonial Campaigns and their effectiveness, *Cancer Institute NSW* <https://vital.ent.box.com/file/1170000388884>



Listen to My Story: Communicating with Victims of Crime, *U.S. Dept. of Justice* https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/media/document/listen_to_my_story_vdguide.pdf



Tips From Former Smokers, *U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, <https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips/about/index.html>



Faces behind the figures: Voices of road traffic crash victims and their families, *WHO* <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/faces-behind-the-figures>



Campaigns That Shape Policy, Mobilize People and Improve Lives, *Vital Strategies*, <https://campaignbeacon.org/>



Victim testimonials have a significant impact in changing attitudes to tobacco, *Vital Strategies* <https://www.vitalstrategies.org/victim-testimonials-have-a-significant-impact-in-changing-attitudes-to-toba/>



Testimonials: Personal stories that have the power to save lives on the road, *Vital Strategies and Global Health Advocacy Incubator (GHAI)*, <https://www.vitalstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/Testimonials-Personal-stories-that-have-the-power-to-save-lives-on-the-road.pdf>



Raw and real: an innovative communication approach to smokeless tobacco control messaging in low and middle-income countries, *BMJ* https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/26/4/476?g=w_tobaccocontrol_ahead_tab

Appendix I

Sample Consent Form

[DATE]

Photo/Video Release

Name of person appearing in recording: _____

I grant [Vital Strategies] the right to photograph, videotape, and record me and my voice in any format (the "Recordings"). I consent to the use of my name and appearance in communication materials ("communication materials") developed by [Vital Strategies]. I acknowledge that my participation is voluntary and that I will not seek or receive financial compensation for my participation.

I understand that in producing the communication materials, [Vital Strategies] may edit the recordings or any portion thereof, and that the communication materials may be made available, exhibited, broadcast and distributed in any form, including online, video-based and in print, in any and all media, now known or hereafter developed, throughout the world without my approval.

I acknowledge and agree that [Vital Strategies] will own all rights in the recordings. I hereby irrevocably release [Vital Strategies] and its affiliates, licensees and all third parties involved in the creation or publication of the communication materials, from liability for any claims by me or any third party in connection with use of my name, image or likeness in the recordings.

I am an adult and therefore can grant these rights and am able to enter into this Release.

Full name: _____

Contact information: _____

Signature: _____

(Parent if the principal subject is a child 17 years or younger)

Appendix II

Sample Interview Questions for a Smoker

INTRO

- Could you please state your full name and your current age?
- If you are working, what is your current work?
- What are your hobbies?

FAMILY

- Can you tell us about your family?
- Who do you currently live with?
- What does family mean to you?
- Apart from you, do any other family members smoke?

SMOKING EXPERIENCE

- When did you start smoking?
- Tell us your story about smoking and what it did to you.
- Does your family know about your smoking habit?
- How did you feel when you first started smoking?
- What made you start smoking?
- How much did cigarettes cost when you started?
- Was it difficult to get cigarettes when you were still smoking?
- What factors influenced you to smoke at that time?
- Are the majority of people around you smokers?
- Do you often see cigarette advertisements?
- How did people around you respond when you used to smoke?
- How did you feel when you smoked? Both physically and in other ways?

EFFORTS TO QUIT

- What caused you to quit smoking?
- Did your spouse or loved one ever ask you to quit smoking?
- If so, what did they say when they asked you to quit?

- Is there a ban on smoking at your workplace?
- How long did you smoke until you decided to quit?
- What efforts did you make to stay away from cigarettes, once you quit?
- How do you feel now that you have stopped smoking? Do you feel different?
- Have you felt any physical or psychological changes after quitting smoking? If so, please explain.
- Do you think other people should quit smoking? Why?
- Has anyone made fun of you for quitting smoking?

MESSAGE

- If you could turn back time, would you still smoke?
- If you could meet your old self when you were still smoking, what would you say to that self?
- Do you have any regrets related to smoking?
- If so, what is your biggest regret?
- Do you have a message for your children?
- What is your message for people who still smoke or want to try smoking?
- Do you have a special message for people who want to quit smoking?
- Do you have a message for parents who smoke?

SMOKE-FREE WORKPLACES

- How do you respond to the fact that many workplaces are still not smoke-free?
- What experiences or benefits have you gained from working in a place where smoking is restricted?
- How do your coworkers react when they find out that you are trying to quit/have quit smoking?

BEFORE ENDING AN INTERVIEW,

- Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix III

Learnings From Tobacco: Tobacco Storytellers from Asia — A Vital Strategies Gallery



Garnering Attention in Indonesia

Sutopo Purwo Nugroho worked for the national disaster unit of the Indonesia government during a time when the county was facing many natural disasters from flooding and tsunamis. Sutopo was well known and well liked and was a calming voice of reason and reassurance for Indonesians in hard times. When he was diagnosed with lung cancer, the result of working around smokers—he never smoked—and subsequently died, Vital created a video about him that garnered 4 million views in one week.

[WATCH THE VIDEO](#)



Breaking Taboos in Vietnam

Mrs. Nguyen Thi Huong shared her story of getting lung cancer from secondhand smoke, for the campaign “Women Create Smokefree Home.” The story broke taboos regarding talking about illness and contributed to a movement of women speaking up about and for their health, and the urgent need for tobacco control policies to protect families in their homes and beyond.

[LEARN MORE](#)



Strengthening Policy in India

When Sunita, a mother of two, shared her story of mouth cancer as a result of using tobacco, the story helped to counter the tobacco industry’s delay tactics and lead the way for the Indian government to implement larger—85%—graphic health warnings on all tobacco products. Sunita’s brave fight against tobacco was instrumental in yielding this result.

[WATCH SUNITA'S STORY](#)

About Vital Strategies

Vital Strategies believes every person should be protected by an equitable and effective public health system. We partner with governments, communities and organizations around the world to reimagine public health so that health is supported in all the places we live, work and play. The result is millions of people living longer, healthier lives.

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