

# Best Kept Secret in Town: A Communications Toolkit from the Community Foundation of the Ozarks

## Storytelling as a Community Foundation

### Introduction

A big challenge of the community foundation world is 'getting the word out.' We hear repeatedly from our affiliate foundations that they feel as though they're the best kept secret in town, that they're operating in the shadows and that the typical resident in their community has no idea what the foundation does, if they know about it at all.

Developing a habit of strong communications practices and creating a strategy is fundamental to what you might think of as the storytelling of your foundation. Humans are storytelling animals, and we tend to grasp concepts better when they're given to us through the form of a story.

### Challenges

There are a few typical reasons for these challenges facing community foundations:

- **Our services can be complex.** Community foundations can be a tricky and kind of messy thing to explain in a quick and simple pitch.
- **We often serve a variety of constituents.** It's difficult for a 'typical resident' of our community to get a mental handle on the services we provide; someone who isn't plugged into the nonprofit world isn't going to easily grasp many of the concepts or terminology that we use every day.
- **Our impact is indirect.** Unlike many of our nonprofit partners, community foundations don't provide a simple direct service to community members. Considering that human beings tend to grasp concepts best through storytelling, it can be difficult to tell a story about indirect service.
- **Limited capacity.** Community foundations are often run by volunteer boards with busy personal lives and limited expertise in communications and marketing.

### Solutions: How to Tell Your Story

These problems have solutions!

- **Simplify our message.**
- **Maximize our most powerful resource.**
- **Build community.**
- **Strategize.**

#### *Simplify our message*

Begin with the basics. What does your foundation **do** over the course of a year? Most typically, our work comprises managing **charitable funds** and **grantmaking**. Perhaps your foundation has a

specialty that can be given a central position in your messaging, but charitable fund management and grantmaking tend to be our bread and butter.

Emphasize these in your storytelling; **save specifics for later**. Use the basics in your wide net-casting: the social media posts, the news releases, etc. Save the specifics for when you're sitting down for coffee and conversation with a potential donor.

**Create and practice an elevator pitch:** An excellent exercise for simplifying your message, for getting to the essentials of what your foundations does, is to design a quick summary of it, say, in case you happen to share a thirty-second elevator ride with a potential donor who's probably never heard of your foundation.

Crafting an elevator pitch forces you to distill your message down to its essence. This clarity not only helps others understand what you do but also helps you articulate your own goals, values and mission more effectively.

While it's important to remember your history and to use it in your storytelling, for a quick pitch, you should focus on your primary function and impact.

Ex. "The Community Foundation of the Ozarks is a nonprofit financial institution that manages the charitable and scholarship funds of individuals, partner nonprofits and businesses. In the past 50 years, we've granted over \$600 million to various causes in our region, which consists of central and southern Missouri and continues to grow. Recently, we partnered with the Coover Foundation to grant \$220,000 to nonprofits working to create more neighborly communities."

#### *Focus on Impact*

Grants! (And/or scholarships!) This is the meat and potatoes of our work. At the CFO, typical work for the comms team is when a grant round opens, when it's about to close and when the grants have been awarded and grantmaking ceremony has occurred.

But grants and scholarships are just the 'front-facing' part of what we do: those things come from funds established by a variety of donors, and they all have their stories. The recipients of these funds have their stories. How the donors and the recipients (and the community foundation!) have worked together to create a wonderful impact on the community is a very rich story. This, all together, is the story of our impact, and it can be shared in the form of donor stories, grant recipient stories, scholarship recipient stories, etc. Highlight these things on your social media and at events. Share the news!

(Note about NRs and MAs?)

#### *Build community*

Create spaces and moments where you can have conversations and where you can set the stage for telling your foundation's story. While larger community events are possible, a useful meeting doesn't have to be elaborate: consider a simple presentation to a local community club, like the Kiwanis or Lions Clubs, church group, or even taking a walk down main street with a stack of brochure and introducing the foundation to local business owners.

## Sharing News

### News Releases

When you're opening a grant application, create a news release or contact the local media — does anyone on your board know the local newspaper editor, or is the editor on the board? Take advantage of those relationships.

Be sure that the information you include in a news release is accurate and official — not only for accuracy's sake, but also to keep everyone (the public, the foundation and other interested parties) on the same page regarding the official or proper name of a program, donor or grant recipient.

New releases can be made through the template at [cfozarks.org/news-resources/internal-affiliate-resources](https://cfozarks.org/news-resources/internal-affiliate-resources). We offer a template because news releases must be written in a specific format and voice; the less an editor must modify or edit the news release, the more likely she or he is to run it (remember, media isn't required to publish your news release.)

Here's an example of a recent CFO news release — as you read through it, notice how the most immediately relevant information (AKA, the actual "news") is near the top, so that it's most likely to be read. Specifics follow that, followed by informational boilerplate (sort of an elevator pitch itself) text that goes into all our news releases.

#### NEWS RELEASE

Date: March 5, 2024

Subject: CFO accepting applications for specialty grant programs

Contact: Aaron Scott, [ascott@cfozarks.org](mailto:ascott@cfozarks.org) or 417-864-6199

The Community Foundation of the Ozarks is accepting applications for several specialty grants made possible by generous donors who chose to support specific areas of interest.

These programs, supported by field-of-interest endowments, are open now through May 15. The programs are open to 501(c)3 nonprofits or organizations with similar tax-exempt status, such as school districts, government entities and faith-based organizations:

- **Hearld Ambler Fund for Senior Centers Grant Program:** \$13,000 is available to senior centers in the 18-county SeniorAge Area Agency on Aging service area.
- **Lennie Cloud Fund for the Hearing Impaired Grant Program:** \$500 is available to a nonprofit within the CFO's service area to assist individuals with impaired hearing through equipment, programming or training.
- **St. Francis Fund Grant Program:** \$2,500 is available to support animal-welfare needs in Springfield and Greene County.
- **Smith Atwell Girls Recreational Grant Program:** \$500 is available to a project that empowers and encourages girls and young women in Greene County to be involved in athletic and outdoor recreational opportunities.
- **Wounded War Veterans Grant Program:** \$3,000 is available to a project that serves the needs of wounded war veterans in southwest Missouri through equipment, programming or training.

For information and to begin the application process, visit [cfozarks.org/applyforgrants](https://cfozarks.org/applyforgrants).

Field-of-interest endowments are established by donors who wish to advance a cause that they are passionate about without designating the recipient. The funds can also bolster the CFO's larger grantmaking rounds when the scope of the program aligns with the donor's intent.

The Community Foundation of the Ozarks is the region's largest public charitable foundation serving donors, nonprofit partners and over 50 regional affiliate foundations with assets totaling \$427 million as of June 30, 2023. The CFO's mission is to improve the quality of life for everyone in central and southern Missouri through resource development, community grantmaking, collaboration and public leadership.

Community Foundation of the Ozarks  
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[cfozarks.org](https://cfozarks.org)

We maintain a list of contacts at local and regional newspapers, tv stations, radio stations and so on, and once we've completed a draft of the news release, we send it out to all the relevant outlets.

This process is repeated when we announce the recipients of a grant round, when we open scholarship applications and for various events open to the public.

### *Social Media*

Social media can be a great storytelling tool, but it's easy to invest too much capacity into it for the pay-off you'll get. Remember that face to face conversations with potential donors and professional advisors is a much better use of your time, if your time is stretched.

That said, there are best practices for using social media, and they can be incorporated easily once you get into the habit and understand the limits of your capacity. For example, you should maintain a Facebook profile. Especially in smaller communities, people use Facebook about as much as Google when seeking local services. Please be sure that the information in your bio is correct.

As for posting, try to post or at least share something once a month. See our social media handout for 'right-sizing' your social media practices.

**Here's an easy Facebook post:** News releases are readymade material for a social media post. Just copy the first couple of paragraphs from the release and paste it into a post. Be sure to include a call to action where necessary, such as a link to the grant applications.

Here's what we created for Facebook from the news release above:

Now open: New field-of-interest grants! 🎉 The CFO is accepting applications for several specialty grants made possible by generous donors who chose to support specific areas of interest.

These programs are open now through May 15. The programs are open to nonprofit organizations with 501(c)3 or similar tax-exempt status, including school districts, government entities and faith-based organizations:

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Learn more and begin the application process at [\(LINK\)](#)

Notice the new opening sentence and emoji — a good practice to catch a scroller's eye.

Grant presentations make for excellent photo ops, and therefore are an excellent social media post. Be ready with those presentation checks!

## Maximize your board

Working to ensure that each member of your board is practiced in sharing your foundation's elevator pitch is always a wise move, but it's also wise to ensure that everyone's talents are being put to good use.

Is there someone on the board who is especially adept or interested in using social media? Or someone who's on close terms with someone on staff at the newspaper? (Or is the editor on your board?) Assign a person/people to be the dedicated communication support.

## Set goals and strategize

A solid communications strategy is created from a broader set of strongly defined goals for your foundation. Once you have these larger goals in place, you can begin to narrow the focus of your communications needs and can begin to 'right-size' your strategy.

Start by thoroughly understanding the broader organizational goals. What does your foundation aim to achieve? What are its long-term and short-term objectives? From there, consider these steps:

1. **Identify Target Audiences:** Determine who your key stakeholders are. Do you want to focus on establishing legacy gifts and tapping into the transfer wealth? You might consider how best to reach financial advisors or estate attorneys. Understand your audience's needs, interests and preferred communication channels.
2. **Craft Key Messages:** Develop key messages that resonate with your target audiences and support the organizational goals. These messages should be clear, concise and consistent across whatever communications channels you use. Speaking of ...
3. **Choose Communication Channels:** What are the most effective or appropriate means of reaching your audience(s)? Traditional media, social media (which platform?), targeted newsletters, educational events, knocking on doors?
4. **Develop a Content Plan and Allocate Resources:** Typically, in creating a communications strategy, these would be separate steps, but considering the limited capacity of volunteer-run community foundations, it's wise to develop a content plan while realistically looking at your capacity to implement it. Do you have a board member who's particularly interested in or adept at social media? Or, to go back to a previous point, someone connected with the local media in some way? Determine the resources you have, then create a content plan suited to those resources. Outline the topics and types of content you will produce to communicate your key messages. Consider the timing and frequency of your communications to ensure consistency and relevance.
5. **Implement and Maintain.** Get to it, and keep yourself accountable for sticking to it.

By following these steps, you can create a communications strategy that effectively supports and advances the goals of your organization.

## Support from the CFO

The goal of this presentation is to allow our affiliate foundation representatives to feel comfortable speaking with local media and to maintain a social media presence confidently and independently.

But the CFO is here to help where we can. Specifically, here are services we offer our affiliate foundations:

- Webpage
- Presentation checks
- New release templates