



The Case for Support

How to Write a Script in Support of Your Mission

A FLA Group Whitepaper



“We all go a little mad sometimes.”



Henry looked tired and drawn. It had been a year since the last AFP conference where we had a chance to talk about the exciting capital campaign his organization was launching.

The anticipation of learning about how things had gone in the past year was thick in the hotel lobby bar. But, instead of detailing the successes (and he had quite a few in that past year), Henry was focused on a crushing professional disappointment he had been experiencing.

Henry's two decades in the capital campaign business told him something was not quite right. Certainly money was coming in, but he could see that prospects and donors were not responding in the way they should. His dedicated and connected board seemed a little lacklustre about the project. Even his hardworking and enthusiastic staff was a bit off.

He didn't know what to do.

Even more than the dollars, his organization needed the energy that comes from a fully engaged and passionate group of volunteers, donors and staff. Henry worried about what this casual disregard might mean for the future.

And, most of all, Henry was slowly going mad trying to figure out what was wrong and how he could turn it around. Unfortunately, it's a familiar refrain for so many hard working, dedicated and passionate fundraisers.

At FLA Group, we wanted to know how fundraisers could improve success with donors and prospects.

An objective look often revealed a disconnect between the incredible work that is being done by the organization – *the cause* – and the efforts made to communicate this throughout the organization.

In our research, we reaffirmed our fundamental understanding of human nature.



“What we’ve got here is a failure to communicate.”

Successful Capital Campaigns flow from the case statement.

And, when we start out as fundraisers, we are taught that effective case statements are “*rational persuasive arguments for donor support.*”

Rational.

Chances are not a lot of yachts get sold with rational arguments. Prada wasn’t built on weighing the pros and cons. And, it’s a given that Ferrari’s marketing plan is vastly different than the Chrysler minivan.

Humans are emotional animals. Human existence is deeply affected by our feelings and reactions.

To be fair, rational thought has delivered some pretty great advances for us humans. But it is pretty much completely against our nature. It’s really hard work for us. We are simply not wired this way.

The human race needed rational, logical, scientific thoughts and processes to get mankind to take that one giant leap onto the moon. But first, John F. Kennedy had to inspire us, to tell us *why* we should go:

“... We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard...We set sail on this new sea because there is new knowledge to be gained, and new rights to be won, and they must be won and used for the progress of all people...”

The fundraising sector simply must get better at engaging donors and prospects on a very basic and emotional level. The emphasis in all we do should be the persuasive, the emotional, and the passion. Let’s engage our donors with ***why*** first and then we can hammer out the ***how***.

Your new and improved case statements will also serve to invigorate your boards, volunteers and staff. Passionate team members and donors are guaranteed to deliver success for your organization and its mission.

“You’re tearing me apart.”



So, what about the rational side? We’re not suggesting you jettison it. You’d best be wildly rational when necessary!

There’s plenty of literature around on how to prepare an effective case statement. If you’ve studied for your CFRE exam, you’ve no doubt digested a lot of it. The fundamentals outlined by people like Hank Rosso (1917-1999) have stood up most durably for decades.

Yes, an effective case statement must also make a rational argument for donor support. As always it should include your organization’s history, vision, mission, goals, objectives, program descriptions, leadership, financial overview and current/future funding needs. But, when you think of it, a typical case for support reads very much like an investment prospectus.

We’re making the case (pardon the pun) to go beyond the numbers and strategic planning documents. We’re almost fanatical in our desire to have you tell powerful stories and trigger strong emotional support in your constituents.

But it doesn’t have to be one OR the other. Our view is that you should – must, in fact – do both. And, do both well.

We’re not suggesting for a minute that you abandon the ‘typical’ case statement information.

But in today’s market – and to today’s prospect – the typical case just doesn’t cut it anymore. Weave all the important factual elements and rational arguments together with powerful, persuasive emotional content. Let’s set people’s hearts on fire, and then we’ll back it up with some damn good facts for their brains.

Hank Rosso doesn’t disagree with us either. His concluding words about case statements (written decades ago) are these:

“The case tells the story. It reaches beyond the organization to where present and future constituents live. Its purpose is to inform, inspire, excite, uplift and motivate the reader of the case to become involved with the cause as advocates, contributors, volunteers, and informed constituents. The spark of creative energy is the core of the case. The mission is that philosophical statement of concern that justifies the organization’s existence and invites constituency interest, support, and dedication.”



“Aristotle was not Belgian. The central message of Buddhism is not ‘every man for himself’. And, the London Underground is not a political movement.”

OK, so you want to get it right. You need to get it right.

Here are the FLA guiding principles for writing case statements:

- The needs of the organization are secondary to the prospect’s desires.
- Writing strategy is carefully constructed along the lines of human decision-making psychology and neurology.
- Rational arguments are secondary to the prospect’s **primary emotional** needs.
- Superb storytelling is the optimal way to penetrate the prospect’s heart and mind.
- The needs of the institution are secondary to the mission.
- The voices chosen to speak in the case must reflect the cause and its universe.

Your case for support is more – so much more - than an articulation of your organization’s funding needs. It is a reflection of your past and your future.

Your personality and disposition.

Your dreams and vision.

Your heart and your soul.

“You had me at hello.”



Storytelling and passion will deliver the same results as it does in everything else. Storytelling is the heart of the human experience. It's how we learn and communicate. It's how our brains are hard-wired.

For years, marketers have known that effective advertising and marketing are written from the customer/donor perspective. Yet, fundraisers feel very odd trying to do this because it 'feels like somebody else's voice'. *Well, it feels that way because it is somebody else.* The trick to effective persuasion is checking individual and institutional ego at the door – and embracing the donor's mindset the way a method actor totally embraces the character she's portraying.

Talking the talk isn't enough. Outside-in communications needs to be authentic and credible. If there's one thing we've learned doing countless donor focus groups, it's that donors can spot hyperbole and insincerity a mile away. **Making it real makes it compelling.**

At our decision-making core, we humans are driven primarily by instinct and impulse. We instinctively protect our children, avoid that which causes pain, even fight wrong-doing. The process of decision-making begins with subconscious impulse and concludes with conscious consideration. Almost all fund development writing we see focuses on the rational – when in fact the instinctive is the trigger that starts the process itself. In fact, people are more likely to give based on impulse alone than on thoughtful consideration alone.

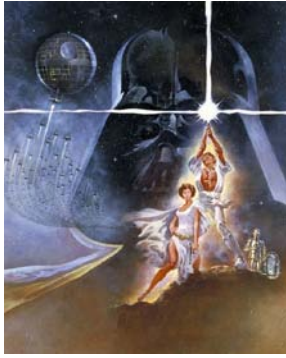
Each and every one of us is driven by emotions at our most essential level. We live to seek happiness and avoid pain.

This is true of people – and it's true of prospects and donors. Yes! Prospects and donors are people, too.

A powerful case for support should generate strong feelings in the reader that predispose her to deepen her commitment the cause and support the organization more fully than ever before. The prose should lift and inspire.

**“Humans are not ideally set up to understand logic;
they are ideally set up to understand stories.”**

Cognitive scientist Roger C. Schank



“A longtime ago, in a galaxy far, far away...”

We as a species have been communicating with stories since time immemorial. As soon as we invented written language, we employed it to record and transport our stories.

Think of it. The evening news is made up of stories. Movies and TV shows are stories. When you call your mom on Sunday nights, you tell each other stories about your week. When you get home at night you ask your spouse ‘how was your day?’ –they proceed to tell you stories.

Great writers of all genres employ stories. Jesus Christ and William Shakespeare were master storytellers. Medical students are now taught narrative skills so that they can listen to their patients’ stories and communicate diagnoses and treatments through stories.

American novelist Ursula K. Le Guin put it aptly:

“The story – from Rumpelstiltskin to War and Peace – is one of the basic tools of the human mind for the purpose of understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.”

The story is more essential to humanity than the wheel. It’s a profound idea, isn’t it?

Recent research leads us to a sample case for support that was asserted to be a fine example of the genre. The opening lines read like this:

“For over one hundred years, X hospital has been part of [city] in its move from pioneer, frontier medicine to modern technology with all its scientific knowledge and medical advances.”

Let’s start by saying that there is nothing wrong with the writing. It is competent, and nicely put together. But reading this case for support revealed that there are amazing stories in its history. In fact, the founding of the hospital itself was incredible and unique. Unfortunately, we didn’t get to read them.

Imagine if the opening line read something like:

“Always transforming - and often saving - lives is the business of X Hospital. It has been for over 100 years. And the night that Sadie Smith arrived in the emergency room with her 3 year old son, Nicholas, was no different...”

Personal, emotive stories connect with your donors and prospects in a way that facts and figures can’t.

“We're on a mission from God.”



Of course, any case for support's *raison d'être* is to convey an organization's need for funding.

Having said that, we believe strongly that these needs are best articulated when they're 'sandwiched' by the cause. We've held dozens of donor focus groups to talk about their attitudes and feelings toward the client organization. Yet, once the conversation gets going, we've observed that they talk about the cause more than the organization in question.

Let's go back to that example we looked in the last section, for a moment. Further in, the need was expressed, beginning with this sentence:

“After an intense study by experts within and outside the hospital family, X Hospital has identified the two most pressing healthcare issues...”

No doubt, it is very important to be able to demonstrate the prudent and objective planning that went into determining organizational needs. Let's imagine for a second how we could really engage the prospect with a true story that would demonstrate the need. Let's show rather than tell:

“Sadie knows that things may have been tragically different if it wasn't for the dedicated team of expert health professionals and the state-of-the-art equipment that helped save Nicholas. Dr. Bill Brown, X Hospital CEO, knows this too. That's why he and his leadership team have developed the long range plan to expand and equip the ER to be able to serve our growing community and ensure the future health of our families and neighbours.”

One of our favourite self-asked questions when writing materials such as case statements is 'why did a donor make their first gift?' The answer is almost always in the cause.

Child sponsors care more about poor children in Uganda than they care about World Vision. People care more about finding a cure for cancer than they do about the Canadian Cancer Society. Donors care more about homelessness than they do about the United Way.

We fundraisers cannot afford to lose sight of this.



“Round up the usual suspects.”

A case for support should contain as much first-person-singular language as possible. The document is much more powerful when information is conveyed and stories are told by *someone*.

The voices that could be contained in the case document are many and varied. Institutional leadership, yes, they must speak in this document.

But first, ensure you include donors, volunteers, clients/constituents and program staff. These voices are compelling to prospects. And they will play a key role in linking the mission and to the organization’s needs.

Our hospital clients are a very good example. Their cases for support include not only the hospital and foundation presidents and board members, but also feature volunteers, donors, former patients, doctors, researchers, nurses and orderlies prominently. One very effective case statement even used a hospital staff carpenter’s voice.

Real human voices are essential to bringing the case to life for solicitors and prospects alike.

“I do wish we could chat longer,
but I'm having an old friend for
dinner.”



People give to people. Stories matter.

As fundraisers, we can be much more effective at engaging donors and prospects on the very important human level. The emphasis in all we do should be the persuasive, the emotional. Let's engage our donors with **why** first and then we can hammer out the **how**.

After all, prospects and donors are people, too!

A case for support that appeals to the heart as well as the brain will yield more engaged teams and donors which that deliver critical resources for your mission.

Tell powerful, emotive stories. Create vision. Bring your cause (and *then*, your organization) to life.

More and bigger gifts will be the outcome.

About the Players

The FLA Group

FLA's principals acquired some of the finest expertise in fundraising communication during their combined 70 year pursuit of connecting passionate donors to compelling not-for-profit missions. This pursuit has led the FLA team to conduct unparalleled research with donors and the Canadian public. The application of this research has lead to the development of unique and often contrarian products like Iceberg Philanthropy, which have brought pioneering organizations across Canada much success in deepening their relationships with their donors, leading to greatly enhanced revenues for their missions.