

D9910 CLUB LEADERS' SEMINAR, Sunday 7 May 2017

Breakout 11 – Telling The Story : Colin Robinson

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We all tell stories – it is what life is made of. Story telling is important; the cave dwellers round a fire knew it, Shakespeare knew it, marketers know it and in Rotary we have always known it ... take the classification talk or two minute snapshot we have in our clubs where we tell a story to introduce ourselves.

Aristotle said that storytelling is what gives us a shareable world.

While the telling of stories is universal the same cannot be said of our ability to tell our stories comfortably and well.

The good news is that with some practice we can get quite good at this and enjoy the creativity of the experience while creating solid benefits for our clubs because others relate to these.

What this session is about is to offer some guidance on telling stories and while I could get rather sophisticated and detailed about this I won't, as the goal is to provide enough guidance that you can share. So that anyone can write a good story, whether they are your club publicity person or a project team member tasked with telling others about that project. For this reason, all that I am covering here is available on the RotaryOceania website. <http://rotaryoceania.zone/>

WHY TELL A STORY?

For us personally, what we do in Rotary is a part of our identity and we naturally want to share these with others. To show them that what we do with our time has value, maybe to see if we can interest them into also becoming involved or maybe just to give ourselves a very well deserved part on the back.

Stories give outsiders a chance to learn about Rotary and how it might be relevant to the community they live in and to them personally

This then gives them the chance to consider how they might participate, whether approaching the club about membership or maybe volunteering to help with a project or even become a sponsor.

For those already involved in Rotary, it is a way of reporting back the results of activities, to show that their participation achieved great outcomes and was valued.

It helps to deepen the club's sense of community and the value of being part of the team, because any club activity touches them all.

In telling the story we build confidence and credibility with those that read it that we are worthy of their interest and support. You could even take the line that telling a good story is preselling to the audience your next activity when you publicise this.

So story telling is important. It is so important that clubs need to plan to write a story for every club project or event, no matter how large or small. Because it is only by making it one of the must-do items in the project plan that it gets done, as it is almost always overlooked.

THOUGHTS ON TELLING A STORY WELL:

Your project success and experience audience is potentially 8,500 NZ and Pacific Rotarians, Rotarians of the world and millions of people who could support Rotary and you, if we inspire them to do so using your story.

Be confident – you have a great story to tell! If you don't tell it then no-one knows what you achieved and that is not good for your club, nor is it helping those benefiting from your project just that little bit more.

Be creative – what is new, unusual, innovative, unique to this, interesting.

Be persistent and be consistent.

When you write a story, having spent the time, effort and creativity in writing it, why wouldn't you get it out as far and wide as possible. Better bang for your time spent.

But when do you write a story? At a minimum I would suggest that every project and event is worthy of a story. After all these were worthwhile planning and spending time and money on, because they addressed a community need in some way, so surely it is worth telling others of what you did and achieved?

But how and what do you write about?

I do think you need to have a mind-set first that writing about your projects is a high-value activity and second, to always have in mind "What will be of interest to the readers of this article?" This is what the editors of any media you send the story to will be asking. No more so than the editor of the local newspaper who may receive dozens, if not hundreds, of stories all clamouring for attention and all thinking they are the best story going. You need to pitch your story in a way that stops it finding its way quickly to the trash bin by answering that question: "Will this be of interest to my readers".

We will come back to this but first you need to gather information that can be used to write a story and this requires planning and that planning must be part of the project plan.

At this stage simple bullet points is quite OK and even preferable as anyone can do this part

- Who was involved?
- What did you do – again, hook the audience with the new and unique
- Where did it happen?
- When did it happen (or is going to happen)?
- Why did it happen? – what was the real, deep, meaningful outcomes/benefits of the project?
There may be several and for different participants.

Decide the media you are sending the story to and know who their audience is and what part or motivation of that audience you want to appeal to. It all depends on how much work you want to put into this, although some media and audiences are sufficiently similar that the same article will do for all.

Take for example the Club bulletin which goes to members, spouses and maybe some Family of Rotary. For most bulletins, projects are simply summarised, but is that enough? After all, they have done the work and not all members took part so they lack the first-hand experience with the article.

Do you just want to report some bland facts? Or, do you want to thank those who took part and show those who did not participate that they missed out on something great and need to make sure they come along to the next project by describing the value?

What goes into the bulletin could just as easily go onto your club website (and may anyway if using Clubrunner to create your bulletin), to Rotary Voices on the Rotary International site and be sent for the District Newsletter. This may be mostly OK for sponsors and beneficiaries, with some rewording to place them at the forefront of the article BUT an even better approach is the one you would take for the local newspaper.

And it may be possible to dissect the one story into parts for some media, such as Facebook where you might pluck out a part of the story now and another part next week. Or even rework the story again with a slightly different emphasis another time.

My point is that one story may be OK for several media but not all, as the local newspaper especially does not want a report or you describing what the members did. They could not care less. What they want is something that will INTEREST their READERS. Although you may want to appeal to a certain broad segment or even emotions of their readers such as, petrol heads for a car show or those who have an affinity for a clean, green environment.

DECIDE ON A DIRECTION AND SOME LIMITS FOR THE STORY.

Projects involve a huge number of aspects but to try and describe everything is simply not practical. If only because most media have limits to space available for any one story so you need to **decide on one story** or aspect from the project you want to portray:

To illustrate, many clubs have a Book Sale or you may have attended one.

Boring you might say as how can we make good publicity out of selling a few books to raise some funds?

The story is available on the website but a 2016 Book Fair by Howick Rotary resulted in an article intended to describe the breadth of benefits enjoyed by different groups of people touched by the Fair. Plus, they came up with 14 individual areas, any one of which could be an interesting story in its own right.

But to make an impact you need to decide what single point is most powerful and useful for reaching and potentially gaining the buy-in of your audience, rather than tossing out many.

So you need to decide on the angle or 'hook' that will inspire an editor to publish and the intended audience to read

The headline sums up the importance of your angle and the first paragraph explains the angle you are emphasising

Let's illustrate this with headlines:

In a recent email to clubs the title used was:

Rotary Publicity – Membership attraction campaign starts Monday 1 May

That was suitably functional for an email but for a story on the website the title was:

Join the publicity revolution starting 1 May

Clearly words do matter.

The rest of the story explains the 'who, what, where, when, why and how', putting the most important information at the beginning, and the least important near the end, from the audience standpoint. Flesh out the middle section with one or two quotes expressing opinions about the importance of your angle.

As you gather the information and later write the story, use action

Talk about people, not programmes

Roll these words around: Books, fundraising, project. Rather uninspiring!

But what about speaking of the child picking a book off the table and becoming so engrossed and enthralled with the story they were reading that they sat down on the spot not caring about the people who had to step around and even over them to navigate between the tables. What was the value of the Book Fair to that child?

So humanising the story is as important to engage the readers as is the topic.

Getting quotes from participants at various areas (think Rotarians/organisers, sponsors, beneficiaries and those who care for them such as teachers/parents) adds a warm 'human' touch to a story. After all, it is people we are helping so what are they saying and thinking?

How did the project benefit them, did it create a better situation for them or open new opportunities or lead them to a better future? Or could it?

Keep it simple

Short sentences are strong sentences. Here it is also worth mentioning that correct spelling and grammar are still essential in today's world of tweets by twits. Readers do get turned off very quickly by misspelt words and

name and bad grammar. Really, with spelling and grammar checkers there is no excuse and local newspaper editors will definitely agree. Get this wrong and it makes no difference how good your story is, it's in the bin. No question.

Show, don't tell - use your creativity and poetic licence

Be vivid in your telling. That child didn't buy a book to read ... the book became an experience.

End strong by revisiting the "hook" and if possible a call to action.

I hope this has given you some food for thought and it is worth me emphasising again that no story, means no publicity and fewer supporters from both within and outside your club. Every project needs a story and I have mostly looked at this from the perspective that a story is actually taken right up to the stage of being written and submitted. But there are a few points also to consider alongside this:

When you send a story to a media, whether within Rotary or elsewhere, there is an assumption the information provided is correct and any permissions to use information and photos have been obtained if needed.

Also all media reserve the right to edit although most will do so lightly.

It may be the person gathering the information for the story is not the person who actually puts the story together in its final form but this will only succeed if the quality of the information gathering is there. Also, once the story has been written it should be reviewed and if needed improved, as the writer may not always capture the essence that will have the greatest impact. Remember, words are important.

Also, some media are quite happy to write the story for you and once written will be quite happy for you to use the story elsewhere as well. By and large, the audience is not substantively the same as another.

For example, I put stories onto the Rotary New Zealand website and Facebook pages and would be quite comfortable at receiving even quite short stories supplied in bullet points but only if you also supply a good picture or two.

TAKING PHOTOS

Which leads onto a part of storytelling, in print at least, that is almost as important as the text, descriptive side and that is photos. The phrase "a picture is worth a thousand words" is quite valid and often the lack of a picture with an article may mean the difference between a story being published or not. In fact most editors will make a story work if the picture is good enough, as they can always phone you up for more information but it is impossible to go back to the project and take a better photo. So some very basic basics on taking a photo.

First back to the planning ... plan to gather the information and plan to take a photo.

Second, is the project big or significant enough to justify paying for a professional photographer? If so make very sure you own and receive the photos taken

But mostly you will have a member or keen spouse or some other person taking the photos, hopefully with a proper camera although at a pinch phones have good quality cameras now.

Number one – take the picture at the camera's highest quality setting as this allows cropping for an even better result later if needed although alongside this always send the photo as it was taken on the camera to the media, not a reduced version.

Second – we need people and faces close up. Backs of heads don't work and crowds of people in the distance don't work.

Like the text, concentrate on the essence of the project or angle being taken – no cheque presentations, instead get along and take a photo of the sports equipment the money purchased being used by the children.

HOW TO GET A STORY INTO ROTARY DOWN UNDER MAGAZINE.

I wish there was some easy, guaranteed way but there isn't.

Rotary Down Under's Editorial Policy is that significant preference will be given to articles submitted that have unique content and have not been published in other places including local media and district newsletters.

Other points are:

- Unless exceptional circumstances, Rotarians and Clubs are limited to a maximum of two articles per year in *Rotary Down Under*;
- Priority is given to districts with lower than average contributions providing the story idea submitted is high quality and other policies are met (at present, District 9920 and 9940 have high contribution levels so low priority for consideration)
- With the exception of mandatory content from Rotary International, all articles can be edited, allowing for more articles to be included in the magazine. Article length, depending on placement, normally a maximum of 350 words. Edited articles are returned to Rotarians for approval prior to inclusion. Any requested changes are to be agreed to by the editorial team and if no agreement can be reached, the article will not be included in the magazine.

RDU prefers to receive your story as a series of bullet points as they want to write the story with the emphasis they choose to place on it ... as mentioned they will ask you to approve this but you do not agree with what they have written it will not get published nor can you later use this for your own purposes in other media. They provide no guarantees when they will use your story or even if they will use it.

TO CONCLUDE:

There is guidance via a link on the Rotary New Zealand website Homepage

There is a webinar on "Telling our story: Communicating about Rotary in the community" on Wednesday 24 May 10.45 am for an hour but later available as a recorded webinar and you will find this detailed in Rotary Down Under magazine in Noticeboard.

Or you can contact your district Public Image Chair and I am usually available. cs.bg.robinson@xtra.co.nz

Telling the story of your club and its activities is fun, it is enjoyable working creatively, it just need someone in a club to get going to tell these stories and the benefits will come. No-one expects a Hemingway from Day One but from day one the quality of the stories will quickly improve with practice so have a go.