

COMMUNITY STORYTELLING TOOLKIT

MICHIGAN MAIN STREET



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Phil Eich is the founder of Storyville, an agency providing story-based marketing for cities, regions, and states across the country.

By emphasizing human faces and human stories, Storyville believes that doubling down on being human is the best way for communities to cultivate pride, attract and retain talent and investment, and support small businesses.



Why Community Storytelling?

Humans Need Stories

Humans have an intrinsic and insatiable desire for stories in every form: from books to movies to conversation to 15-second TikToks. This desire for storytelling has roots in the very first communities that burrow all the way down to our DNA, and still today, most of our time is spent telling, listening to, or viewing stories! Community storytelling leverages this innate pursuit of stories by communicating community information in a way that connects with people.

Stories Capture Attention

Without capturing someone's attention, our messages don't exist! If the messages we send look, feel, and sound like advertisements and just aren't compelling enough to pique someone's interest, they will be subconsciously filtered out.

Community storytelling is based on the understanding that people inherently want to pay attention to stories, and that using human faces and stories in community marketing improves the odds of capturing attention.

Humans are More Important Than Things

The heart, soul, power, and potential of every community is its people, and community marketing should accurately represent that belief by including human faces and human stories in our marketing. Retail products, food, jobs and the like are all important, but it's more important to show how people create, enjoy, and benefit from those things. If we believe that our communities are made for people, the marketing we do should focus on those people.

Trust Comes First

Communities are transformed by action, but actions are dependent on trust. If we want people—both citizens and noncitizens—to create transformative relationships with our community, we need to focus on creating trust before “telling people what to do”. Trust is primarily created through displaying warmth (friendliness) and competence (providing value). Warmth says, “We’re here to make your life and the lives of others better!”. Competence says, “...and we have the ability to do it! Here’s the proof.”

Storytelling displays both!

Love is the Goal

We need to move beyond simply making our communities more livable—we need to make them more lovable! Customers in love with a Main Street will shop there more often while inviting their friends to do the same. Business owners who love a Main Street will run better businesses, be more willing to support actions that move it forward, and are more likely to invite fellow businesses to set up shop in our district. Need more volunteers? Create more love!

Love is not just a "feel-good" emotion: a community filled with love and pride can and will accomplish immeasurably more than a community simply going through the motions.

Community storytelling is one of the most powerful ways to increase community pride because it demonstrates reasons for love, and uses the people within the community as the focal point for that love.

The "How" of Storytelling

Your Community Already has a Story

Don't try to rewrite your history or only highlight whatever is new, trendy, or "impressive". If you do, sooner or later, your stories will seem fake, citizens will start calling "favorites" and your storytelling will lose the trust and support of the community being served. People are more attracted by pride than perfection, so be real! Be you! Embrace your story!

Tell a Good Story, Don't Try to Sell

A story that sounds like an advertisement will cause people to disengage and lose interest. **Let a great story sell itself.** Don't smash your Main Street's logo on every photo, don't try to "polish up" a story with language straight from an infomercial.

Include things like a businesses' website, location, and hours of operation, but *showing* us why we should shop there will be more effective than simply *telling* us we need to. Don't tell us that your community is great, tell us the stories of all the people who make it that way!

Keep it Simple

Keep the stories simple—whether it's in writing, a video, or a podcast. "Simple" gives more opportunity for more people to actually experience the story you're trying to tell.

Keep the process for creating stories simple, as well. This means different things to different people, but stories are best used consistently—and that requires a simple and sustainable process to create them.

Keep Things Human

We want to see human faces and we want to hear human stories. Even if a story isn't obvious or applicable in a piece of marketing content, ask, "Who can we see? Who do we need to hear from?"

Consistency is Key

While community stories can be successful as "every once in a while", the magic happens when storytelling becomes a core element in how a community interacts with the world.

The exact frequency of storytelling depends on factors such as ability and capacity, but approach story-based work with the question, "How can we make this a part of who we are?" instead of saying, "We'll do this whenever we get some extra time."



Creating the Calendar

Great work requires a well-executed plan, and an editorial calendar is the backbone of great community storytelling. Before running around with a recorder and camera, creating an editorial calendar helps determine what stories will be told, how many, and what form they will take. Whether you're "all-in" and telling stories every single day or are a "every once and a while" storyteller making a single story-based social media post twice a month, use the following four steps to create your calendar:

Step One: Determine Content Load

Start by establishing how many stories you'd like to create over 12-months. Ask these two questions:

- **Frequency:** How frequently do I want to publish a story? How many stories do I have the capacity for?
- **Form:** Are the stories short-form (a paragraph or less) or long-form (multiple paragraphs)?

Do you want to feature one big story every week by posting a part every single day? You'll need to aim for a calendar with 52 feature-length stories. Aim for every other week and you'll need 26. Want to keep stories short with some "quick quotes", but post them twice a week? You'll need 104 people/subjects to grab quotes from.

This will be a bit of a guess at the beginning, but do your best!

Quick tip: Start small and aim for consistency! As your skills improve, gradually increase frequency, and then start exploring longer-form stories.

Step Two: Schedule Time-sensitive Stories

Stories can be classified as time-specific or evergreen. Things like events, a summer season full of things to do, or the opening of a new business are time-specific: the stories need to run in advance for them to turn readers into attendees or customers. Because these stories *have* to run at a specific time to be effective, they get first dibs on the calendar.

How far in advance of an event should you run a time-specific story? It depends, but a general rule would be to start simple promotion at least 4 weeks before, and then publish story-based promotion the week before the event. Too late and people won't be able to plan. Too early and people will forget!



Quick tip: Don't get overwhelmed by trying to schedule every possible time-specific story. Instead, focus on the big ones: signature events, the opening of new businesses, and seasonal promotions.

Step Three: Evergreen Stories

After putting in the time-specific stories, create a “story bank” of evergreen stories with flexible publishing dates. As an example, a story about a long-time and well-loved pizza shop could run next week, in three weeks, or in six weeks.

It’s important that as you schedule these stories in your calendar, you keep the line-up of stories varied, interesting, representative, and aligned with specific community goals.

For example, break up a string of food-based business stories in a row with some service and retail businesses. Sprinkle in a story or two about an important volunteer, individual, staff member, or elected official. You could also feature a non-profit organization, teacher, a community member who’s “been here from the beginning”, or a child with an interesting story.

This is also an opportunity to provide a platform for underrepresented populations such as Black, Indigenous, and people of color as well as member of the LGBTQ+ community. The demographics of your community have a significant influence here, but don’t be afraid to step outside the immediate district or think outside the box. **Your storytelling can become a way to embrace and uplift everyone in your community.**

With these ideas in mind, write down any and every story that could possibly be interesting (and even ones that might not seem that way!) and then proceed to Step Four.

Quick tip: Fill out your story bank as best you can, and then get ideas and feedback from a few other trusted sources. They will be able to identify biases you didn’t notice as well as connect you with great stories you’ve wouldn’t have known about otherwise.

Potential Story Suggestions

- People who have overcome an obstacle
- Small business origin stories
- Unsung community heroes: volunteers, teachers, community
- People with stories that connect your community to the “outside world”: people that moved from another area to yours, boomerangs, immigrants, those who have a story on the national stage, etc.
- Kids engaging with the community or doing great things
- "Boomerangs"
- Historically underrepresented groups
- The "why" and "how" behind Main Street, DDA, city government, etc.
- Developers involved in new construction, redevelopment, or historical preservation

Getting Buy-in

How do you get people to tell you their story?

The first step is always **create great relationships**. A Main Street Director with the trust and support of their community will always get more and better stories than one who does not.

The second step is by communicating the intent of the story: acknowledging the people who make a Main Street great. "We believe its the people here in ____ are what makes this community great, and telling their stories is a way we can show that." is a good line to steal!

Step Four: Create a 12-month Editorial Calendar

Now that you have your time-specific stories scheduled and have created a story bank of evergreen stories, fill in your calendar's remaining slots. Remember, the number of slots is determined by your estimated capacity. You will most likely have to prioritize them...and that's ok! Imagine trying to tell thousands of stories at once—it just wouldn't work, but that doesn't mean don't start. If the plan is to tell one community story each month, you'll have to pick 12 and that's just the way it goes.

Two notes here: you could try filling out a two, three, or six month calendar instead of 12. But thinking in terms of 12 months helps keep this work from falling off your radar after a month or two. It's also important to note that this calendar isn't set in stone, specifically the evergreen stories. Stories can be moved around, delayed, pushed ahead, added and subtracted as you go.

Calendar Evaluation Checklist

- Are the amount of stories scheduled frequent enough to be effective?
- Can we actually implement the frequency and volume of desired stories?
- Is the list of stories selected varied between subjects?
- Are the stories selected representative of our community?



A Sample Template

A basic storytelling template for social media has three elements:

- **Quote-based:** the interviewee telling their story entirely in their own words
- **Portrait Photo:** a portrait photo with the subject looking into the camera
- **Short and simple:** whether it's a single post or a story told over multiple posts, each post is short and simple

Example Template



Riverfront Saginaw is at Saginaw Boxing Club.

Published by Phil Eich · August 15 at 7:00 AM · Saginaw



"I've been boxing since I was eight years old. I grew up in a fighting family. My grandpa's been coaching since I was born. My dad fought. My uncles fought. My cousins fought. My youngest brother fights. My middle brother would have fought, but he had cataracts, so he couldn't fight, but he would have. My sister would have fought, but my mom and dad didn't want her to fight, otherwise she would have, too.

But it all started with my grandfather, Juan, because he wanted to mak... [See more](#)



32,176
People reached

5,216
Engagements

↑ +3.3x higher
Distribution score

Boost again

Quick tip: This is just one of many templates, and of course, you can create your own! Along with telling better stories, templates can help make work less time-consuming and more efficient.

Interviewing

The Interview is the first step in the content creation process because it's an opportunity to hear a story directly from the people who lived them! These interviews can be scheduled or done spontaneously, or performed in-person or done remotely.

Use an app, such as Otter.ai and others, to record and create an initial transcription for the interview. A great time saver!

Interview Tips

- Conversations are better than interviews—but make sure they're doing most of the talking
- Being an active listener is 90% of a great interview
- Be curious!
- Play dumb!
- Dig for details! Ask "why...?" and follow-up questions to flesh out important elements
- Don't be afraid to interrupt if something interesting or important is only touched on
- Go back and ask questions as they come to you
- Build rapport before the interview starts: smile, laugh, comforting nonverbal communication
- Smoothly transitioning into the interview from small talk to questions can put people more at ease, i.e. don't announce the beginning of the interview.

Sample Questions

The best questions always come from listening and being in the moment during an interview, but it can be helpful to have some "big" questions ready to ask:

- How do you....?
- What's the meaning behind the name?
- How did the idea for this place begin?
- What got you interested in...?
- What's the key to doing this well? What's the hardest part? The most fun part?
- What's the most challenging thing you've had to overcome?
- What do you love about what you do? What do you love about this community?
- What advice would you give....
- Who's been the biggest influence in your life?



Photography 1

To go with the interview, you'll need to take some photos of the interviewee. Have a photographer on staff? Awesome! Want to hire someone? That works, too!

But here's the great news: you don't have to be a professional photographer to take a great photograph, just think "**FLC**".

FLC: Face / Light / Composition

Face

Remember how "humans are more important than things"? This means that photos featuring the faces of the people interviewed will always be more important and effective than what they sell.

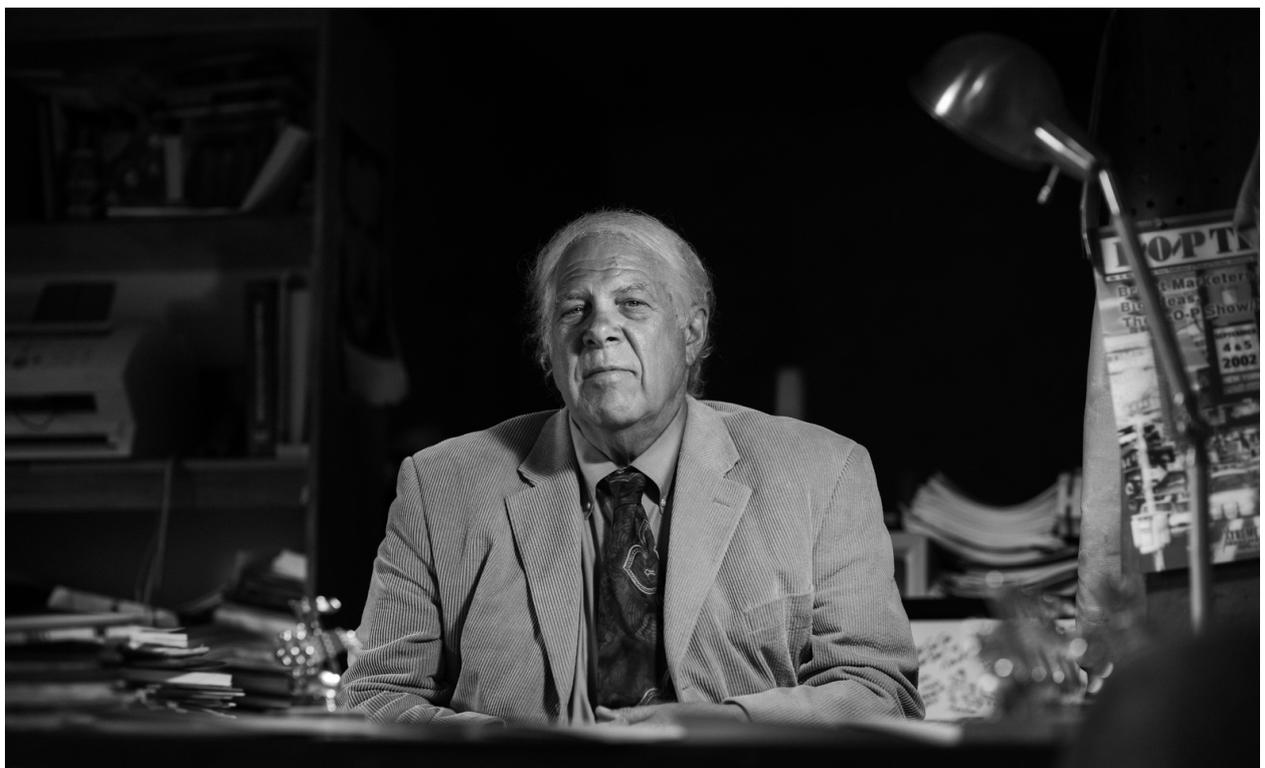
Before you click the shutter button on your camera or phone, take a look around and think about how to put the human behind the story front and center. It might be having them do something (toss a pizza crust, sew a dress) or it might be having them simply stand next to a well-lit window.



Light

Find the biggest, best source of light in the room and then position the subject in a way that creates light and shadow on the face. Need some help the best position for the best light? Try out the hand trick! It's also important to consider options other than ceiling lights: windows, lamps, doorways, reflected light off walls can all be possible better options.

The first photo below uses a window as a light source, and the second uses a desk lamp:



Composition

Composition is about how all the parts of a picture get put together. Because photos will vary based on location, it's best to think about asking some compositional questions before taking a photo: Where should the subject be in the frame? Left, center, right?

What can be put into the photo that helps tell the story? Can I include a prop, a detail, have the subject do something, or place them in a descriptive environment?









Creative Editing

Now it's time to clean up the interview transcript. It's important to think about this work as one-part journalism and one-part marketing. It's your job as a storyteller to relay the interviewee's words in a truthful way, but also your job as a marketer to communicate in a way that is clear and effective.

I call this "creative editing". There are some "hard rules" to editing: spelling should be correct, there shouldn't be typos, etc. But there is also a style to editing: what reads clearly to you as the editor while still being a good representation of the person speaking?

Here are samples showing some of the "techniques" used edit an interview while still preserving the words of the interviewee.

Add Information

Original: "Nobody has to bring anything, just show up under the bridge ready to clean!"

Edited: "We're going to hold the cleanup on Friday the 17th, from 6 PM to 8 PM. Nobody has to bring anything, just show up under the Court Street bridge ready to clean!"

Move Around (Organize around a theme or timeline)

Original: "The was never any doubt I was going to start this business. I bought everything I needed over the course of a year, officially opened in July, and the restaurant has been packed ever since. I love this community and to see them love me back and encourage me has been amazing. As a kid, I always loved to cook—my dad couldn't keep my away from the stove. He was always teaching me little tips on the grill, giving me little jobs to do where I couldn't hurt myself."

Edited: As a kid, I always loved to cook—my dad couldn't keep my away from the stove. He was always teaching me little tips on the grill, giving me little jobs to do where I couldn't hurt myself.

I officially opened in July, and the restaurant has been packed ever since. I love this community and to have people love me back and encourage me just like my dad did has been amazing."

Combine Sentences

Original: "Anyone can make barbeque, but not everyone can make world-class barbeque. If you want really great BBQ, you really have to live and breathe barbeque."

Edited: "Anyone can make barbeque, but to make world-class barbeque, you've got to live and breathe it."

Eliminate Redundant Thoughts

Original: "There was never any doubt I was going to open a restaurant. I've always wanted to, ever since I was a kid, I've wanted to open a business just like this one."

Edited: "Ever since I was a kid, I've wanted to open a restaurant like this one."

Change Word or Phrases that could be misinterpreted or have a negative connotation

Original: "We're going to clean up the area under the bridge and whitewash some of the graffiti on the buildings."

Edited: "We're going to clean up the area under the bridge and remove some of the graffiti on the buildings."

Quick tip: The 1% Rule

Spoken interviews are different from their written counterparts in that they are spontaneous and contain more context. People misspeak, say things that could be interpreted poorly, or are inaccurate. One of your jobs as a storyteller is to be an advocate for the people you interview, and "The 1% Rule" can help. If there's a 1% chance something could be misinterpreted, cause unnecessary conflict, or harm a relationship within the community, don't publish it.

Implementation

Implementation of community stories could fill an entire toolkit by itself, but here's a checklist to help to put stories in front of more readers:

- Publish stories frequently enough people begin to look for them
- Cross-publish! Post a story on multiple social media channels, drop into an email marketing campaign, and publish it on a website. With different social media channels be mindful that character limits and preferences come into play: Facebook captions can be longer, Instagram captions are capped at 2200 characters, and Twitter captions are limited to 280 characters.
- Boost with an ad spend: Even a minimal amount can make a big difference. If your budget doesn't have room for this, consider asking the featured business to donate money to help promote.
- If publishing to social media, make the post at a time when users are online in the morning, around lunchtime, or in the evening around 6PM.
- Engage: Share the post to community Facebook groups, like and reply back to comments
- Photos, stories, and pull quotes can be repurposed into other forms of content: print marketing, Canva designs, newsletters, slide decks, etc.

Quick Tip: For an extra boost in visibility, be sure to tag any mentioned pages or users and check-in at their location.

Making it Work

Even with a clear process in place, community storytelling can be intimidating, especially for a first-time storyteller. But here are some tips that will help ensure storytelling becomes an essential part of your Main Street's marketing efforts:

Do Your Best...Then publish!

Don't try to win a Pulitzer right out of the gate: do your best work...then publish! Stories need to be seen to work their magic, so get them out into the world while embracing the process of becoming a better storyteller.

Spread the Load

Who can help? Maybe a retired local journalist or an energetic introvert on staff can do the interviews. A local photographer or student could help with the photos. Finding help can ensure storytelling becomes a long-term success and not a short-term burnout.

Commit to Long-term

Facing an endless list of work and responsibilities, it can be tempting to stuff storytelling into a desk drawer for another never-to-arrive day. But resist! Make a commitment to sharing these stories consistently



Promote and Engage Back

Don't let community storytelling be a one-way street. Try to put the stories in front of as many people as possible, talk about them, and engage back with the people who like, comment on, and share them on social media.

Start Small, Build a Habit

Don't start out trying to win a Pulitzer! Start smaller - even smaller than what you think. This will build that skills, process, and habits needed to make sure storytelling becomes an integral part of your community.

Have Fun and Be Human

Interviews are an opportunity to get to know someone you serve on a deep level. More than just checking off a "to-do", this experience can be fun, exhilarating, and eye-opening. Enjoy it!



For more resources, head to the Michigan Main Street
[Resource Library](#).



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