

Stories Communicate Public Value

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Library Helps Town's Small Businesses Recover from Fire

Wendy Whiting, owner of Maine Society of CPAs, estimates that having the library available as a resource after the Scarborough Commons fires saved her \$4000 in workspace and equipment rentals, as well as benefits for her two employees since they were able to continue working after the fire. Wendy's business was one of 18 businesses with that called Scarborough Commons "home" on Maine's Route 1. In the fall of 2014, an evening fire decimated the complex and all 18 businesses were left homeless. The next morning, our Library Director Nancy Crowell met onsite with the business owners who were sifting through the rubble to determine what might be salvaged. On behalf of the Library, she was able to offer temporary business accommodations such as meeting room space, wireless Internet access, and basic business services such as fax and copying services.

While Scarborough is home to a robust small business community of nearly 2700 firms, 22% of our state's microbusinesses have five or fewer employees and also could benefit if in the same fix. Wendy was surprised and grateful to see the Library as part of the town response. She appreciated how Nancy truly listened and offered immediate support of library facilities to help her get "back to work." Wendy and her assistant were at the library the next day, filing insurance claims, notifying member CPAs and planning next steps. She says that Nancy and the library made a huge difference in her outcomes going forward from that day.

To me, this is such a powerful example of how the library is a "go-to" resource for needs that might not even occur to most people. Thankfully, this is not the kind of tragedy that touches everyone. It's comforting to know, though, that if faced with this kind of catastrophe, that the library can be a truly helpful resource. When we talk about the library being "more than just books," this is what we mean. Library resources make a big difference in personal lives and in a really significant way to the community at large.

- A narrative told by Emily Read, President of Scarborough Public Library Board of Trustees, Sep 2016

People Love A Story

People love real stories about real people and often pay more attention to them than to logic and evidence. A story that includes emotion is both easier to tell, easier to listen, easier to remember and moves people to action better than simply logic and evidence.

Yet a story alone of an interesting situation really doesn't reflect how much of an impact that a public service makes. If a library had a compelling story about how it helped one of its business owner patrons in a time of crisis (see insert), this helps people understand the public value of the library. As Emily Read points out everyone in town benefits from knowing that "if faced with this kind of catastrophe, that the library can be a truly helpful resource." This is only one of many stories on how both patrons and the community have benefited from the libraries in Scarborough and Falmouth, Maine. Yet, in many cases we rarely hear these stories.

Abstract:

Scarborough and Falmouth librarians and volunteers participated in an online learning circle process, offered by University of Maine Cooperative Extension, to learn how to tell robust stories. The learning circle became a 'public value laboratory' and energized these participants to move beyond 'sharing what our library offers' and 'collecting numbers' ...to.... grappling with how to translate 'why our patrons

love us' into clear descriptions of the value which the library provides to the community members who do not use the library, i.e. the library's public value. These narratives are anchored by, and thus focus on stories.

Key Ideas

- Public service programs need public support. For the public to support these programs at adequate levels, the public needs to understand both direct and indirect benefits, also known as private and public value.
- Public value descriptions need to be more than an elevator speech since the listener needs to connect emotionally with the benefits.
- Stories about individual patrons and how they have benefited provide a means of communicating both the private and public value of any public service.

Definitions: Translate the Language

- **Private Value:** Customers or patrons¹ who use a public service obviously receive a direct benefit from using it for themselves (or perhaps the entire family); otherwise they won't participate. This is called the private value of this service.
- **Public Value:** In addition to the direct benefits accruing to the users of a public service, often the general public receives indirect benefits as a result of the patron using the service. These indirect benefits are called public value.

Altruism and Enlightened Self-Interest

Whether people pay taxes or donate to public services out of altruism or enlightened self-interest, both require an appreciation of the public value.

- *Altruistic supporters* are increasingly asking: "Do the funds I donate or pay in taxes really make a difference?" These differences often include not only the private value to patrons but also the public value to the rest of the community. Only if the funds yield direct benefits to patrons that change their lives, can there be any indirect benefits to non-patrons.

- *Enlightened self-interested supporters* are those that ask: "Do the funds I pay in taxes or donate really benefit me and my family even when we don't use this particular public service?" Here the public value is extremely important to the supporter.

Almost all of us are both altruistic and enlightened self-interested supporters, so both the private and public value are important.

Program Evolution from Public Value Statement to Public Value Narrative

2013-2014: 15 libraries participated in a half-day program and created 15 short public value statements.

2015: Evaluation led to creating a comprehensive website with user-friendly tools and examples.

2016: Two libraries², each with 4-5 participants, participated in a six-part online learning circle.

The 2013-2014 statements and 2016 narratives fall within:

- Children, Literacy and School Success
- Workforce and the Economy
- Quality of Life and Sense of Community

Public Value Statements:

Here are two examples of public value statements developed in 2013-2014.³

- "Young children attending pre-school story time will be more ready to start school and be successful which not only benefits them but all of us by decreasing costs for special education or summer school classes."
- "Job seekers utilizing one-on-one employment help at the library will be more successful in getting a job which not only

¹ Public service organizations refer to citizens who use their programs and services in various ways that include and are not limited to, customer, patron, client, participant, etc. Terms are used interchangeably here.

² Falmouth and Scarborough

³ Other 2013-2014 public value statements are found on [UMaine Extension's Public Value Website](#) as well as the [Maine State Library's website](#).

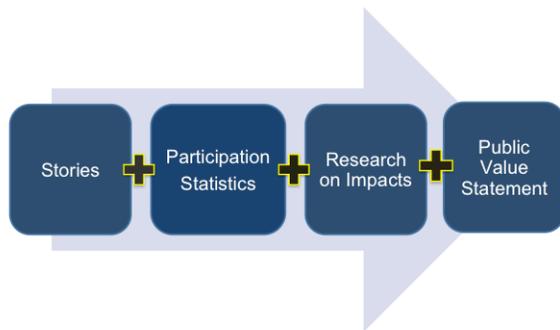
benefits them but all of us by making them productive members of our community.”

However, by themselves, public value statements do not move people to action as well as a story about one patron and backup information. So in 2015-16, the public value narrative approach was developed and tested.

Four Parts of a Public Value Narrative

Our Learning Circle discovered that ‘a narrative’ is more than just a captivating story. The narrative must make the point that the public service made a difference in the life of a patron (i.e., private value) **and** that this difference benefits non-patrons or partial patrons as well (i.e., public value).

Figure 1: Public Value Narrative Components



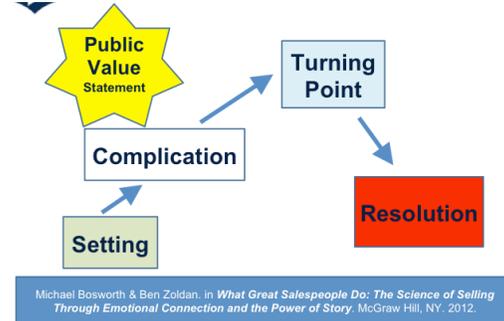
The Public Value Narrative has four parts.

1. A story about the way the service impacted a patron of the service to illustrate the private value;
2. A statistic on the number of patrons who experience a direct benefit, indicating the scope of the service. The statistic tells the listener that the story is not unique – that it is simply a real-life example that is repeated many times.
3. A public value statement which links the changes in the patron’s life due to the service in ways that generate indirect benefits for non-patrons; and
4. Credible research that the change in the patron’s life outlined in the public value statement is true.

Build A Story

To build a narrative, our Learning Circle needed to talk about ‘good’ stories: real stories about real people and ones with an emotional punch. Good stories hook the listener. Generally, the storyteller tailors that story for you, the listener.

Figure 2. Four Story Components Link to A Public Value Statement



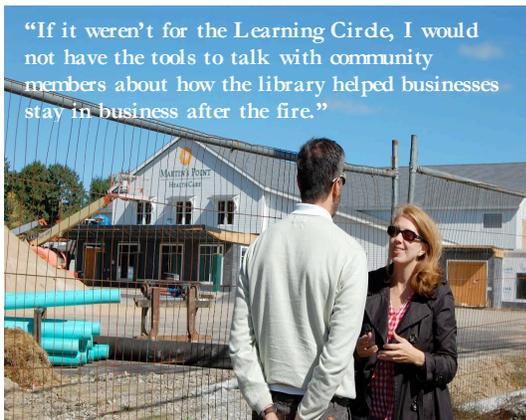
Let’s look at the fire at the Commons story told at the beginning. It illustrates how a story leads to a statement of value.

- *Setting:* Wendy’s business burned and she needed work space.
- *Complication:* Wendy was one of 18 businesses in the same fix that had customers, insurance forms to file, and employees who needed a job. She was in shock.
- *Turning Point:* Librarian offered workspace, internet access and basic business equipment.
- *Resolution:* With the librarian’s help, Wendy was able to ‘get back to work’ the next day, saving her \$4000 in rentals and employee benefits (private value).
- *Public Value:* Reduced the cost of the ‘social safety net’ of immediate lost jobs, and maybe increased local tax contributions and private spending.
- *Number:* Last year, Wendy’s library held lunch and learn workshops for small businesses, hosted the community’s chamber of commerce and buy local monthly meetings and helped many other firms.

Online Public Value Education Program: Process & Structure

- Two libraries each recruit a team of 4 to 6 staff and volunteers
- Online, 6-8 sessions, team members work between sessions
- Early sessions outline public value and building stories concepts
- Teams identify and build their own stories, use [UMaine Extension Public Value Website](#) as a resource, and offer suggestions to strengthen each other's narratives

Online Public Value Education Program: Strength of Learning Circle



- Building teams and networks of people with similar goals;
- Collaboration, both online and in between sessions;
- Confidence-building with on-going support; multiple sessions gave time to build stories and practice getting through fear of saying why you (the public) need to support our organization; and
- Develop actual narratives.⁴

The Public Writes Public Value

Most of the work that UMaine Extension has done on public value has focused on its own programs and on public libraries. Will this approach work with your public service? A dedicated team can try it and see.

- Discover your organization's exciting stories.
- Use [UMaine Extension's Public Value website](#) to express what your public service offers with more than numbers in an elevator speech.
- Write compelling narratives supported with statistics and research that say why it is really necessary to support your organization.
- Build a team that delivers the narratives in multiple ways and venues.

Services Available from UMaine Extension?

To strengthen UMaine's public value education program, the focus through 2018 will be on public libraries and UMaine Extension programs. Cohorts in both areas are suggesting tools, resources, and providing new insights that will benefit other public services.

Organizations interested in participating in a future learning circle can contact Jane Haskell, Extension Professor, jane.haskell@maine.edu or George Morse, Extension Faculty Associate, george.w.morse@maine.edu

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⁴ As of Oct 2016; planned online public access to these narratives in early 2017.