

6 Simple Tips For Communicating About Impact

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Note the following originally appeared as a two-part blog series as part of ONN's work to develop a [Sector Driven Evaluation Strategy](#). Combined with an Impact Message Builder template, these blogs have been turned into a resource to help you communicate about impact.

Nonprofits in Ontario often get asked about the technical details of their evaluation work — things like the survey response rate, or the amount of measurable change — but there are not as many opportunities to talk in depth about why we do evaluation and what we hope to learn. One of the tricks to succeeding at outcome evaluation happens before you even get to the stage of designing surveys or completing reports. It involves focusing your measurement on a small number of concrete, measurable outcomes that are more or less within your control. Picking those outcomes can be challenging, and explaining them effectively to your target audiences can take some practice, but it is important to being able to effectively get your message across. These are strategies designed to help you **get into the habit of talking about your work in impact language**. This blog offers a few simple tips that might be helpful, even if you don't have a lot of impact data yet.

Tip #1: Build your message to talk about the specific action you are taking

Many people in Ontario do not have a good understanding of the causes of complex social issues and the implications if they are not addressed. Nonprofits confront this lack of awareness all the time and it can be tempting to focus your organizational "pitch" at this level. We often want to stand on a rooftop and yell "this is a problem, and we need to acknowledge it!" However, your communication may not have the desired effect if your message stops at this point. You may have trouble convincing your audience to support you if you don't go on to explain why your approach to addressing the problem is impactful.

Here is a helpful example that shows how you might build a message that names the problem AND explains how your approach will make a difference:

- ***DON'T ONLY SAY: "Rates of spousal abuse continue to rise in our community. We need to take action."***
- ***ALSO SAY: "Our work is focusing on helping women build safety plans, which is a key step in helping them obtain and maintain stable housing."***

Tip #2: Explain why your plan for impact is viable

Some nonprofits seek support for an untested idea or an idea that has not been developed into a viable plan. They attempt to gain support on good intentions alone, and they do not present a solid case about why their approach is a smart investment. It is the difference between saying "we hope this work will help" and saying "we've considered the options and this approach has solid chance of success."

Here is another example of building a message that makes the case for impact:

- **DON'T SAY:** *"Our program will help youth succeed using social media."*
- **INSTEAD SAY:** *"We have a good track record in helping homeless youth build better social skills and set life goals. Over the last two years, we've helped 25 of our participants make progress towards goals related to education, employment, and family relationships. We are working hard to reach out to youth with addictions issues. Our online harm reduction approach seems to work especially well for this population."*

Tip #3: Avoid outlier stories that do not link strongly to your core outcomes

Many nonprofits run into trouble when they focus on stories that are not representative of the work they do. Most nonprofits care greatly about the people they serve and they often get to know their clients very well. Every now and then, one client will succeed in a dramatic and unexpected fashion. The program staff and volunteers who know that person well will be able to see how their efforts to support that person contributed to this success, but outsiders may not be able to connect the dots so easily. Sometimes, nonprofits become over-reliant on a small number of stories that are impressive in isolation, but not very clearly tied to their core purpose or very representative of their day-to-day work.

Another scenario:

- **DON'T ONLY SAY:** *"One of our participants ended up getting a great job through someone she met here at our basic life skills program!"*
- **INSTEAD SAY:** *"Our program helps people with intellectual disabilities develop life goals and access the supports they need to move forward on those goals. For example, we had one participant who used the plan we helped her develop to get a job working with one of our partners!"*

The first version seems to suggest that the program is focused on getting people jobs — even though it is a basic life skills program focused on helping people who are not yet ready for independent employment. The second version uses the same story, but explains clearly how the story is an illustration of the program's core work.

Tip #4: Build messages that demonstrate your willingness to collaborate and learn

Some nonprofits build messages that make their program seem like the *silver bullet* or the *lone wolf* that can single-handedly solve a complex problem. Often, the implication here is that the only reason the program has not ALREADY solved the problem is that partners and funders have been slow to recognize just how fantastic the program is. This kind of messaging can turn partners off. It fails to acknowledge the ways in which other organizations may have helped to set the stage for your success and it also suggests that you do not think you have any room to learn or improve. Ultimately, the best way to show that you have something unique and important to contribute is to demonstrate that you value the contributions of others.

Here is an example:

- **DON'T SAY:** *"We know this program is the solution. We've known it for a long time. The only problem is that you haven't been willing to give us enough money to do it."*
- **INSTEAD SAY:** *"Here is information about the impact we have been able to achieve to date. If you are able to help us expand the program, we would be able to reach x new people, including y people from a group we aren't reaching right now. This would help to fill a key gap in service that has been identified in local research."*

Tip #5: Build focused and consistent outcome messages

You would not trust a salesperson who told you that their miracle cleaning product was equally effective on kitchen counters, aluminum siding, and silk shirts. But nonprofits sometimes make the mistake of claiming too many outcomes — rather than zooming in on the specific, concrete things that their program does really well. Nonprofits take great pride in their willingness to be flexible as well as their commitment to meet the unique needs of each client they meet. And they often do achieve a wide range of outcomes. However, good communication about outcomes does not try to express the full spectrum of outcomes that are possible in principle. Programs communicate most effectively if they focus on three to five concrete, short-term outcomes that are really central to their core business.

A closely related mistake is being inconsistent with your outcomes language. Some programs, in an effort to please multiple funders, use very different outcomes language for some audiences than they do for others. Some even show "slippage" in their outcomes messaging within a single conversation.

Here are a few examples demonstrating both:

- **DON'T SAY:** *"I'm looking at the list of outcomes provided by our funder, and to be honest, our program achieves ALL of them."* **OR**
- **DON'T SAY:** *"Our drop-in helps newcomers be job ready. If that is what they want. Other times, it is more about helping them feel welcome in the community. Also, in some ways, our impact is just as much on our volunteers as it is on our participants. Really, though, this is all setting the stage for our advocacy work."*
- **INSTEAD SAY:** *"Our program's primary focus is creating a sense of belonging for newcomers. We define 'belonging' as including three key elements: participation in community life; access to support; and sense of connection to place."*

Tip #6: Build messages that connect with your audience

Have you ever had a friend return from an exotic destination and tell you that you simply must go see it for yourself? When that happens, you know your friend had a wonderful time, but you are not really any further ahead in deciding whether this destination would be a good fit with your interests, travel budget, or life goals. A tourism company would not last very long if it told potential visitors that it could

not possibly explain the value of a trip to their city. Good marketing goes beyond listing the features of the city and convinces you that a trip will help you learn about a new culture, forget the stress of your everyday life, or build family memories. In short, it focuses on outcomes that matter to you.

Sometimes, nonprofits claim that their impact cannot be captured through evaluation and must be personally experienced in order to be appreciated. However, if nonprofits are not willing to take the rich, complex, colourful reality of their programming and do the work necessary to explain it in terms that will resonate with their target audience, it should not come as a surprise if they do not then have a captive audience. Strong messages focused on outcomes can create opportunities to connect to your audience.

- **DON'T SAY:** *"We could send you stats, but they don't tell the real story. Our outcomes are different for every client, and they are changing all the time because we meet each client wherever they are. Our work is too complex for evaluation."*
- **INSTEAD SAY:** *We work with very vulnerable youth, and each of them face a complex and unique set of challenges. Our work is constantly evolving and we help youth in many different ways. However, our focus is always on using the arts to build life skills. Here is some data on the changes we have made in three asset areas that are particularly important. Here is a story that shows how these changes happened in the life of one youth. We are having an open house next month, if you are interested in learning more."*

Key Takeaways

Communicating about your program in a way that emphasizes impact is a great way to build support for your work. People find this kind of communication compelling because it answers the questions so *what?* and *why should I care?* The key things to remember are:

- ✓ **Focus.** Talk about a small number of outcomes that are in your wheelhouse. Talk about them consistently.
- ✓ **Listen.** Show that you know and use local research on social issues. Show that you know your unique niche and how your work complements and enhances what others are doing.
- ✓ **Share.** Show that you are committed to ongoing feedback. Show that you can contribute useful data to a shared impact report. Acknowledge your mistakes as well as your successes. Demonstrate that you have learned from your evaluation and that you are adapting.
- ✓ **Engage.** Seek out opportunities to talk about impact and to understand it in more depth. Using your own behaviour as an example, invite your funders and partners to focus, to know their context, and to share.

Impact Message Builder

Want to build strong messages about your impact? Use this handy fill-in-the-blanks & multiple choice message builder! Check as many options as apply and adapt to suit!

The Issue

- We know that _____ is an important social issue in our community. We aren't the only ones who think so. This is something that our community has agreed about. We know this because
 - independent local reports have identified it
 - your funding priorities identify it
 - Local, provincial or federal government has identified it
 - this specific statistic _____ is moving in a troubling direction
 - Our clients or users are showing us or telling us
 - media attention has been focused on it
- We know what we need to do in response to this issue (at least, in part). We need strategies like _____, because
 - independent local reports have identified it
 - best practices research has shown it
 - it is working in other communities
 - we've got to try something new!
- We also know that a lot of important work is already going on in our community on this issue, including _____.

Our Niche

- Our program/initiative/agency plays a unique role in addressing this problem. We:
 - serve _____ population that others don't reach
 - use _____ approach, which is unique in our community
 - complement and enhance the impact of our partners, including _____.
- We help to advance funder priority / issue of concern _____ by achieving the following specific, concrete, short term outcomes _____ (list no more than 3).
- We face challenges in doing this work effectively, due to
 - Limited resources
 - Complex needs of clients
 - Poverty, racism, or other systemic issues
- Despite these challenges, we have already made an important difference in this issue through our work, as demonstrated by
 - These evaluation findings _____

- These stories and examples (that are firmly tied to our three outcomes) _____

Our Plans

- We continue to learn. Based on our experiences in this type of work to date, we are planning the following updates or adaptations in the next funding cycle. _____
- We know we can make a measurable impact and / or contribute something of value to our shared efforts to address this issue, because
 - our program is well established and has solid program evaluation results
 - our program is experimental, and has shown promise in
 - pilot testing
 - other communities
 - other populations
 - our untested, highly innovative approach is worth taking a risk on. Current approaches just aren't working.
- If funded, we can contribute to advancing your work on this issue in an important way.
- We can generate concrete evidence of impact that you can use in your own reporting. We will do this using the following methods _____
- We can generate important new insights or contextual understanding in the following way _____
- We know that the unexpected can always happen. As we move forward, we are going to be keeping the following key questions or challenges in mind as we monitor our progress _____.