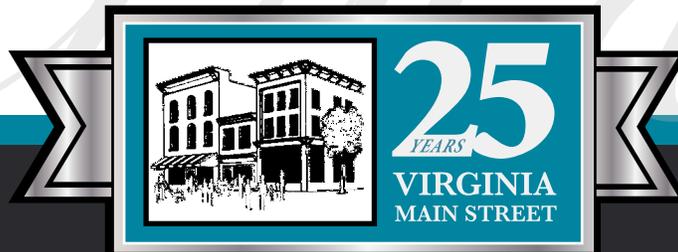


# Telling your Revitalization Story



Technical Brief  
Fall 2010



Virginia Main Street

# MONITOR



## Telling your Revitalization Story

As the television show's narrator said, "There are eight million stories in *The Naked City*," so your downtown district must be good for at least 50, right? Consider the history of your buildings, the successes of your emerging entrepreneurs, and the transitions you've seen first hand in the last decade. You have stories that can inspire action and provoke thought. They can entertain a crowd or leave a hole in your heart the size of vacant downtown lot.

In this issue of the *Virginia Main Street Monitor*, we'll encourage you to harness the power of story to

- highlight the unique and saleable aspects of your district,
- connect residents and visitors to your downtown community,
- engage stakeholders in a unifying vision of the future, and
- demonstrate the impact of your organization's work.

The development of a district narrative can take many shapes. It can be a collaborative or solitary effort, but at some point, for the story to get traction, it must be widely shared and accepted. The more effectively you engage volunteers and stakeholders in discovering the story, the more quickly they will internalize and share it.

Much of this technical brief will assume a collaborative process led by board and committee volunteers. Of course, consultants can help facilitate a process, but you must provide the leadership, drive, self-knowledge, and momentum.

We'll look at forms of telling your story and at some best practices for enlisting others in being your best storytellers. But the first look will be at the big question: "How do we know what our compelling story is?"

## The master narrative: Your district's story.

A master narrative—the overarching story of your district—places your downtown within the cultural shifts of its time, provides a context for interpreting change, and creates a framework through which merchants, property owners, and other stakeholders can share and create their own

individual stories. Your story is meant to connect people to the district; so it has to have an emotional appeal.

Once your unique narrative is uncovered and refined, almost everything else can fall into place more easily: media outreach, funder communications, board development, membership drives, public relations efforts, volunteer recruitment, and district branding. Sound too good to be true? Well, maybe it does, but without this fundamental organizational tool in place, everything else you do lacks synthesis and cohesion and is just plain harder.

## Establishing your master narrative

**Step 1: Assess the past.** There's a lot of historical information available about your downtown. The local historical society has probably even put out a book full of information and pictures. Each building and business provides its own set of dates and transitions. Your organization, formed at a particular point in the community's progress, has its own meaningful overlapping timeline.

But all of this data and information about your town lacks meaning. It needs a story to give sequence to the events and provide the 'why.' Why is your district the way it is today?

A timeline is valuable if you're not quite sure about the answer to this. If there's no timeline of important events in the development of your downtown, creating it is a good way to look for patterns. Historians and history buffs thrive on these patterns, and there is sure to be lots of local help available.

To reduce the history to only the most meaningful and significant facts and patterns, try giving your volunteer historian a challenge: develop a half-page summary of the history of the development of your commercial district.

**Step 2: Portray the future.** The past is an important building block, but there are others. Each story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and you're not at the end yet—not by any means. Project the story forward.

You may already have an organizational vision established for the district. Your downtown story must lead to this future. The vision of the future must be specific and aspirational. You may need to use the process of developing your story as an opportunity to reconnect the community to the vision. Or, if you don't have one, there's no better time to formalize one.

**Step 3: Connect the dots.** By selecting the most important sequences of events shaping your downtown and by connecting causes and effects, you create a plot—something that people can grab hold of when thinking about your streets and buildings, your merchants, and the shape of your downtown.

### Story creation prompts:

- Who are the key players, events, or trends that have meaningfully acted on the district?
- How does the strategy for the future reflect, build upon, or capitalize on the past?
- What catalytic role has your organization played? What have you sparked or fostered?
- What have been key turning points?
- Specifically, how will the organization affect change moving forward?
- How can individuals, businesses, and community organizations become a part of this change?

### The Importance of the success narrative

People want to be part of a success story, and the struggle is an important part of that connection—the fan of the team who went years without a pennant, the music lover who knew the band before they got national radio play.

This works in the favor of downtown revitalization. We connect with stories in which the hero overcomes obstacles and barriers; that's when we stand up and cheer.

Without the story of the progress you've made and how you're planning to reach your destination, it's a lot harder to excite and engage volunteers, advocates, and donors. Yet, painting the picture of this successful future is only part of your organization's task. The other is letting everyone around you know what part they can play in creating that success.

This is where your Main Street organization and its strategies come in. The initiatives you are undertaking are critical in catalyzing movement toward that future. Here, you are providing the action. You connect the past with the future by showing why revitalization efforts have been needed, how they have been successful, and how they will make a difference for tomorrow.

**Step 4: Reflect.** Now, make the takeaway overt. The members of your audience have probably already come to the same conclusion as you through your story, but by reflecting, you reinforce your interpretation with them. The moment of reflection can carry emotional weight or stress a cause-effect relationship. Some examples might sound like, “It was because we reinvested in the hotel that 5 new businesses opened on a block that was once entirely vacant. Today, we look to the next opportunity...” Or, “Now in his thirtieth year of business, Mr. Mallory has given the business to his daughter who has stepped up as chair of the economic restructuring committee. Downtown continues to work for local family businesses.”



Click the photograph to see radio and television storyteller Ira Glass from *This American Life* on telling a basic story, or search for it on YouTube.

## This Main Street Life

*This American Life* storyteller Ira Glass gives a great primer on using anecdotes. In a video available on [YouTube](#) he stresses the natural suspense created when you tell events in a sequence. It's probably the most natural structure for a story. But for the anecdote to carry any weight, he says, it needs a “moment of reflection.” That moment of reflection can connect a smaller story to the larger vision for your district. It can connect the district to your audience.

## Numbers help tell a story.

Reinforce your story with ‘measurables.’ For instance, if your future is one involving your district as a livable, 24-hour community, then tell how many hours a day there is currently activity on the street, how many people live in the district, or how many stores or restaurants are open at 8 p.m. The more you communicate measurable goals, the more easily you'll engage people in helping to meet them.

## Putting it in Technicolor: Connect anecdotes to the master narrative

Now that you've got the master narrative of the district, what individual stories illustrate it?

Downtown is a gathering place, and every day, those gathering in shops, on the street, and in local eateries share news about the people and places they know. People love to talk, so make their stories work for you. Which stories exemplify the community story you've formalized? Does the one about a new customer who recently moved to the area? How about a historical one about why someone got into business years ago? Or a story of why someone invested in a downtown building.

By engaging merchants, local leaders, and community groups in understanding and moving the district forward, you encourage them to make it part of *their own stories*. These testimonials can be even more effective than the comments of paid staff and board members. Your job is to collect these stories and share them with others, always drawing the line back to the larger community story and goals. Share them in both informal and more official ways.

## Getting your story out there

There's no one path for getting your district's story out there. There are many, and you should be using all of the possible avenues.

### 1 Word of Mouth

Word of Mouth is perhaps the most important and the most overlooked asset in getting your revitalization story out in the community. Consider how you can encourage people that you work with on a daily basis to spread word of your community's revitalization efforts within their own networks.

#### Board and Committee

**Members** Board and committee members should be able (and willing) to talk effectively about your organization as well as their individual efforts within it. Give them the tools to do it. You might consider handing out and reviewing with them wallet cards featuring important information, organizational brochures that they can pass along, or even business cards featuring the vision and mission of the organization. The physical document serves as a tangible reminder that they serve as organizational ambassadors to the community.

**Merchants** Encourage leaders among the district's merchants to consider how the Main Street story intersects with their own.

Write up a profile of the merchant in an attractive way—as part of a brochure or a one piece flyer. When the merchant uses it to tell his or her story, he or she will effectively communicate the story of the district and the Main Street organization.

When you hang a promotional flyer in a merchant's window, talk up the project with the merchant and his or her staff. Again, connect the project with your larger goals and encourage them to spread the word.

**Property Owners:** A property owner who has just completed a façade improvement is an ideal spokesperson for downtown revitalization and the design committee. Make sure people know what was behind the visible improvement. A before-and-after photo display and attractive signage are two ways to spread the word. Carry

the story one step beyond appearances: encourage the property owner to find measures of the project's success (increases in property value, rental incomes, good press) and to share them with his neighbors and friends.

**Stakeholders and Partners:** Main Street organizations are community convening points at which interests and goals of a variety of partners merge. By building long-term, mutually supportive relationships with partners, you can enlist them in helping to tell your story. These outside testimonials carry greater weight.

**Event attendees:** People will talk about a successful event. Work hard to visually, emotionally, and candidly connect that event to your organization. Incorporate your story as part of the official program, set up an informational tent, and train volunteers to communicate about the organization and goals for the district. At the end of the day, there should be no question in participants' minds about who put it on.



### 2 Organizational Marketing Materials

Maximize the benefit of your existing communication tools, telling your story or a piece of it in a short form suitable for the particular document. A sentence or two on how your organization is making a difference can be incorporated into nearly every piece of communication that you send out.

**Newsletters:** If someone were reading your most recent newsletter for the first time, how much would they know



23 E. Main Street  
P.O. Box 372  
Berryville, VA 22611  
Phone 540 955-4001  
Fax 540 955-0909

manager@berryvillemainstreet.org  
www.berryvillemainstreet.org

Newsletter is published by Berryville Main Street and issued four times a year—December, March, June, and September. Its purpose is to provide news about people and events in and around the historic district; promote local business; and raise awareness about the many ways a vibrant downtown contributes to a community's quality of life. Berryville Main Street is a 501(c)3 organization and part of Virginia Main Street since 1992. The Main Street program was launched in 1985 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to encourage growth and revitalization of commercial districts in towns across the United States. To order a subscription or advertise contact: manager@berryvillemainstreet.org

*The Masthead of Berryville Main Street's newsletter includes the publishing schedule, how to contact the organization, and information on the mission of the organization and the purpose of the newsletter itself.*

about your district's story? Would they get a clear picture of your organization? How does this regular communication emotionally connect readers to the shared vision of the district?

**Brochures:** Brochures can age quickly, so consider the lifespan: what information in it will date it? You'll either have to leave it out or create a system of frequent printings. No matter what the brochure is covering, set space aside for a brief version of your story and a call to action: where can people get more information? How can they get involved? A specific brochure on public art or a walking tour of historic sites can effectively promote the organization as well as the district.

**Business cards and stationery:** A brief version of how your organization is shaping a successful district can be part of any item you print, including stationery and business cards. You're paying for the piece anyway—make it do as much work as possible.

**Website:** Your homepage or landing page is your electronic first impression. While you may want this valuable electronic real estate to be loaded with information, don't crowd out a powerful message. Who are you and how can web visitors be a part of your success story?

### 3 Planned Presentations

Service clubs and churches continue as primary avenues for civic engagement. By making presentations on the downtown story, you can tap important resources in the community as well as inform opinion shapers. If you have large employers that hold regular staff meetings, ask if you might do an informational session at one.

Presentations should be brief and informative. Use pictures to put a face on the district. Recognize audience members who are already involved. Tailor the talk to the specific interests of the organization. (Use anecdotes that relate to them in illustrating the master narrative.) And don't forget a call to action. Let them know how they can be involved.

It should not just be the executive director who makes presentations. Enlist volunteer board and committee members in serving as a speaker's bureau.

*Old Town Winchester's new website provides visitors and residents with options for exploring the community, but it also dedicates the prime space to presenting Winchester as they intend for it to be discovered.*



## 4 Traditional Media

**Print Media** Don't overlook time-honored traditions of print media that can still work for you: articles, letters to the editor, and paid advertising. Build a relationship with reporters who cover issues related to your efforts. Provide quick responses to requests for information from the press. Encourage stakeholders and supporters to communicate positively with the community about downtown revitalization through letters to the editor.

Print advertising still works. By including it in your marketing mix, you can support an important community institution—the local newspaper. Regional and statewide travel and leisure magazines can also deliver your message to a targeted market within a short day's drive of your community.

**Radio** A short version of your downtown story can easily be built into public service announcements. Also, get on the schedule for the local radio interview show.

**Television** If you expect television coverage at a planned event, go ahead and plan where the cameras go. By setting aside a dedicated place for a news crew to interview leaders, you can control the background shot as well as provide a quiet place for spokespeople to focus on their message.

Take advantage of cable access programming to spotlight your history, accomplishments and vision. Many communities give nonprofit groups free access to production staff and equipment. Enlist a trained journalist or media specialist to give your spokespeople tips and training for their on-camera appearances.



# The 4 Cs of Telling your Story

### Clear

You must know what you are trying to say. Then use very specific, distinct words and phrases to say it. Give examples and relate your activities to results. Restate your point for clarity and emphasis.

### Concise

The more you say, the more opportunities you have to be confusing, so keep it short. Leaving it short often leaves room for questions and further clarification; it opens up a dialogue.

### Consistent

Reinforce your ideas by restating them. Make sure everyone in your organization is on the same page, delivering the same message. That consistency should stretch across the organization's activities as well. If activities aren't consistent with the message and the mission, then you probably shouldn't be engaged in them.

### Careful

Carefully craft your central message to be easy to understand. Carefully create activities that support this message. Carefully cultivate media relationships that are sympathetic to your mission, and carefully choose your words to stay on message.

## Becoming a **Powerful** Spokesperson

These tips on becoming a powerful spokesperson and more communications strategies for nonprofit organizations are available from the SPIN Project at [www.SPINproject.org](http://www.SPINproject.org).

**Project confidence.** Projecting confidence is key to winning over an audience. Being nervous while speaking to the public is normal, and many say it's positive to feel that way before you speak. But showing it is another thing—that's why it's important to project confidence (even if you're not feeling it). People believe in those who are perceived as confident, know the issue, and are personally connected or affected by it. Remember to stand tall, or if sitting, sit forward in your chair. Commanding a strong presence assures your audience that you are a credible spokesperson and shows that you believe in yourself and your expertise, that what you have to say deserves and needs to be heard.

**Keep it short.** You don't need to explain everything to be heard. Rather, it's better to keep it brief. Think about what you want to say beforehand, create short soundbites (eight seconds in length) that capture your main points and your key message about the issue or campaign. And practice, practice, practice.

**Stay on Message:** It's important from the very beginning that you stay on message. If you are responding to a question, respond with your message, not just with the answer. Most media outlets will pull out a soundbite, so give them one. Answer the question, but do so with context. With practice, this reframing becomes—and sounds—natural.



**Personalize your message.** Add something personal at the beginning of your soundbite to create more of a human connection between you and your audience. Be sure that this is a genuine connection will resonate your audience.

**It's OK to say that you don't know.** If you don't know the answer, it's OK to say so. Remember nothing is "off the record," but it's better to be honest about what you don't know than to say "no comment." Keep it slow and steady. Remind yourself to speak slowly. It is OK to pause and take a deep breath. Practice annunciating, and even over-annunciating, each syllable so that your words will be clearly articulated. If you catch yourself speaking too quickly, it's OK to pause, take a breath and start again. Remember, slow and steady.

Keeping it slow also helps keep you steady under more aggressive or difficult interview questions. It's always better to look more reasonable than your "opponents" or a somewhat hostile interviewer. Calm, cool and collected is the way to go.

The goal is to learn how to do this while also being confident and strong in your message, from beginning to the end. So **practice, practice, practice!**

## 5 The Marketing Materials of Others

Cross promote. Give logos, images, and copy to others who benefit from marketing your district to incorporate your story in their documents. Find creative ways to let your supporters brand their material with the community's downtown revitalization story. It might be done through a special version of your logo or tagline that could be as simple as "Meet me in historic downtown" or "Another leader in revitalizing downtown."

## 6 Social Media

Be a community connector. Use your Twitter account and Facebook page to illustrate the success narrative of your community. Showcase your examples. Social media is more effective when you engage your followers with related efforts that they will be interested in, not just in your promoting your own direct efforts. Save time by using a coordinated. Save time by using a coordinated approach: use one service to update other services.

In addition to posting to your own sites, active participation in the social media presence of other related organizations is another way to promote your efforts and will help guide visitors to you. And remember to add personality to your posts. Give the posts the same brand feeling you want your downtown to carry.

Maintaining an online presence can feel like more work than you bargained for at first, but once you get a rhythm of activity it's not that hard. But don't start an online presence that you're not going to maintain, and if you've got something stagnant on the web, take it down.

## Tips for constructing a news release

The news release is a first step in working with traditional media. Try these *Helpful Hints for Passionate PR* provided by our friends at the Virginia Tourism Corporation.

- Have your contact information in plain site at the top or bottom of the page
- No more than two pages – preferably one
- Use a headline to announce the news in title case, under 80 characters
- Use a strong lead sentence (less than 25 words), simply stating the news you have to announce and make your points in the first paragraph.
- Make sure to address the basics—what, when, who, where, why
- Keep sentences short, with three to four sentences per paragraph
- Never use promotional language—“the best new...,” “unbelievable,” etc...
- Write succinctly and well
- Avoid use of first person outside of direct quotations
- Include a quote from a major player
- Customize the release for your intended recipient
- “For more information, visit [Web site] or call [phone number with area code]”
- End with # # #
- Proofread carefully!

## What's it got do with the price of tea in China?

Be opportunistic. If local, state, or even national media attention is focused on an issue relevant to your district's story, provide media outlets with information, quotations, and contacts in your community. Watch for emerging hot-topics and prepare a press release that brings the story home. Newspapers today don't have the staff they used to, and as a consequence will more often run stories written by wire services such as the Associated Press or Reuters. These can't provide a local perspective. Providing a news release can encourage local papers to quickly and easily augment their articles or follow them up.

Or, if the topic is already being covered in a general way locally, communicate directly with the reporter covering the story.



*Take your presentation on the road as they did in Uptown Martinsville. A well-structured walking tour in partnership with the local historical society connects the past with the present and future. Speaking of the future, Stephen (at right) looks like a he may serve as chair of the design committee.*



## Additional storytelling resources on the Web

[www.agoodmanonline.com](http://www.agoodmanonline.com).

Andy Goodman is an expert in public interest communications. Many of his tips on telling your organizational story have been compiled in his book, *Storytelling as Best Practice*. You can order that here, or piece them together from a decades worth of archived Free Range Thinking newsletters.

[www.wearemedia.org](http://www.wearemedia.org)

This wiki resource for nonprofits coordinated by the go-to technology resource NPower includes a whole section on storytelling under the "Strategic Social Media" module.

[www.presentationzen.com](http://www.presentationzen.com)

Garr Reynolds' blog reaches beyond how to design good PowerPoint slides, highlighting the elements of both good presentations and good storytelling.

[www.TED.com](http://www.TED.com)

TED (Technology, Education, Design) Talks are the big league. Take a moment for some storytelling inspiration by watching by a speaker on a topic that interests you.

[www.dipity.com](http://www.dipity.com)

Use this online tool to integrate images and updates from your social media sights into a timeline to help show the progression of your district.

[www.SPINproject.org](http://www.SPINproject.org)

This nonprofit organization provides excellent communication tools, freely available to nonprofit purposes under a Creative Commons license.



The Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development's Main Street Program provides downtown revitalization technical assistance to Virginia communities, using the National Main Street Center's Four Point Approach™ (Organization, Promotion, Design & Economic Restructuring) to comprehensive preservation-based revitalization of historic commercial districts.

### Jeff Sadler

Program Manager  
Jeff.Sadler@dhcd.virginia.gov  
(804) 371-7040

### Kyle Meyer

Program Administrator  
Kyle.Meyer@dhcd.virginia.gov  
(804) 371-7041

### Doug Jackson

Program Administrator  
Douglas.Jackson@dhcd.virginia.gov  
(276) 780-3244

### Web site

[www.dhcd.virginia.gov/MainStreet/](http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/MainStreet/)

### Blog

[dhcdvms.wordpress.com/](http://dhcdvms.wordpress.com/)



**VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING  
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[www.dhcd.virginia.gov](http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov)

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