

# Why Telling the Right Brand Story Matters So Much

By Fritz Grutzner

Use these keys to connect more powerfully with supporters.

**W**hen it comes to branding, many nonprofits are rightfully suspicious of borrowing terms and approaches from the for-profit world. Profits, shareholder value, and market share don't have exact parallels in the nonprofit world. The measure of success is always how well nonprofits deliver on their mission. How many kids did they help? How much nature did they protect? How many communities did they strengthen? Whatever the goal, this is the ultimate measure of success.

To fund this mission, a nonprofit must have a compelling story. Donors get countless requests each year for their support. The staff gets pulled in hundreds of directions. A compelling story can excite them, motivate them to action, and align them.

The story is the emotional core of a nonprofit's brand. Research shows that a strong brand can cause people to feel deep emotional connections to seemingly innocuous products and services in the for-profit world. And in comparison to these for-profit markets, nonprofits have an enormous advantage in emotional equity.

Every nonprofit is driven by a deeply emotional reason to solve some problem plaguing our world. The challenge is creating a consistent frame for the fundamental emotional connection nonprofits make with their supporters.

These are the three keys to a strong brand story: It must be grounded in emotion. It must be consistent over time. And it must be true.

“Nonprofits have an enormous advantage in emotional equity.”

## 1. Ground It in Emotion with Archetypes

The most effective way to ground your organization's story in emotion is to look at “archetypal” stories. These are stories that have been around for thousands of years and are deeply embedded in our consciousness. They build on universal human truths and deliver on emotional needs we all share.

C. G. Jung used the term “archetype” to refer to ideas and characters appearing in stories from different eras and cultures around the world. One example is the story of the hero with a mortal vulnerability, such as the Greek story of Achilles and the German story of Siegfried.

In Achilles' case, his mother, Thetis, dipped him in the river Styx to make him invincible everywhere but on his heel where she held him. And Siegfried, after a battle with the dragon Fafnir, was invincible everywhere the blood of the dragon touched his body. Unfortunately for Siegfried, a small linden leaf had fallen on the small of his back, leaving him vulnerable on that spot. These vulnerabilities prove fatal to both Achilles and Siegfried.

## Examples of Powerful Archetypes

Here are some archetypal figures that can be woven into an organization's brand story. Which one resonates most with you and your organization?



**The Mentor.** The mentor acts as a wise sage, guiding others and helping them learn who they are and what they can become.



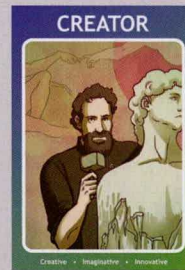
**The Caregiver.** Often having a deeply empathetic nature, archetypal caregivers help others find security and comfort as they navigate their world.



**The Hero.** The courageous fighter gathers others to help battle injustice, ignorance, and other wrongs for the greater good.



**The Rebel.** This character circumvents societal rules, acting as a catalyst to upset unjust systems, cultures, or authority figures.



**The Creator.** Seeing the world from new perspectives, the artistic character inspires people to use their own imagination to create a better world.

A hero with a vulnerability is common throughout the world not because these cultures were consciously stealing from each other. Rather, these stories touch on fundamental human emotions: our fear of mortality and our desire to achieve something meaningful in our lives through action.

Jung identified seven archetypes but left open the possibility that more could be discovered. Margaret Mark and Carol Pearson expanded on Jung's archetypes in their work, *The Hero and the Outlaw*, and identified 12 specific archetypes, demonstrating how these could be used as a basis for brand stories.

When an organization identifies the best archetypal story for its brand, the results are incredibly powerful. As executives and board members re-examine their nonprofit with fresh eyes and connect it to a single archetype, all the pieces of the organization's brand strategy can be brought together around a single emotion that drives the connection to the brand.

A central benefit of archetypal stories is that they're told constantly in our culture. Thus, brands only need to evoke the bare essentials of an archetypal story and people can conjure up the rest. When supporters actively fill in your story's details, they're more invested in the core emotions of your brand.

## 2. Be Consistently "On Brand" Over Time

According to a recent Harris poll, the Girl Scouts of the USA is the second most familiar nonprofit brand in the US. Behind only the Red Cross, the Girl Scouts has seen its brand equity increase every year because of a growing connection with the public.

That emotional connection is the product of many great programs that help hundreds of thousands of young girls celebrate amazing achievements. It's grounded in an extremely consistent emotional story that permeates every action of the Girl Scouts.

From Frances Hesselbein's first year as the CEO of the Girl Scouts, the organization's leaders have been absolutely clear about their mission: "To help each girl reach her own highest potential."

This mission signals a strong mentor archetype. It evokes all the kindness, wisdom, and intelligence that we expect from this archetypal figure who helps young heroes achieve their dreams.


The story's emotional impact and Frances Hesselbein's effective leadership have woven this consistent brand into the fabric of the organization's culture. Long after her departure as CEO, the brand endures.

## 3. Build a True Story from the Core Out

Nonprofits like the Girl Scouts build their brands from the core. If their senior staff, board of directors, and front line employees don't grasp the emotional core of their brand, how will they ever appeal to their supporters in a consistent and meaningful way?

To uncover your archetype, start with key executives and your organization's founders. Examine the history of your brand. Find the emotional connection that formed your organization and links you with your most ardent supporters. This connection is the foundation of your brand.

Administer surveys with your staff to gain insight into what archetypes might make the most sense for how you're perceived internally. Whatever story you're planning on telling the world, it must be true to those who will be telling it every day.

The emotional need every nonprofit fulfills with a strong brand story can align internal staff and energize supporters behind your brand. Most important, though, a strong brand can drive you toward completing your organization's mission. 

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### The Brand & the Story

Read more about branding and storytelling at [NonprofitWorld.org/members](http://NonprofitWorld.org/members). For example:

**How to Transform Your Brand** (Vol. 28, No. 5)

**Are You Following the 4 Cs of Branding?** (Vol. 25, No. 3)

**Telling the Story: Exploring Clients' Lives** (Vol. 17, No. 1)

**The Most Important Question You Should Be Asking Right Now** (Vol. 27, No. 2)

**Defining Your Leader Brand** (Vol. 25, No. 2)

**A Conversation with Francis Hesselbein** (Vol. 15, No. 5)

**The Nonprofit Branding Exercise** (Vol. 26, No. 1)

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