

How To Change Your World By Sharing Stakeholder Stories

*by Peter Pula
Axiom News
June 2010*



©2010, Axiom News Inc.

This e-book is protected under the Creative Commons license.
Please feel free to share this ebook in its original form, in whole or in part, with some notation about who wrote it and where you found it.

This e-book is available for free by visiting axiomnews.ca.

How To Change Your World By Sharing Your Stakeholders' Stories

A lot of us have been doing *corporate* news for a long time. We have newsletters, websites, now electronic newsletters. All of us have heard the social media hype. Some of us have waded into it. Some have figured out how to make it useful. Some of us just keep doing it in the hope that answers come soon. Some of us run for the hills and discount the stuff altogether.

How do we communicate in a world of crazy interactivity, and answer the call to provide leadership and direction? We are after all still expected to provide clarity and a sense of direction.

How do we deal with the fact that despite our efforts to communicate, and murmurs that we inundate people with too much communication, people still say we're not communicating enough?

What does it tell us that people rush to the social media world to express

themselves, to take back the press so to speak and turn it to their own desires and ends.

Fact is, the communication-rich environment in which we lead has changed drastically. The sea change has been a result of the explosion in communications technology. There has been a shift in who has communications power. The speed with which things change is faster. Where the impetus for change comes from is less predictable than before. Sometimes it comes from leaders, but more and more it comes from self-organization at the grassroots level.

As a result, the way we lead is now inextricably tied to how we communicate.

As leaders and communicators we are more compelled to connect and catalyze than we are to direct and tell.

The trouble with most corporate communications, and why there is

*... the way we lead
is now inextricably
tied to how we
communicate.*

such a massive proliferation of hybrid communications tools being used out there is this great need to be heard.

Most corporate communications aren't designed to listen. They are designed to tell.

We need a new paradigm.

On the one hand, there is traditional corporate communication: crafted messaging designed for getting our message across. It's one-way. Very rigid.

On the other hand there are social media conversations we don't control. These conversations have a life of their own and they are about relationships. While meaning can be made through these conversations, it's not necessarily about our view of the world. Social media is incredibly co-creative. Very fluid.

Stakeholder News bridges the gap. Together, corporate communications,

Stakeholder News, and social media networking, provide a complete and powerful way to get our arms around communications strategies that simultaneously lead, listen, and co-create new realities.

A communications method suited for the times will get all of these things done. And there is one critical starting point around which everything else hinges. It's this:

Engage Your Stakeholders

Engage people. What I'm talking about here is actually talking with people. Actually asking them questions.

Here's something to try. Take a look at your corporate communications and tally up how many different people are quoted, and I mean really, credibly quoted. How many people's stories have actually been told? How many people's voices does your communication include, amplify, and honour?

That's what Stakeholder News gets done. Your Generative Journalists interview people, in person, on the phone, ask them questions about their experiences with your organization — as employees, customers, owners, and stakeholders. Then they report those stories.

It's not how many people you talk at, it's how many people you ask questions of.

Have you or your kids ever been in the newspaper? What happens? Friends tell you they saw your story. Some of them clip the article and photo out and bring them to you so you can have extra copies. They tell you they saw your pictures. Point is your story becomes part of a bigger story. We like to share and relate through stories.

This is a key marker of a Stakeholder News program. It shares lots, and lots, and lots of people's stories about their experience, hopes, challenges with regards to your mission and their involvement in it.

And that's the turn. It's not how many people you talk *at*, it's how many people you ask questions of, and how many people's stories

you can facilitate being told.

When you engage people like that you build community in a real hurry.

Here's the thing. How many of you are told your organization doesn't communicate enough? Lots of us. How do we respond? Often we put out more material. Guess what!? We've missed the point. It's not that people want to hear from us, it's that they want to be heard, and to hear from each other.

Stakeholder News provides the mechanism for causing that to happen. Stakeholder News isn't about sharing the leadership's message, it's about sharing news about the community as a whole.

Face it, there is more going on than you, in the executive suite, can possibly think about. You've got to believe in people and trust people. You also know there are areas of expertise you know very little about. How on Earth can you communicate that stuff anyway?

Point is people on the front-line can. But, and this is a big but, they aren't communications people, they haven't got the time to craft and share their stories in a way that makes meaning over time.

Good Stakeholder News reporting can do that, Generative Journalists, working for you, can do that. Their work engages people, tells their story in a credible, honouring way.

That's the first point. The stories have to be their stories, what they want to tell and what they want to hear, not necessarily what you imagine they want to hear.

Asking Catalytic Questions

Okay. So now we know we have to engage. Does that mean we're looking at a communications free-for-all? Nope. That's where the questions come in.

There has been some brilliant work done on the power of questions. Sure it goes all the way back to Socrates, but recently the Appreciative Inquiry and Positive Psychology folks have been giving us a tonne to work with on the power of questions.

This is huge.

Let's say we're talking to a lot of people and writing their stories. Fine. If we go willy-nilly at it we're not adding any value or meaning.

Organizations go in the direction of what they study.

What they study begins with the questions they ask.

The questions you ask lead to stories and experiences.

And the stories shape the culture and the direction you take.

Clearly, the questions you ask your stakeholders are absolutely

*What you ask
creates your world.*

critical. What you ask creates your world. Asking questions, then honouring and amplifying the answers, is the, *the* best way to co-create the future your community imagines.

Ask about what is working, or what people can imagine in an ideal situation and what will you create? More of what's working. Ideal situations. What you focus on expands.

If you ask generative questions seeking the greatest possibilities, you will get news about the greatest possibilities. Not only that, each person you interview will be energized by the reframing, affirmation and imagineering.

Here are a couple of examples. Answer these and see how you feel:

Think about a time when you felt your work was making a difference in someone else's life.

Tell me a story about what you were doing. How did it feel?

What circumstances made that experience possible?

What could be done to make this happen more often?

What trends do you see that excite you most about the future of this organization?

What have you seen that suggests your organization is poised to make the most of those opportunities?

Can you tell me about something a colleague has done to make that possible?

Truth is, asking the right questions are the most important thing a journalist can do. There is probably no profession on the planet so well placed to change the mind of the world than journalists.

*Create a world
full of the greatest
new realities.*

Journalists are paid to ask questions and craft the resulting stories.

Put those skills to work in a purpose-driven organization like yours and imagine the new found capacity for creating a vibrant, meaningful future.

Investigative journalism has come to mean you uncover things people are trying to hide and to expose wrong doing. Blah, blah, boring. That's not really being helpful any more. There is so much transparency endemic to the system these days transparency darn near takes care of itself.

What if, instead, you had Generative Journalists discovering your organization's strengths and the hopes people have for their contribution every day?

With the scope and reach of a full functioning Stakeholder News program, you could create a world full of the greatest new realities.

It's a big part of the change process — getting people to think in new ways. Beating them over the head with our great ideas is not the way to get them thinking in new ways. In fact what it often does is get them defending old ideas.

Instead, asking questions that cause people to think new things about what is working, what they'd like to see more of and how to get there is the way to change the mind, and direction, of your organization.

Change your mind, change everything.

Check out these resources on the power of questions.

[*Appreciative Inquiry: A Postive Revolution in Change*](#)

[*The Encyclopedia of Positive Questions*](#)

Also consider booking one of our Power of Appreciative Questions Presentations. It's an interactive, fun, learning experience. The

presentation provides people an opportunity to experience that power. As we go through the exercise you can see the lights go on and the energy in the room change palpably.

Writing Well By Focusing On Strengths

Okay, writing well. Journalists have at their disposal 200 years worth of tools to draw on. They also have decisions to make when it comes to writing.

How do you handle quotes and sources, structure your headlines and leads, story structure, tense, language choices, style guides? All good stuff. When you apply these well-worn techniques you are off to the races. We have the beginnings of a great engagement tool, knowledge-discovering, culture-shaping, change tool.

When we coined the phrase Generative Journalism we picked that prefix, 'generative' for a couple of reasons. Journalism can be

degenerative — and frankly that's the big reason mainstream journalism is bombing. Mainstream journalism got really good at taking things down and apart, but rarely gets to the work of figuring out how to make things better. It focuses too often on deficits not on assets. Weaknesses not strengths. Much of it has become cynical, sceptical, preachy, moralizing. It became deconstructive, and yes, degenerative. Verdict's in. People aren't buying it.

Positive journalism doesn't do it really either. Positive journalism would be an improvement, but it might not have teeth. Generative Journalism has teeth — it has to produce something new, give birth to something, generate something to earn its name.

Focus on, write about, what's not working and what do you get? More of what is not working. Focus on, write about, what is working and what to do you get? More things working.

*You already have
everything you
need to solve your
problems or live up
to your potential.*

What a Generative Journalist assumes is that everything you need to solve your problems or live up to your potential is already resident somewhere in your organization or network. Generative Journalism gets investigative in a hurry because we're looking for assets. We go out on a journey of discovery. We're looking for strengths. You could call it strengths-based journalism.

We do that by asking questions, the more the better, and sharing the results of our inquiry, our investigation, in the form of emotive, real-life stories.

Okay. We've covered the big adds to corporate communications:

1. Engage Your Stakeholders
2. Ask Catalytic Questions
3. Generative Journalism and Writing Well

These are big components but they need some structural underpinning to keep the show moving.

It's Not News Until It's Published

You've got to deliver! And, you have to do it in a systematic way.

All that good stuff goes for nought, falls silent, leaves its potential on the table if you can't get it out.

News, journalism, is as much about systematic publishing and purveying as it is about the stories. You have to amplify the experiences you capture and create in the storytelling process.

News is going on all the time. That's why you've got a big commitment to make. Newspapers that only come out when they want to don't do very well. People can't tune into their favourite show if it doesn't

*News is going on
all the time. That's
why you've got
a big commitment
to make.*

come on at the same time. There are inherent strengths to a consistent, frequent delivery of news. It provides people a sense of constant movement and direction. It builds your audience over time. It provides you ongoing feedback.

There will be high news times and low news times, but you learn from all such times, and retain your audience over time when you publish consistently. A commitment to a regular publishing schedule catalyzes a few other things too.

If you make the commitment you have to find stories. You've got a hole to fill. You would be amazed at some of the remarkable things we've discovered and caused to happen because we were forced to make a story deadline and didn't have a story. It forces you to find stories. If you can slough it off and say there is no news today, guess what, there won't be. There won't be any tomorrow or the next day either. That's likely the number one reason why most outfits don't already have a Stakeholder News program — it's too much work and you can slough it off, so you do. And guess what? In the

Stakeholder News game, no news is bad news — it means nothing is going on! Thing is: You have to go find it, coax it out, co-create it with your community.

When people are repeatedly and constantly engaged in story interviews and seeing their stories published, they start to think differently about their work. Things they would have thought mundane, because they are in it every day, they realize are of use to other people. A storytelling culture starts to emerge when people are pressed regularly to share their stories.

As they engage in the question-and-answer dance, people begin to form a new frame of mind about what they are working on. They share more. When people start sharing their stories and see that they are valued, that it is safe, encouraging, and even fun to share their stories, your culture quickly becomes more open, and innovation and resilience result.

You don't accomplish this by doing a story here and there in a

quarterly newsletter. You accomplish it by doing it every day.

That's why we recommend, depending on your size and activity level, publishing a stakeholder story at least every Monday, Wednesday, Friday. Better still, publish every day of the work week.

Don't believe its possible?

Just about everyone we talk to says, "there is no way we have that many stories."

Guess what?

Never a problem.

If there has been a problem in the past its that nobody has been out asking enough. Once the story floodgates are open, you'll be surprised by how much great stuff there is going on you didn't know about.

This might sound ambitious yet it can all be accomplished on an ongoing basis for less than the cost of junior communications position.

*It's News, not Olds.
Post Fast and
Post Often.*

Big Important Rule: Post Fast and Post Often

We all have websites. They are the convergence point of all your marketing and communications activity. So first post place is your website.

Remember this though: It's News, not Olds. The longer the wait between that thought-provoking interview to posting the more energy is lost. Don't wait till you think you have 'the whole story'. That's the thing with stories: they live, breathe, morph, change. You'll never have the whole story. Besides, people are out there filling in the blanks in the meantime anyway so you might as well share what you've got just as soon as you get it. Post Fast and Post Often.

If you've got a news page, great. If you don't, make one. Or, better yet, put your news on your front page. It's going to be the most dynamic, fresh, and mission-focused content you've got.

You get to cross-content promote on your website. You get to let people wander around and self-direct their investigation and their interaction with you. Your Stakeholder News program will help you bring people to your site and give them reasons to keep coming back.

Who isn't going to check out a website with a story about them and their colleagues on it?

They'll be even more inclined to do so if they get a call or an e-mail from someone in the newsroom letting them know the article has been posted and offering to help them share it around.

Just remember, do it every day, or as close to that as you can.

Boost Readership and Audience Engagement with E-News

Electronic News these days is brilliant. As a permission marketing tool, e-newsletters are a great way for your readers to opt-in to participating in your community. In every case where an opt-in e-newsletter augments the daily news posting, engagement goes through the roof. More people read your stories. You can see which stories people liked the best, who they sent the stories to, who they invited, who signed up, who opted out, who is reading, and who isn't.

We've used e-news to reach out to community members interested in specific topics. We've used them to invite people to get involved in a story series.

In each case the opt-in e-news publications have increased site circulation, attracted new readers to our publications, to our community, to our product.

We like to recommend an e-news for at least every 10 stories published. That gives you enough to choose from to build a thematic e-news. Those themes are part of the meaning-making process. You can bring a variety of stories together, connect them with some welcoming comments and off you go.

Make Meaning Through the Power of Print

Print publications are far from bygone. When a collection of stories are put together in a thoughtful layout a much stronger message is conveyed. When an editor's mind is applied to the news of the times a variety of stories are presented as a family. The headlines themselves tell a story, reinforced by photographs and insights from the editorial team. It is live storytelling at its best, and most real.

When we read a newspaper we rarely read the whole thing. We do read almost all of the headlines though!

Then we hold those headlines in tension. We'll scan the front page, decide we're going to read the most interesting story first. While we're reading that story we hold in tension the other two or three headlines that caught our eye. If we're reading a front page story, there's a good chance the editor will 'turn' the story to an inside page. As you search for 'Continued from page 1' the editor has you reading another two or three headlines as you look for the continuation of the story you started on page one. By now you have in mind three to five headlines as well as the story you are reading. That has tremendous meaning/connection-making power. That's why a lot of us still pick up a newspaper. It's a satisfying, rich, complex, story experience.

When it comes to your Stakeholder News there is added power of experience in the fact that your organization is a tight-knit community. When you read a community newspaper you may or may not know the people you are reading about. With a newspaper based on stakeholder stories there is a very, very, very good chance your readers are going to know a lot of the people in the news. On top of that, the news will be of specific and direct use to them and their work. In an organization

you are in common purpose with your co-workers. The bonding power of these stories is that much more enriched as a result.

Watch Your Stories Go Viral Through Social Media

Social media also means a lot of things to a lot of people and there is a lot of fantastic emerging thought and practice around how we participate in social media as well.

There are a couple of things I want to focus on though. The first is tribe-finding.

Social media tools like LinkedIn and Twitter give you the ability to find and connect with like-minded people all over the world. It's taken the physical constraints out of finding and connecting with people of like mind. Its a massive, people-driven search engine. Social media may soon replace search engines as the way people find what they are looking for. It's one thing to get a referral from a database, its quite

another to get one from someone you know and like.

So first its friend finding. Second its automation.

One of the stunning things social media technologies offer us is automation of updates. Everytime you post content, or someone you are interested in does, updates automatically go out to those who have opted in. It's a brilliant, self-filtering, self-organizing community-building tool. Yes, you have to put in the time to cultivate relationships and you have to make sure you are contributing and respecting the very social aspects of the social media game. There is an etiquette to it, and maybe even enough of it to settle those souls who pine for the loss of civil society. That being said it can be one of the easiest ways to reach your stakeholders.

Can you imagine what a circulation manager at a major newspaper in the 30's would have thought if he could have seen this network of newsies chomping at the bit for the latest story? Nothing to print. Nothing to ship across town. Nothing to sell at newsstands. Just off it goes. Viral.

Wrapping Up

So this e-book is a start. Doesn't give you everything because there is a lot to unpack. There may be more e-books to come.

In the meantime

Let's bullet it down:

- 1. Engage Your Stakeholders Everyday**
- 2. Ask Catalytic Questions**
- 3. Write Well by Focusing on Strengths**
- 4. Publish and Publish Often**
- 5. Boost Engagement with Opt-In E-News**
- 7. Make Meaning In Print**
- 8. News Network In Social Media**

One Last Crazy Hopeful Thought

Now, here's a crazy thought. What if your organization and a handful of others who have something in common, a cause, or a sector, or a practice, or a geography you all really believe in, were sharing stories every day with their networks? Then, imagine all of those stories were pulled together by a news network representing your whole community.

Can you imagine how fast your network would begin to thrive, attract attention, move towards its vision, create a new story, and shape the world around it?

Can you imagine what would happen if all the great organizations in the world, shared all the great stories, about great people, doing great things, every day, day in and day out?

Are You Ready to Start Sharing Your Stakeholders' Stories

How many organizations do you know who can put aside all other competing priorities to focus on consistently designing question sets, interviewing people, and circulating stories? Chances are you already know the stories are out there, you just haven't had the time, or the framework, for getting to them the way you would like.

For as little as \$3,000/mo. Axiom News can have your three-story-a-week Stakeholder News program up and running just as soon as you are ready. With your go ahead we will conduct interviews, ask catalytic questions, write your stories, publish them for you. Try a three-month, trial period, with no obligation to continue. Call Peter at 705-741-4421 ext. 28 to explore the possibilities.

OR,

If you aren't quite ready to start but you'd like to learn more, check out the free opportunities to Get Involved listed on the next page!

Get Involved

- ✓ Share your story! Follow our news coverage and connect with us if you have a story that fits. This is a great way to experience a positive-questions interview and get a free story or two to boot. Connect with us at 705-741-4421 ext. 26 or e-mail jennifer@axiomnews.ca.
- ✓ Sign up for our free e-news to hear more about Social Business and Stakeholder News — visit axiomnews.ca and click the link to subscribe.
- ✓ Captivate your organization in learning about the power of appreciative questions. Invite Axiom News to present at your next event. Drop us a line at info@axiomnews.ca.
- ✓ Keep in touch! Follow us on Twitter — twitter.com/AxiomNews — and connect with us on [LinkedIn](#).