

# What's Your Story?

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Some time ago, I had the pleasure of being the opening keynote speaker at the Rural Ontario Municipal Association's (ROMA) re-inauguration conference. It was a great event held over three days. I stayed for the entire conference, because I like to hear what attendees think of the presentation, as well as their ideas about their own community. I hear interesting stories about challenges and opportunities, as well as failures and successes. I learn a lot at these events, which makes me more effective at my job-building better communities.

People are prone to talk about the details of what they are working on. They discuss elements of their economic development plan, or their strategic plan, or their beautification strategies, and so on. I listen and ask questions, but I have found one question changes the conversation drastically and invaluable. The question is always the same: "What is your community's story?"

We all know the value of stories. We watch them on TV, or read them in books. We tell them over beers about fish, and while fishing, we tell them about life. We tell them to teach our children, and we tell them at the end of our lives. Stories are what give meaning to our world; otherwise, we have only a compilation of dates, places and events. Stories are what add the human element and meaning to those events in our lives. The story is really all that matters.

So, when I ask leaders in a community what their community's story is, it's meant to move their eyes off the small details and focus them back on the big picture. A well-written story tells you where you have been, where you are and what you are going to become. The story explains why things change and how you are going to adapt to that change. The story creates a sense of purpose for why things need to be done, and creates an emotional attachment to the future.

Communities that don't have a story, often have a vision statement or town slogan, one that is identical to those of so many other communities: "The Best Place to Work, Live and Raise a Family," or "A Great Place to Be," or "A Community Unlike Any Other." You get the idea. If you don't have a story about your community, then your story becomes generic and meaningless, and becomes a story not worth telling, or worth listening to.

If you don't really have a story, it's never too late to write one. It takes a bit of time to create, and you need to engage the public to write a good story. When engaging the public however, it takes special effort to ensure you don't water the story down to accommodate everyone and every sentiment. As the saying goes, "You can't be all things to all people." Afterward, it takes time to socialize the story with your community, and to incorporate it into all your plans and strategies. Your story, once established, will become your community's "why", which will then become the rudder that will guide daily decision making.

*"A community story is how you answer the question, "Why You?" If you aren't aiming to be different or better in some form of competitive advantage, you won't attract tourists, investment won't be interested in you, and locals will lack the source of pride, energy and engagement in the future necessary to make your community a success." - Chris Fields, Senior Strategist, 13 Ways*

Your community's story is important, not just to celebrate your past, but to direct your present and create your future. Without a story-a purpose-you may find some success, but it will be more a matter of coincidence and good fortune than deliberate choices. Articulating your story can be challenging, but it is a necessary part of becoming something unique, which is a necessary part of becoming a successful community.

*This syndicated content is provided by Doug Griffiths, best-selling author and chief community builder at 13 Ways, a company with a mission to push communities to face their challenges to find their unique path to success. For more information visit [www.13ways.ca](http://www.13ways.ca), or we can start the conversation at [info@13ways.ca](mailto:info@13ways.ca).*