

The Simplest Way to Explain What Your United Way Does

Note: This is a companion guide to the webinar “The Simplest Way to Explain What Your United Way Does,” which you can view for free [here](#).

Introduction

Your United Way does a lot for your community.

When you have so much to talk about, how can you begin to simplify and prioritize your messages? How do you know if your messages will be easily understood or which messages will most effectively convince community members to support you?

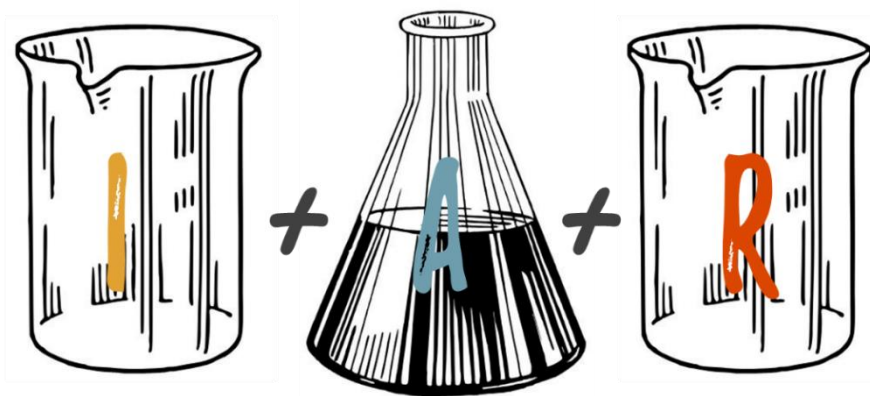
The answer is simple. First, distill down all the things your United Way does into three categories: issue(s), actions, and results. Then follow our formula to put those elements together to create a cohesive narrative describing your United Way. Once those elements are together, repeat your narrative to build stakeholder understanding.

Building the Narrative: Distill the Elements

There are three elements to our proven formula for building stakeholder understanding of United Way: issue(s), actions, and results. When combined, these elements build a cohesive, easily understood narrative to share with stakeholders.

While these three elements may seem obvious, many United Ways fail to consistently communicate one element or another with their stakeholders. Other times, United Ways focus on certain types of issues, actions, and results that are not compelling to audiences.

That is why it is so important to breakdown everything your United Way does into these three elements. Once you’ve identified your issue(s), actions, and results, you can start to simplify and focus your United Way’s messaging to ensure that stakeholders are getting the information they want and need.



Step One: Identify Issues

Issues are specific social challenges your United Way is working to address. Remember that the clearest message you can share with stakeholders is rooted in specifics. Therefore, it is to your benefit to talk about clearly defined issues, like hunger or kindergarten readiness, instead of categories of issues that can be open to interpretation, like health and education.

Additionally, your messaging will be even clearer if you can focus on just a few issues rather than many issues or a combination of issues and categories. More issues and categories mean more messages, which will leave your stakeholders more confused about what your United Way does.

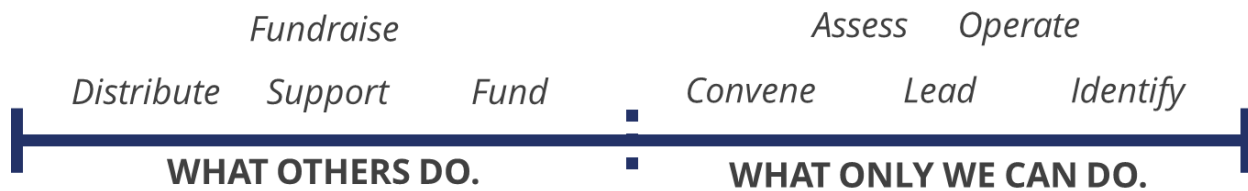


Step Two: Assess Actions

Actions are what your United Way is doing to address your issue(s). There are two types of actions your United Way can be involved in. Pass-through actions involve supporting the work that others do, which often means fundraising or providing grants. Direct actions are activities that are unique to United Way and directly cause community change, such as convening local organizations to better address local issues, operating a needed local program, identifying gaps in services, or leading the charge against a local issue.

Direct actions are most compelling to donors; if you find that your United Way is primarily involved in pass-through actions, you may be seen as a middleman in your community. Therefore, focusing on your direct actions will be most successful in building stakeholder understanding, attracting community support, and retaining donors.

There are no hard and fast rules for determining what type of actions your United Way can claim. Instead, you must assess the spirit of what you are saying to determine the type of action. For example, you might ask yourself: "Did we give money away to support the work of others? Are we directly engaged in causing change to happen? Are we doing something unique?"



Step Three: Review Results

Results are the products of an action taken by United Way. There are five types of actions:

1. Campaign Results: *Total dollars raised, total number of donors, number of campaigns, workplace participation rates*
2. Allocation Results: *Total dollars allocated, number of partner agencies, number of programs/initiatives*
3. Attributed Program Results: *Outcomes or outputs of a named funded program*
4. Unattributed Program Results: *Outcomes or outputs of an unnamed funded program*
5. Lives Changed: *Number of people no longer experiencing the issue*

Unattributed program results and lives changed are the two most compelling types of results for donors and other stakeholders.

Unattributed program results are more compelling than campaign results, allocation results, and attributed program results because they distance United Way from funded partners and the process of fundraising. This allows United Way to distance itself from the traditional middleman reputation.

Lives changed are the most powerful type of results to share because they do not rely on the ability of stakeholders to interpret program outcomes or indicators of change. Additionally, communicating a concrete measure of lives changed allows stakeholders to easily understand the impact United Way has on community conditions.



Building Understanding

Once you have identified the elements of I-A-R that you wish to communicate to your stakeholders, you can expand on that formula to build stakeholder understanding.

To build stakeholder understanding, you must:

1. Share your cohesive narrative in ways that resonate with all audiences
2. Repeat your narrative

To have your narrative resonate with all audiences, be sure to communicate using both stories and statistics:

- Stories allow community members and other stakeholders to build an emotional connection with your work, while statistics allow stakeholders to understand your work in more concrete, rational terms.
- Some stakeholders will prefer stories and others will prefer statistics. To ensure that United Way appeals and connects with as many people as possible, communicating both types of messages is essential.
- Be sure to use stories and statistics to clearly define the issue(s) your United Way is addressing, as well as the prevalence and relevance of your issue(s).

As you repeat your narrative, be sure to repeat it everywhere:

- Every message and piece of marketing content your United Way puts out should align with your identified issue(s), actions, and results.
- Something is better than nothing; if you cannot fit all three formula elements, include at least one element in all of your communication and marketing.
- Materials that are used to make an ask to donors, such as campaign brochures, annual reports, or your website, should include all three elements.
- Other materials that are simply used to build stakeholder understanding, such as social media posts or business cards, do not need to include all three elements but should include at least one element.

The Final Formula: To build stakeholder understanding, you must repeat your issues, action, and results through both stories and statistics.

$$\frac{SS(I+A+R)}{time}$$

Perspectives Consulting Group, Inc. is a Michigan-based research and consulting firm that has been working with United Ways across the United States since 1989. We guide United Ways that want to increase their resources, maximize their impact, and remain relevant in their community.

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