

2019

## Using the Power of Storytelling to Shape Your Institution's Narrative

Jessica de Perio Wittman  
*University of Connecticut School of Law*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://opencommons.uconn.edu/law\\_papers](https://opencommons.uconn.edu/law_papers)



Part of the [Law Librarianship Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wittman, Jessica de Perio, "Using the Power of Storytelling to Shape Your Institution's Narrative" (2019).  
*Faculty Articles and Papers*. 586.  
[https://opencommons.uconn.edu/law\\_papers/586](https://opencommons.uconn.edu/law_papers/586)



# USING THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

## TO SHAPE YOUR INSTITUTION'S NARRATIVE

How law libraries can use storytelling to demonstrate their value and provide better service to the communities they serve.

**BY JESSICA DE PERIO WITTMAN**

**P**eople love stories. For generations, storytelling has been the basis of human communication. Stories capture our attention, and they recount authentic human experience. Stories enable individuals to understand the world around them and to make sense of the who, what, when, where, why, and how of institutional actions. Most importantly, stories enable people to create meaningful connections with one another and with members of their community.

The law library has always acted as a community hub that encourages and facilitates scholarly activity and collaboration. By connecting citizens with laws and narratives, the role of the modern law library has evolved to address important institutional, business, and societal needs. Law libraries empower members of local communities with tools to interact with those in positions of power, whether they are judges, landlords, or employers. Through well-managed records, law libraries can also leverage their archives and special collections to position themselves as key contributors to institutional advancement and community engagement.

## Lessons Learned

In 2010, Kraft was set to acquire the British confectioner Cadbury. To help smooth the transition, senior management turned to Kraft's archive collection. Searching through historical materials, they uncovered that there was evidence of shared values and common goals between the companies and their founders. Detailed histories of well-loved brands enabled archivists at Kraft to quickly launch an intranet site that highlighted the parallel paths that the two companies had taken. Using the materials they had uncovered, they were able to create interactive timelines that reframed Kraft and Cadbury to be "growing together" on supermarket shelves throughout the years. The integration, they argued, would create a stronger, more unified company. As a result, Kraft integrated Cadbury more smoothly than any of its previous acquisitions.

This reframed narrative continued in all of Kraft's communications—from their CEO's speeches to their press releases, and finally, to their employee trainings.

What can organizations learn from this? Any good leader will tell you that emotional investment is the foundation of a well-told story. If done correctly, a heartfelt, human-centered story will be able to spark an emotional connection that compels someone to act. Institutional advancement, whether it be a successful merger, a fundraiser, or community engagement, can be a direct result of how librarians and archivists have demonstrated their value to the organization. As long as libraries continue playing a role in the storytelling process, such institutional advancements will serve to further cement the library's status as an essential partner in the emotional and social fabric of the institutions and their communities.

## The Role of Librarians and Archivists in the Storytelling Process

Librarians and archivists are not simple keepers of institutional records. They debunk the myth that their law librarian communities know the

By connecting citizens with laws and narratives, the role of the modern law library has evolved to address important institutional, business, and societal needs.

institutional story simply because of their affinity with the institution. Instead, librarians and archivists identify collections and themes that retell the institutional narrative and inspire other methods of storytelling. They become active participants in the creation, analysis, and selection of documentary records to support outreach activities, such as exhibits, educational workshops, and digital and print publications. Ultimately, librarians and archivists play the roles of scribes and documenters, and help their users see themselves as part of the institutional story.

## Storytelling Invites Collaboration

Librarians and archivists do not always need to be the people who actually create the records. They can also act as analysts, planners, and agents who generate an awareness of documentary and preservation issues. Archivists can then work with other appropriate departments, such as information technology, marketing and communication, and development and alumni relations, to carry out oral history, photographic, video, and other documentary projects as needed.

For example, librarians and preservation staff can help development offices and other fundraising entities create a gallery of portraits that highlight notable alums of the institution. In addition to helping identify the individuals, archivists are in the best position to assist with logistics and the maintenance of the collection. What is the condition and value of the document? Is it stable enough to withstand exhibition? What is the past exhibition history of the item? Does it require conservation treatment before it can be displayed safely? Does the document require special environmental conditions or special security

provisions? Does the item have complex mounting needs or need special equipment to minimize aging? Is the exhibit space in a centralized area with staff nearby, or is the area isolated with little traffic by staff?

## Storytelling + Emotional Investment = Philanthropy

Recent trends in fundraising, especially nonprofit fundraising, focus on letting people tell their own stories. The best stories are those that connect people, inspire them, and compel them to act. Ron Fleury, senior director of development for the University of Connecticut (UConn) Foundation at the University of Connecticut School of Law, understands that good fundraising stories empower donors to become part of the story. "As development officers, we have a unique opportunity to help donors understand at a personal level how they can bring our institution's mission to life. Good narratives help us inspire their philanthropy."

Like historians, fundraisers and development officers must rely on careful research and documentary evidence to support their narratives, and they need various kinds of archival material. The archives can contribute to these donor relations programs by showcasing materials that provide insight into the institution's mission and vision.

In Hartford, Connecticut, Lea Wallenius, preservation specialist at the Thomas J. Meskill Law Library, is already hard at work preparing for the UConn Law School's centennial in 2021. After completing a book titled *Hard Times & Best of Times: The University of Connecticut School of Law at 39 Woodland Street* with professor Kent Newmyer, Wallenius's 100 for 100 Narratives Project continues to retell the law school's story. It attempts to

collect, preserve, and make accessible stories from the UConn Law community that reflect the intellectual and social fabric of the School's history. By listening and documenting alumni and faculty accounts, the School honors their diverse historical and cultural perspectives.

**Stories as Pictures: Memes, Infographics, and the New Digital Age**

A picture is worth more than a thousand words. Because humans are visual creatures, images and photos can communicate more effectively than text alone. Katheryn Ross-Winnie, leadership gift officer at SUNY Buffalo State, posited that the power of the picture will dramatically change current fundraising practices. "The age of the bequest is a thing of the past. Social media is a primary fundraising mechanism in a fundraiser's arsenal.

People are used to absorbing messages in 280 characters or less. Millennials and Generation Zers expect something eye-catching and abbreviated such as memes and infographics. Organizations that can capitalize on this will be ahead of the curve."

**What Does This Mean for Preservation Efforts?**

As libraries continue to transform from knowledge centers into access gateways, the advent of new technologies such as social media, artificial intelligence, and machine learning should not impact the position that librarians and archivists play in the role of storytelling. Rather, law libraries and archivists stand ready to face a new set of legal issues and ethical challenges in this new information era. By being agents of change, librarians and archivists can keep one foot in the past and continue to tell the

transformative stories of their libraries and the communities they serve. ■

**READ**

Collen Cable's article "Storytelling, Metrics, and the Wisdom of Don Draper," from the AALL Digital White Paper "Defining ROI: Law Library Best Practices" at [bit.ly/AALLROIcable](http://bit.ly/AALLROIcable).

M+O Marketing + Outreach



**JESSICA DE PERIO WITTMAN**  
**DIRECTOR OF THE LAW LIBRARY**  
**AND ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF LAW**  
 University of Connecticut  
 School of Law Library  
 Hartford, CT  
[jessica.deperio@uconn.edu](mailto:jessica.deperio@uconn.edu)

© 2019 BY JESSICA DE PERIO WITTMAN

# 2020 AALL LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

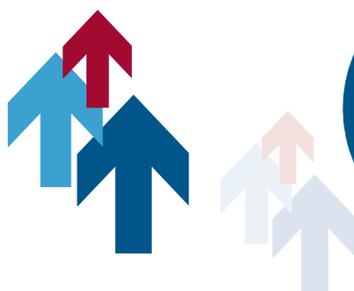
**AALL** / YOUR LEGAL KNOWLEDGE NETWORK™

**MARCH 27-28, 2020**  
**HYATT LODGE/OAK BROOK, ILLINOIS**

Legal information professionals in the early stages of your career—maximize your leadership potential while networking with your peers.

**LEARN:**

- Leadership styles & approaches
- Strategies for effective communication
- Accountability & workplace ethics



**REGISTRATION OPENS IN SEPTEMBER**

learn more at  
[bit.ly/AALLacademy](http://bit.ly/AALLacademy)