

PRINCIPLE

SHOW, DON'T TELL

Use metaphor, visuals, and action to show your message rather than falling into preaching, hectoring, or otherwise telling your audience what to think.

CONTRIBUTED BY

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Patrick Reinsborough

Patrick Reinsborough is a strategist, organizer and creative provocateur with over twenty years of experience campaigning for peace, justice, indigenous rights and ecological sanity. He is the co-founder of the Center for Story-based Strategy (formerly known as smartMeme), a movement support organization which harnesses the power of narrative for fundamental social change.

Kevin Buckland

Kevin Buckland is an artist, activist organizer and the "Arts Ambassador" for the grassroots global network 350.org. Responding to the call to "make this movement as beautiful as the planet we are fighting to save," he employs comedy, tragedy, farce, satire, and a great deal of cardboard in his attempts to end empire and globalize justice.

"A WELL-DESIGNED ACTION EXPLAINS ITSELF, AND IDEALLY OFFERS MULTIPLE WAYS INTO THE ISSUE. YOU WANT YOUR AUDIENCE TO REACH THEIR OWN CONCLUSION, RATHER THAN FEELING LIKE THEY ARE BEING TOLD WHAT TO THINK."

"Example moves the world more than doctrine."
—Henry Miller

A picture is worth a thousand words. In today's image-driven news cycle and mass media culture, this is truer than ever. Effective creative campaigns must be image-driven, too. In other words, *show, don't tell*. And there are a lot of ways to do it.

Lead with story, not facts. Facts rarely speak for themselves. While the factual accuracy of your message is essential, facts should only serve as the supporting details for the story, not the hook that makes the story compelling.

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Barbie Liberation Organization
- Billionaires for Bush
- Bring Back Our Girls
- Conflict Kitchen
- Couple in the Cage
- Daycare Centre Sit-In
- Every Heartbeat Counts
- Honk at Parliament

If you want to convey the devastation of unemployment, don't lead with statistics. Tell us a compelling story about one person. Then tell us there are ten million more like her out there.

Make it visual. A lot of important stuff is hard to talk about — it's too big, far away, abstract, or complex. Props, visuals, and concrete language can help bring things down to human scale. Take economic inequality, for example. You can easily get lost in the finer points of the US tax code, but when billionaire Warren Buffet says that his secretary pays more taxes than he does, and that that's wrong, it's hard to argue with. To draw attention to the increasing disparity between CEO and worker pay, one group unveiled a tiny replica of the Washington Monument that was 419 times smaller than the actual one they were holding their press conference in front of.

Use powerful metaphors. With metaphor you can show something for what it is, rather than have to explain it. To find your compelling metaphor, look for something that embodies what you are trying to communicate. Recently, the immigration debate in the US has been usefully engaged via the metaphor of migratory birds ("Do migrating birds need passports too?"), neatly pointing up the absurdity of the situation, without focusing on any specific policy or piece of legislation.

Speak with actions. Instead of telling, act out what it is that you want to say. At protests, whenever there are lines of police protecting a bank, a metaphor is being enacted that reflects the reality of the situation: The state defends the wealthy from the rest of us. Sometimes it's enough to just point that out — or you can ham it up (see: *STORY: The Teddy Bear Catapult*).

A well-designed action explains itself, and ideally offers multiple ways into the issue. You want your audience to reach their own conclusion, rather than feeling like they are being told what to think.

Preachy isn't persuasive. Whether we're telling a story, conjuring a scene, offering up a metaphor, leading by example, or letting our actions speak volumes, there are millions of ways to convey our message and values without launching into a political diatribe. Let's do ourselves and our audience a favour: Show, don't tell.

Originally published in Beautiful Trouble.

LEARN MORE

The Sound of Wealth Inequality
Institute for Policy Studies, 2009
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AhucAN6G00

- Mining the Museum
- Modern-Day Slavery Museum
- Orange Alternative
- PARK(ing) Day
- Pedestrian death puppets
- Pyramid of Shoes
- Replacing Cops with Mimes
- Round Dance Revolution
- Standing Man
- Stolen Beauty
- Street Graduation
- Streets Into Gardens
- The Salt March
- The Teddy Bear Catapult
- Welcome to Palestine
- Whose Tea Party?
- #YouStink

Tactics

- Advanced leafletting
- Artistic vigil
- Banner hang
- Blockade
- Citizen's arrest
- Creative disruption
- Creative petition delivery
- Cultural disobedience
- Culture jamming
- Currency hacking
- Guerrilla projection
- Human banner
- Identity correction
- Lamentation
- Mass street action
- Media-jacking
- Public filibuster

Principles

- Balance art and message
- Brand or be branded
- Breakfast is persuasive
- Consider your audience
- Do the media's work for them
- Don't dress like a protester
- Lead with sympathetic characters
- Make the invisible visible
- Play to the audience that isn't there
- Reframe the issue
- Shame the authorities by doing

their job

- Stay on message
- Think narratively
- This ain't the Sistine chapel
- Turn the tables
- Use the power of ritual

Theories

- Action logic
- Direct action
- Ethical spectacle
- Floating signifier
- Prefigurative politics

Methodologies

- Story of self, us, and now

TAGS

Action design, Art, Campaign strategy, Communications, Direct action, Humour, Language, Media, Movement building, Nonviolence, Pranks, Social media, Street protest, Student activism