

DON'T SAY A WORD: The Art of Visual Storytelling



Jessica Vogelsang

In 2011, my friend at World Vets asked me to help get the word out about a veterinary team heading to Japan to help in the wake of their disastrous earthquake and tsunami. The goal was to fundraise in order to help this small team with the considerable travel expenses. I wrote a post describing the scene: flattened villages, a lone veterinarian whose clinic on a hill was the lone survivor in a sea of debris, bodies and boats and devastation.

Then I found the pictures. A dog clinging to a door, floating on the water surrounded by remnants of all he knew. People clinging to their dogs and cats, faces contorted with emotion as they were reconciled with family members they thought they had lost. Those pictures accomplished every tale I was trying to tell, without saying a word. Combined with the written post, the article had its intended effect. It was, to date, the most successful fundraiser World Vets has had.

Why are visuals so important? We know that the brain processes images up to 60,000 times faster than words, meaning you can convey a whole lot more information in a shorter period of time. It's just the way the brain is wired. It's why the Pulitzer Prize offers awards not only for writing, but for photography. And in today's social media environment, when the tools for photography, videography, and graphic design are so easily accessible, it makes sense to implement these tools in your marketing. Facebook posts with images account for 87% of interactions- and with video on the rise you can expect that number to grow as well.

There's no hard and fast rule about how to use visual storytelling: feel free to combine photos, videos, infographics, and written posts as you figure out what works best for you. No matter the format, be it photo, video, or word, information is best processed and retained within the context of a story. With that in mind, there are a number of principles that successful visual storytellers use.

Here's are 10 killer elements that make visual storytelling pop:

- 1 Show, Don't Tell.** Don't use a picture of a heartworm, show a picture of a dog who was successfully treated for heartworm. This establishes the stakes and gets the viewer invested in the outcome. Posed photos are "tells." Action photos are "shows."
- 2 Use Context.** The background helps set the stage and give clues about your story. If you're in surgery, the spotless background tells the story of your meticulous nature.
- 3 Use People in Images.** Dogs and cats are adorable, and often tell a story all on their own. But when you can, put owners and team members in there too. Your faces and emotions tell a story all their own.

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- 4 Be True to You.** Are you free spirited and fun? Down to earth and a little more serious? There is no right and wrong answer; the important thing is that the stories you share reflect that in an authentic way. People will pick up on a sudden change in your stories.
- 5 Show Conflict.** What problem is being resolved? Don't just show your staff going about their day, show them treating patients, helping owners, and cleaning up messes.
- 6 Reveal Hidden Things.** People love a behind-the-scenes look at your life. They don't need to see you making your weekly MWI order, but they will enjoy a look inside your surgery suite (as long as there's no blood!)
- 7 Have a Focus.** Use the Rule of Thirds or the Quadrant System to keep the attention on the main characters in your photo or video. Lighting and color can also help focus the eye.
- 8 Use Motion.** Think of yourself as a photojournalist, not a wedding photographer. Posed photos are boring, right? What story does this tell? "We're all standing here, smiling." Action and motion and naturally more pleasing and engaging to the viewer.
- 9 Teach Something.** As veterinary professionals we are in the education business, so this is a great opportunity to get important messaging in. A puppy picture is cute. A puppy getting a dose of pyrantel because you found roundworms in his fecal is cute and informative.
- 10 Use Your Own Images.** Sometimes we need stock photos because we just can't get the images we need, but use your own photos as much as possible. It really does bond people to you and makes them feel like they "know" your staff and their faces.

Who is your story about? Storytelling archetypes fall into one of 12 categories. Of that dozen, half are especially applicable to veterinary medicine. If your subject can be described as one of the following, you're in good shape: The Sage, who is the educator. The Hero, who saves the day. The Regular Guy/Gal, who is shown in order to create a sense of camaraderie. The Explorer, who tries something new. The Caregiver, which is self-explanatory. And finally, The Innocent, who makes you feel protective.

Using these principles, you can take photos or create videos that truly engage!

Pictures worth a thousand words: Visual Storytelling at a Glance



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TOOLKIT

Story Subjects

- Interviews (The Sage)
- Behind-the-scenes (The Explorer)
- Staff cuddling patients (The Caregivers)
- Owners with their pets (The Heroes)
- Cute pets being cute (The Innocent)
- Staff outside work (The Regular Guy/Gal)

Technique

- Rule of Thirds
- Off center focus looks better
- Put focal points at intersection
- Rule of Quadrants
- Use of color vs black and white

Recommended Apps

- Canva • iMovie • picmonkey • believe.tv • Videoshop • prisma

KEY POINTS

- Use authentic, non-posed visuals
- Show people, not just pets
- Use rule of thirds
- Make clients the heroes as much as possible

Show Us a Story

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Visual Story Scavenger Hunt

Find as many examples of the following as you can.

Upload your photo with **#picturehunt** to the
Uncharted Facebook page for PRIZES!

The Hero

Rule of Thirds

The Innocent

Boring posed photo

The Explorer

Quadrants

The Regular Guy

Story Using No Faces

An a-ha moment

Black and White

Having Fun

Motion

Tired

Conflict

The Sage

Yep, that's totally you