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The Complete Data-Driven eBook to Storytelling Marketing for Senior Living

You are 85 years old. You have raised your family and lived out a full life and career.

You are curious about senior living, but you are scared to give up your independence.

On a web search, you find two passages. Which makes you feel better?



A.

Our Home is a collection of communities in the Southern United States that provides top-quality assisted living and memory care services for older adults. We are leaders in senior living, setting high standards and providing long-term stability for each location.

B.

Come take a seat here with us on the wrap-around porch overlooking the garden. That's right, make yourself at home. Smell the gardenia flowers, see the wisteria blowing in the breeze. It's nearly supper time. Come enjoy a savory bite of grilled salmon during our chef-inspired cooking class...

If you answered B, you rightly have the sense stories connect people, have since ancient times and continue doing so today.

We surveyed numerous marketing executives in the senior living industry to find out why storytelling makes such a difference in marketing. Here's what we discovered:

Storytelling Defined

Throughout history and across every culture, stories have been passed down from generation to generation to entertain, educate or inspire. Storytelling started as an oral tradition then evolved to pictures even before writing existed. (Think rock art.) A memorable story discloses previously unknown information, offers a new perspective on known information or reveals an unforeseen twist or development. Aesop's Fables, the Arabian Nights and Shakespeare's plays are just a few examples of history's best-known stories.

In marketing, storytelling is primarily used to bolster brand loyalty. Giles Lury, author of [*How Coca-Cola Took Over the World: And 100 More Amazing Stories About The World's Greatest Brands*](#) and [*Prisoner and the Penguin: And 75 Other Marketing Stories*](#), suggests the effectiveness of storytelling in marketing ties back to a deeply rooted human need for entertainment.

In our research, three trends emerged:



Feeling

People defined storytelling primarily as a means to evoke feeling or elicit an emotional response. The feeling may be one of pleasure, a sense of belonging, a sense of loyalty or confirmation of previous experiences, thoughts or feelings. One respondent described this synapse as the moment "the potential buyer, user or client can identify with the brand as it holds their same values or ideas."



Connectedness

Overwhelmingly the data showed feeling ties directly to a sense of connectedness. I relate to you, you relate to me. We understand each other. Let's work together. We must not stop at education; rather, it's better to take prospects all the way through inspiration into feeling ready to take the next step with you. One participant said the purpose of storytelling is to "make the prospect feel enough to take action."

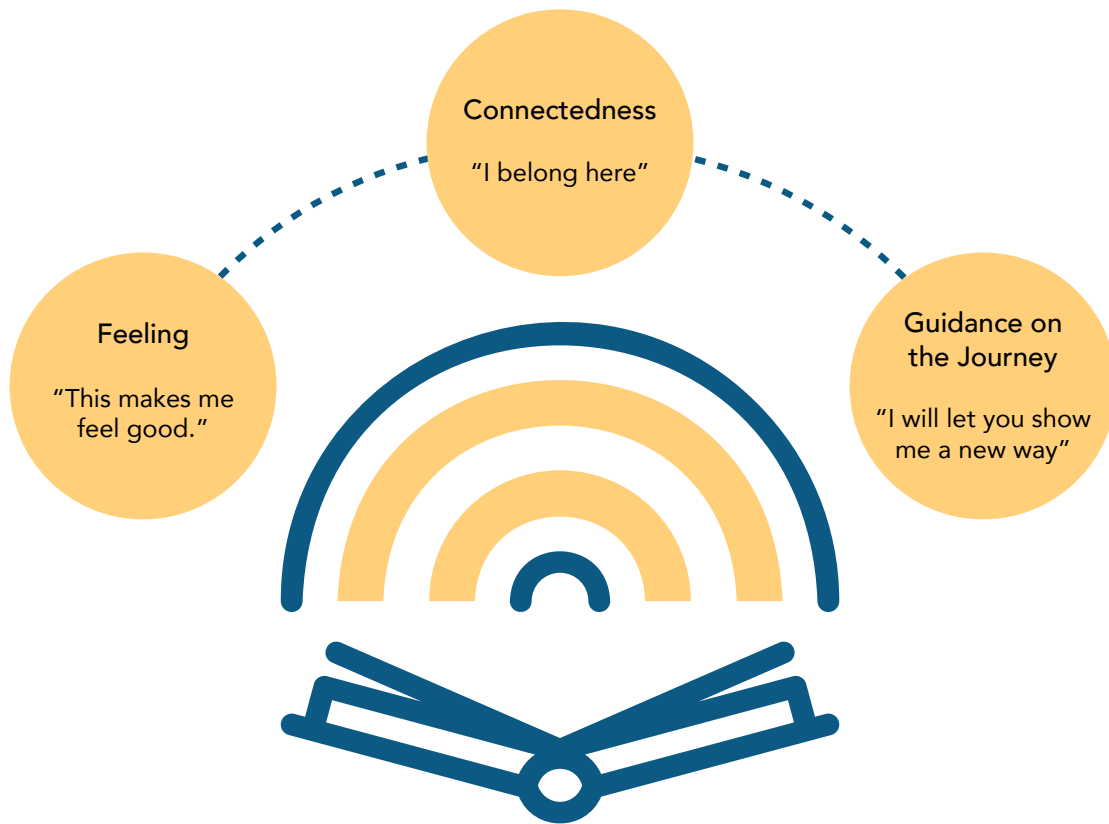


Guidance on the Journey

The data indicated that storytelling should take the reader from where they are to someplace new. You are the guide. You know the reality of older adults not currently in a community or under care. Equally, you know the reality of those fully immersed in community life toward the end of life. You see the wonder and possibility.

Take your audience by the hand and guide them to that place. Think of it as taking them down a path, pointing out all the little nooks and crannies along the way: here is what it feels like to walk our gardens, here is what it feels like to easily gather with people like you every day, here is what it feels like to be cared for, here is what it feels like to move, here is what it feels like to open a whole new chapter in life.

One respondent shared the importance of painting a clear picture. Indeed, the more detailed the story, the more moving and actionable it is.



***A memorable story* discloses previously unknown information, offers a new perspective on known information or reveals an unforeseen twist or development.**

The Importance of Storytelling in Marketing

86% of survey respondents said storytelling is important in marketing for two reasons:

Beyond Brand and Target Audience

Storytelling provides a deeper connection between an organization's brand and its target audience. Think of the brand as a person with a full personality: maybe a person who is deeply inspiring in a relentless drive to protect older adults and their experience of life. (This is one of sixty possible brand archetypes, or personalities.) Now think of just one person you might serve, an actual prospect whom you particularly enjoy. Stories connect these two personalities just as stories have connected people since ancient times. Consistent storytelling deeply connects countless people with the personified brand.

Relationship Building

Storytelling serves to build relationships. Storytelling can be used in testimonials and case studies, bringing the marketing to life. Storytelling provides credibility to the organization, moving it in the prospect's mind from a far-off destination to a very real place they feel happy to call home. Storytelling showcases an organization's culture and values, which invites relatability to the people who work and live there. Storytelling offers educational value, invoking trust.

Harkening back to my days earning my Bachelor's in English, I recall the most important principle in storytelling: *Show don't tell.*



SHOW

"A savory steak with king-trumpet mushrooms is expertly plated and served with seasonal leafy greens fresh from the garden."



DON'T TELL

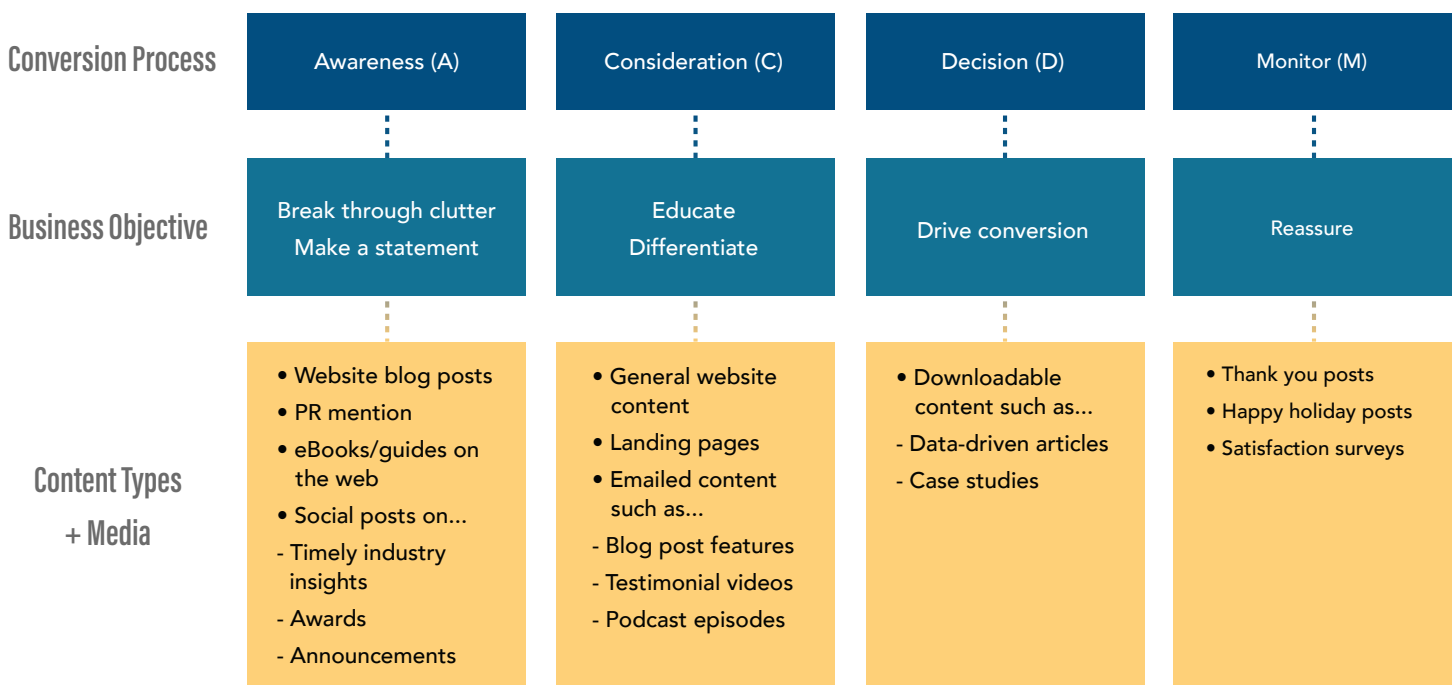
"Our dining options are second to none."

Storytelling in Practice

Our survey results indicate 78% of organizations like yours frequently use storytelling in marketing; here are a few considerations when doing so:

Use appropriate media throughout the conversion process.

Most respondents favored Facebook for amplifying storytelling. Instagram, website blogs and display ads were also popularly used. Best practices for storytelling marketing include surveying current residents and family members to validate which media they most consume. If respondents use Facebook most, post frequently there. It's best to weave the brand story throughout the conversion process, meeting dedicated business objectives via propagation across appropriate media at each step:



Produce content to consumer preference.

Writers, designers and developers on the marketing team must manage their own states of mind, drawing less upon their own biased beliefs, memories, education and experience and instead developing content appropriate for consumers.

Stimulate left brain and right brain.

The data indicates 69% of senior living marketers integrate data into storytelling. Data stimulates the left brain, engaging the person's trust, while storytelling ignites the right brain, engaging the person's feelings. A balance ensures you are communicating to the whole person. Even more, it helps reach all people, whether they distinctly have an analytical or emotional personality.

Honor various learning styles.

Most senior living organizations visually supplement storytelling to engage audiences. 74% publish video content and 40% share case studies. Other uses include downloadable guides - great for asking the interested person to share their contact information so you can engage them later - as well as infographics, which engage visual learners. Neil Fleming's VAK/VARK model, just one learning style theory, proposes there are five styles, which we have aligned with suggested approaches:

1. **Visual learners** enjoy infographics, photography and videography.
2. **Auditory learners** will gravitate toward [ADA-compliant](#) video and audio clips.
3. **Reading/writing learners** will lean into blog posts, articles, case studies and whitepapers.
4. **Kinesthetic learners** would engage with video tutorials on subjects like meal preparation at home and exercise for older adults.
5. **Multimodality** is a combination of one or more of the previously mentioned styles. Including a variety of storytelling types for various learners is inclusive and over time provides value for them and expands your repertoire of material, further positioning you as the expert on aging services.

Honor differing story type preferences.

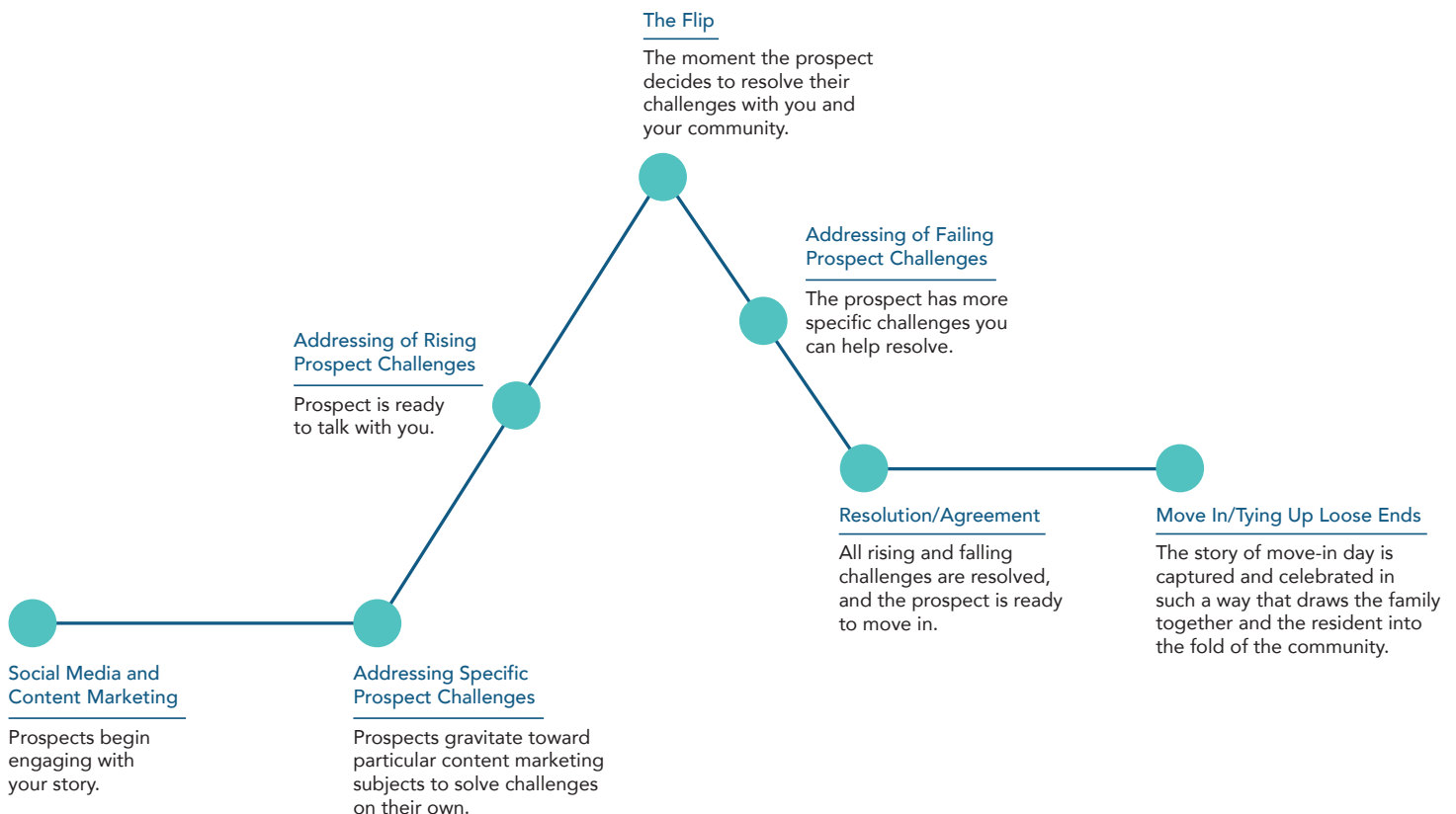
Our survey respondents were evenly in favor of sharing entertaining and educational stories while only a third were in the habit of sharing promotional stories. Only be promotional 20% of the time. The remaining 80% of the time, share stories via educational thought leadership, entertaining media and a combination of both (i.e., edutainment). First, inspire people to like and trust the brand. They will then convince themselves to readily take the next step when we suggest it.

The results showed that 29% of respondents perceived their organizations' storytelling marketing efforts were slightly below average compared with competitors', and 8% thought they were significantly below average. 26% said storytelling outcomes were slightly below average compared with competitors', and 2% thought they were significantly below average.

How, then, to improve efforts and outcomes? What follows is a roadmap.

The Arch of Storytelling in Marketing

In any story, there is an arch from beginning to climax to resolution. Jennifer Bonhomme, MD of Insights & Strategy at VMLY&R, [shared in Medium](#) a simple narrative arch, over which Big Buzz has overlaid the various stops on the marketing storytelling roadmap. Herein, we illustrate the opportunity to tell a cohesive story across the full experience of the resident and family journey into your community. We detail how to expand on that story at various points in the journey.



Let's explore each point on the marketing storytelling arch in more detail.

Social Media + Content Marketing

Prospects begin engaging with your story through social media and content marketing.

More than half of our survey respondents said 60-100% of their leads came from social media. Social media is like an open house for your community. Share stories across social media to position your brand as different and beneficial to the prospect. Social media marketing leads are top-of-the-funnel leads. Engaging social media stories invite the prospect to check out your content, moving them to the middle of the funnel.

Nearly three-quarters of our survey respondents said that 30-100% of their leads came from content marketing. Share stories across content to nurture prospects to understand you can solve their general challenges. Here are some example content titles:

- Helping Parents with Money: A Fable on Family Finances
- Rosie and Sally Put Sisterly Differences Aside to Assist Dad
- Preserving Peter's Pride: One Family's Journey in Senior Care

Content marketing leads are middle-of-the-funnel leads. Engaging content marketing stories show folks you are the expert, help them see they need support and demonstrate your community can be trusted to deliver that support. Gated content allows the prospect to share contact information in exchange for your expertise.

Both social media and content marketing are fueled by voice-of-the-customer data. 72% of our respondents said, excluding required customer satisfaction surveys, they regularly survey residents and families to learn how the organization has impacted their lives.

Here are survey questions that can be used to gather data that will inform stories for social media marketing:

- What are we doing best?
- Why did you choose us?
- What is different about us?

And here are survey questions that can be used to gather data that will inform stories for content marketing:

- What challenges did you face before moving in with us?
- What fears did you face before moving in with us?
- What hopes did you have before moving in with us?

As prospects move from the top of the funnel to the middle of the funnel, there arises an opportunity to further develop the story and engage people.

Social media is like an open house for your community. Share stories across social media to position your brand as unique and beneficial to the prospect.

Addressing Specific Prospect Challenges

It is appropriate at this phase to reach out to the prospect using contact information gathered from gated content and ask for a call or meeting. Here's how:

Prospects gravitate toward particular content marketing subjects to solve challenges on their own. A marketing automation solution can show you what they are reading. In the words of Jana Bienz, Digital Marketing Manager at ActiveDEMAND, marketing automation can "support more custom personalized messaging that better touches on these relationships."

This is where the story can be developed to address specific prospect challenges. It is a unique opportunity to invite the prospect to move from the middle of the funnel to the bottom of the funnel. As an example, here are some storytelling-inspired conversation starters for a prospect consuming content about dementia:

I noticed you recently read a few of our articles on memory loss and that you downloaded our guide to memory care. We have a hunch you might be concerned about a loved one's memory. We might be able to help. Would it make sense to have a 10-minute conversation?

We work with families like yours who are navigating memory loss. We help them increase connections and joy in life. Are you interested in having a short conversation about how we might help you?

We're on a mission to help folks like you enjoy life more fully while navigating dementia in a loved one. Would you let me give you a quick call to see if we may be able to help you and your family?

Address Rising Prospect Challenges

Prospects who are ready to talk with you have arrived at the bottom of the funnel. Call or meet with the prospect and get a full list of the issues they are facing. The first issue they talk about is usually not the core issue troubling them. In reviewing this sample issues list conversation, note how the team member deepens and develops the story to address prospect challenges as they arise:

TEAM MEMBER: "Tell me a little about what's going on."

PROSPECT: "My mother can't remember things."

TEAM MEMBER: "What's that affecting?"

PROSPECT: "I can't be present for my job, my husband, my kids."

TEAM MEMBER: "Why is it important to you to be present?"

PROSPECT: "When I was in high school, my grandfather died after a long struggle with Alzheimer's. My mom was the only one who could connect with him. She spent so much time managing his care. It felt like she forgot about us at home. She did her best. I want to do better than that."

Asking, "Why is that important to you?" invites the prospect to become part of the story. She lets down her guard and tells the truth because you have built trust throughout the storytelling process. This gives way to the flip.

The Flip

Sales expert Blair Enns of Win Without Pitching describes "the flip" as the moment you move in the mind of the prospect from salesperson to "expert practitioner." Enns says you will witness changes in body language, tone and attention. The flip can happen anytime leading up to this moment: while the prospect engages with you on social media, as they are consuming your content, while you are addressing specific challenges or as you are addressing rising prospect challenges.

The flip is the turning point, the moment the prospect decides to resolve their challenges with you and your community. It's an ideal time to introduce them to other prospects and families, allowing them to share their stories to further engage in your community.

"The simple shapes of stories are beautiful shapes."

- Kurt Vonnegut; watch his TED talk [here](#).

Addressing Falling Prospect Challenges

At this phase, the prospect has more specific challenges you can help resolve:

- How many of my belongings can I bring with me?
- Will my family want to visit me?
- What happens if I don't like it?

The webinar [The Art of Engagement: Strategies That Convert Hesitant Prospects Into Happy Residents](#), by Sherpa and Carter Stevens from [OneDay](#), explores what makes for stronger connections with your prospective residents at this phase.

Resolution/Agreement

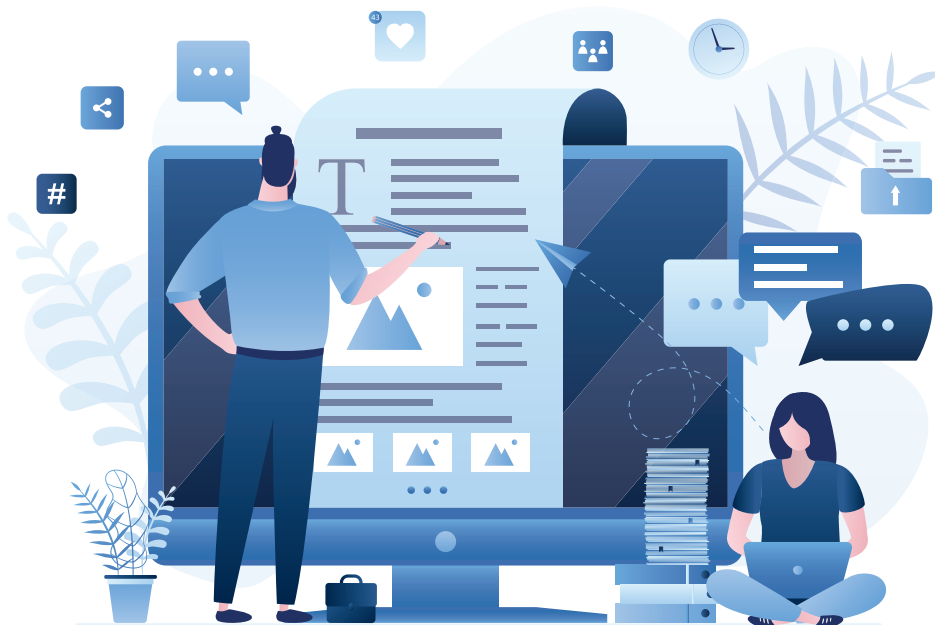
All rising and falling challenges are resolved, and the prospect is ready to move in. Go beyond the agreement signing and continue the conversation, ensuring every fear and hope have been addressed. Every great story ends with a deeply satisfying feeling of resolution.

Move-In/Tying Up Loose Ends

The French word denouement refers to the final part of a story in which the elements of the plot are woven together. Ideally, the story of move-in day is captured and celebrated in such a way that draws the family together and the resident into the fold of the community.

As Carter Stevens from One Day says in [The Power of Storytelling in Sales and Marketing](#), storytelling is all about “taking the prospect along for the ride and allowing them to imagine themselves living in your community.”

Now, how will we know storytelling efforts are successful?



Measuring Success in Storytelling

The top five ways our survey respondents quantitatively measured success in storytelling marketing were:

- Analyzing social media analytics of collected story results
- Analyzing website metrics of collected story results
- Analyzing a list of collected story types for effectiveness
- Generating split test results to analyze story results
- Tracking the number of new contacts in CRM database

In terms of qualitatively measuring success in storytelling marketing, almost half of our respondents are conducting a structural analysis of how the collected story types are built. Other means deployed include conducting a thematic analysis of the collected story types and conducting an analysis of how the stories are conveyed visually.

Key lead measures of storytelling marketing success include:

- Number of social posts made monthly
- Number of new content pieces published monthly
- Number of prospects invited to a call or meet each month

Key lag measures of storytelling marketing success include:

- Increased social media impressions
- Increased open rates for content marketing
- Increased website traffic to the blog

Is your team meeting marketing benchmarks? How might storytelling make a difference?

Yes, I want a complimentary strategy session with a Big Buzz nurture marketing expert today so I can get:

- ✓ Clarity on the root causes of current lead issues we face
- ✓ Research and industry intel that will help eradicate lead issues for good
- ✓ A clearer vision for reaching the organization's desired future state this year, 3 years from now and 5 years from now
- ✓ A free initial nurture marketing plan to invite warm leads to move in now

SCHEDULE MY FREE STRATEGY SESSION

Big Buzz is a marketing agency delivering a steady stream of move-in-ready leads to teams serving the senior living industry. For more than 15 years, Big Buzz has helped senior living marketing and sales teams nurture leads to increase occupancy, grow and scale. CEO Wendy O'Donovan Phillips is the author of the book [Flourish!: The Method Used by Aging Services Organizations for the Ultimate Marketing Results](#), has been published in McKnight's, has been a regular contributor to Forbes, and has been quoted in The Washington Post, ABC News and Chicago Tribune. The Big Buzz leadership team regularly lectures in front of audiences ranging from 25 to 3,000 attendees, including at Argentum and various LeadingAge chapters. Agency awards and accolades include recognition for excellence by the American Marketing Association, Gold Key Award Winner by the Business Marketing Association, HubSpot Academy Inbound Marketing Certification, and Top Advertising and Marketing Agency by Clutch. www.bigbuzzinc.com