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Breaking Through: It Takes a Good Story

by Joe Solmonese



This past September, I sat on a panel at the annual convention of the Association of LGBTQ Journalists in Philadelphia. Our session focused on the challenge of getting a story to break through in a fractured media environment, at a time when LGBTQ progress is being undermined by an unfriendly administration. But my response, drawn from my experience as head of the Human Rights Campaign, holds value for anyone trying to get a message across, whether you're addressing your workforce, customers, regulators, or the public.

I talked about how the LGBTQ movement succeeded in changing the conversation about marriage equality, a strategy that helped engineer a complete reversal of public opinion. (According to the Pew Research Center, Americans in 2001 opposed same-sex marriage by a margin of 57 percent to 35 percent in favor; today, 62 percent of Americans favor marriage equality and only 32 percent oppose it.)

How did we achieve this breakthrough? As president of HRC during a good part of the marriage equality debate, the lasting lesson I drew from the experience is to never underestimate the power of a good story. It sounds old-fashioned in this high-tech world, but think about it: When something goes viral — be it a video, a Tweet, or a Facebook post — an emotionally compelling story is usually at its heart.

I shared what I consider to be the turning point for marriage equality. Initially, we centered our message around the notion that LGBTQ people are just like everyone else. We've got jobs, mortgages, and kids; we make a positive contribution to society; shouldn't we also have the right to marry? We trotted out example after example of ordinary couples who just happened to be gay.

But our message wasn't getting much traction. The way we were framing it, not being able to marry didn't seem like that big a deal. People thought, "well, those LGBTQ people have it pretty good, what do they need to get married for?"

Clearly we needed to change things up. So, instead of talking about all we have in common with straight people, we began to highlight vulnerable LGBTQ families who were likely to suffer severe personal and economic adversity because they could not legally marry. I shared the example of an elderly couple, both World War II vets. "Look at these men," we said. "They are American heroes. After 40 years together, if and when one of them dies, the other will lose his home and half his pension because they aren't able to marry."

This moved people in ways our "gays — they're just like us" message had not. It drove home the idea that not being able to get married does actual harm. Stories like this touched people's emotions and helped break down their resistance, ultimately shifting public opinion in our favor.

Now that I'm in the corporate world, I've found this to be equally useful for my clients. A compelling story can help build support for rolling out a new product, making a change in workplace policy, or restructuring a business model. For all the new platforms we have for communicating and engaging, a good story is still the most powerful way to break through and build influence.

Joe Solmonese leads the Gavin/Solmonese Corporate Engagement practice, helping organizations break down problems and find actionable solutions. Prior to forming Gavin/Solmonese, he was president of the Human Rights Campaign and CEO of EMILY's List.