

# Testimonials:

Personal stories that have the power to save lives  
on the road



Rebecca Sultana from Bangladesh lost her husband in a speed-related crash.

**Personal, empathetic stories can be powerful tools when promoting behavior change and support for public policy.**

**This guide summarizes decades' worth of experience in developing first-person stories from road crash survivors, victims' family members, police officers and medical professionals to emotionally connect with an audience. Revealing how lives are forever impacted by road crashes is vital for supporting civil society, governments and citizens who share a vision for a future where better laws and regulations mean no more fatalities or serious injuries.**

## What is a testimonial, and why are they so powerful?

Testimonials must be real to be powerful.

Testimonials remind audiences that there is no such thing as an accident: If an integrated approach to safer roads and road users, vehicles, infrastructure and post-crash response were in place, nearly every death on the road could be prevented. These stories also remind viewers that these tragedies can happen to anyone.

In this context, a testimonial conveys the profound effect of a crash, offering a deeply personal account from those directly involved. It can include critical perspectives from doctors, police officers and first responders who witness the aftermath of these crashes. Testimonials emotionally recount the incident and urge viewers to take action, empowering them to prevent future tragedies.

Testimonial storytellers share relatable experiences, evoking a strong sense of familiarity in viewers, which highlights the gravity of the tragedy and the importance of taking action.

### A testimonial story can be harnessed to:

- Present the people behind crash data, humanizing the problem of road safety and creating a sense of urgency.
- Change risky behaviors and attitudes around risk factors.
- Advance policy change, such as strengthened road safety laws to protect road users and their families, so that no crash results in another death.
- Shift paradigms by showing the need for a systematic approach to a problem, such as viewing road safety as a public health issue.

## Considerations for testimonial development and use

### Identifying storytellers

Victims' groups, medical professionals and insurance companies can be great resources for finding good storytellers.

Social media and news stories can also be used to find crash victims or family members who may be willing to tell their personal story. Anyone featured in a testimonial should also be willing to appear alongside other speakers at a news conference, policy roundtable or television interview, and in campaign media campaign materials.

Carefully review the cases and look for those who have experienced serious harm that can be attributed to the issue in question, for example, a violent car crash attributable to a driver's alcohol consumption. Consider testimonials from ordinary people viewers can relate to and avoid perpetuating stereotypes. When approaching potential storytellers who may have experienced severe trauma, handle the interaction with utmost care. Tactfully probe to understand how they plan to convey their story, while clearly explaining that not everyone interviewed will be selected.

The interests of the storyteller, their family and the organization planning to use testimonials in their work must be aligned. Ensure proper consent is given from anyone featured in the testimonial, with a clear understanding of how the final product may be used. See Resources for a sample consent form.

Avoid pending legal cases. A storyteller should not be paid or coerced in any way to tell their story, but consider providing compensation for their travel and time. Understand and respect if a storyteller decides to withdraw their participation at any time.

### Producing materials

When preparing for the video interview, write down questions probing the cause of the event such as, "Can you tell us what happened that day when...?" Include questions that elicit emotions such as, "How did you feel when...?" Don't use a script or tell them what to say—the words should be their own. Ask storytellers to repeat their answers if they ramble. Don't push too much. Tears are not the objective. Analyze their story very carefully. It is advised to have a conversation with them before the interview to make the storyteller more comfortable.

At the end of the interview, ask: "Is there anything else you want to say?"

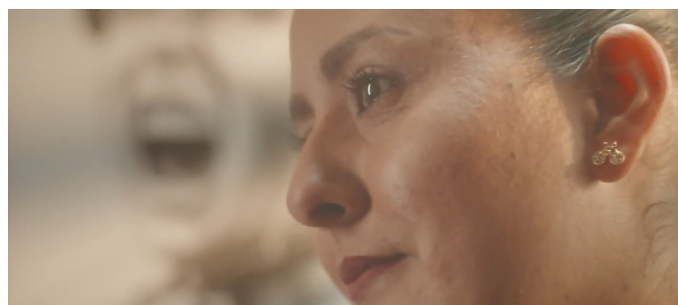
Film in a quiet space. Consider doing the interview in the storyteller's home. Keep the background free of clutter to avoid distractions.

When meeting for the interview, be compassionate, sensitive and appreciative. Make sure that the storyteller is able to articulate a key message and establish a call to action, such as not speeding in residential areas.

Always listen closely. Be relaxed, but attentive. If they aren't sure where to begin, ask them to start at the beginning. Be patient and let the story come out naturally. Do not be afraid of long pauses—it can take time for a person to find the right words. Ask for the family's home videos or photos, which can be useful to show the subject when they were young, or to show people who died before their story was told. Don't be judgmental or stigmatize anyone. Explain why people should not say "accident," and should consider shared responsibility to mitigate a crash's impact when they do happen. See Resources for sample interview questions.

A good testimonial has a simple linear structure that clearly illustrates a point being made, for example, that speeding is dangerous and can kill, or that stronger laws are required to curb speeding. Show the final product to the subject to get their consent.

### CASE STUDY: The story of Fernanda Torres



Fernanda Torres, Julian Esteban's mother.

[Watch Fernanda's testimonial](#)

### Use of testimonials

Testimonials can be used as part of a 360-degree communication strategy. Consider creating a video for broadcast or streaming, as well as linked posters and print ads, and posts for social media. Invite the storyteller to participate in events and meetings, such as stakeholder roundtables, news conferences, town hall meetings, rallies, workshops or other road safety events. Engage the storyteller in a press conference and pitch the story to journalists as part of a media advocacy strategy.

Parents who have lost a child can be particularly heart-wrenching storytellers and effective at changing hearts and minds. In Colombia, Fernanda Torres shared a painful story of losing her son, Julian Esteban, because of a speeding driver. This helped convince lawmakers to pass legislation to reduce speed limits. This law, though known to save lives, was not popular with the public.

To build public support for lower speed limits, she was featured as part of a nationwide campaign curbing speeding by Colombia's National Road Safety Agency, along with the cities of Bogotá and Cali, with the call to action, "It Didn't Have to Happen. Slow Down." The goal was to expose country-wide speeding, flag speeding as a public health issue, and make drivers understand the devastating consequences of speeding so that they would drive within posted limits. The campaign also strived to change social norms by portraying speeding as deviant behavior. The campaign aired for eight weeks on TV, radio and online, and was widely shown on billboards and bus-station posters. It was designed to make drivers think about the terrible consequences that a traffic crash could bring for them and their loved ones and convey to drivers that no one is immune to crashes.

In preparation for the campaign, Vital Strategies worked closely with the National Road Safety Agency to interview 48 motorcyclists and extensively test messages with drivers to ensure that the plea to slow down was strong enough to motivate riders. The video spots featured an original song created for the campaign that was infused with palpable grief, longing and regret that Colombians found powerful and emotive. These interviews, as well as focus-group message testing, revealed the importance of highlighting death's effect on the family, and the slogan "It Didn't Have to Happen. Slow Down" grew out of that finding.

The post-campaign evaluation showed that a significant majority of respondents who remembered seeing this campaign (98%) agreed that the campaign helped them understand the consequences of not following speeding rules. About 93% reported feeling concerned about speeding, and 95% indicated that the campaign made them more likely to avoid speeding. The campaign encouraged public discourse about speeding: aware respondents had a 42% dialogue rate compared to 30% among those unaware of the campaign. The campaign also demonstrated the significant impact of testimonials in uniting society. Despite political differences, the National Road Safety Agency and the Secretariats of Mobility from both Bogotá and Cali joined forces to launch the campaign in tribute to road traffic victims. This collaborative effort highlights the power of a compelling narrative, such as Fernanda's testimonial, in rallying people from diverse backgrounds toward a common cause.

When developing testimonials, always remember the sensitive nature of working with families who have lost loved ones. Be sure to:

- Respect privacy, ethnicity, language, local beliefs, rituals and culture.
- Not interview someone experiencing trauma and shock.
- Check and cross-check the information before making it public.

## Resources

1. [Sample consent form](#)
2. [Sample interview questions](#)
3. [Road safety testimonial videos by Vital Strategies calling on drivers to never drink and drive, to slow down, and to properly wear helmets and seat-belts](#)
4. [Ecuadorean YouTube channel with testimonials from car crash survivors or relatives of victims](#)
5. Testimonials about the impact of unsafe vehicles on people's lives, part of the Colombian Carros Más Seguros initiative led by La Liga contra la violencia vial
  - [Conoce la historia de Arley David](#)
  - [Conoce la historia de Aura Vélez](#)
  - [Conoce la historia de Carolina Sarmiento](#)
6. [Faces behind the figures: Voices of road traffic crash victims and their families, WHO](#)
7. [Wakefield PMA, Loken PB, Hornik PRC. Use of mass media campaigns to change health behaviour. Lancet 2010;376:1261.](#)
8. [Listen to My Story: Communicating with Victims of Crime, US Dept. of Justice](#)
9. [Raw and real: an innovative communication approach to smokeless tobacco control messaging in low and middle-income countries, BMJ](#)
10. [A News Media Guide For Victim Service Providers, Justice Solutions](#)

For more information, visit [Vital Strategies](#) and [Advocacy Incubator](#).