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Article

Brand storytelling in social networks – tell your storyline

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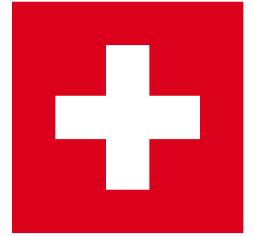
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Storytelling in Marketing & Sales



Universität St.Gallen

Brand storytelling in social networks – tell your storyline

The term storytelling generates more than 40 million hits in a Google query. It is just one clue of the huge diffusion of the storytelling concept in many areas. Marketing is one of those domains where the notion of storytelling has been applied. However, the success of a concept brings also the confusion of the true conceptual core of that concept and its use as a generic catchword, rather than a well-rounded thinking tool. The basic question is: What is a story? And this question is followed by the interrogation: How a brand can tell that good story in the current marketing context? The answer to the first question revolves around the notion of authenticity. The answer to the second question is that consumers are the final bearer of authenticity. Brands should build their own narrative around the consumers' storytelling.

Prof. Stefano Pace

First, what is a story and how a story has been recognized in marketing? We can trace different phases of the evolution of storytelling. The first wave of storytelling – though not labelled as such – is mostly based on the art of rhetoric. This storytelling has the form of an intellectual endeavour, where communicator and receiver share a common understanding and appreciation of rhetorical tools. A good story is a story that applies the features of rhetoric in a creative way. A good story walks the thin line between respecting and trespassing the rhetorical rules. A rhyme, for instance, is a strict rule that can be applied creatively. At that stage, marketing has the ambition to imitate the liberal arts for the communication with the market. Marketing applies rhetoric tools to warrant the market that marketing is a legitimate discipline of society, different but not too far from literature.

In a second phase, storytelling is about persuading people: “Persuasion is the centrepiece of business activity. Customers must be convinced to buy your company’s products or services” (Fryer/McKee 2003, p. 51). Storytellers add emotions to the intellectual ideas. Stories take the form of the narrative process where a protagonist overcomes adversities and antagonists to achieve a desirable goal. “A great salesperson knows how to tell a story in which the product is the hero” (Guber 2007, p. 54). The cognitive sciences support the idea that the narrative form is one of the best way to wire memories, understandings, and beliefs in the brain of the customers. The idea of persuasion is not at the opposite of truth. A good story always expresses the integrity of the teller and the trustworthiness of her story (Guber 2007). The persuasion of the story can be quite deep. A story relates inner archetypes,

that “are collective unconscious forces affecting beliefs, attitudes, and behavior implicitly and/or explicitly” (Woodside 2010, p. 533). By touching the archetype, the receiver of the story experiences a cathartic transformation, as in the ancient Greek tragedies. One can consider transforming oneself as the highest form of persuasion.

The assumption of storytelling as persuasion is that the audience is external to the storyteller. The storyteller should let its audience immerse into her own story, letting the receiver feel the way the protagonist feels. Experiential marketing has fostered this assumption and made it a physical service or retail environment. Themed and immersive environments (Disneyland is the master case) surrounds the customers and transforms the story from a narrative process into an alive ambient (Pine/Gilmore 2011). The environment acts upon the visitor to let her live the story. It is an active audience, interacting with the elements of the story, but still an audience. The wonder from the unfolding story remains, because “a great story is never fully predictable though foresight – but it’s projectable thought insights” (Guber 2007, p. 57).

Today, consumer research can introduce a third stage in storytelling. It is a stage where the consumer is not an audience anymore. The consumer is the storyteller. As suggested by the Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould/Thompson 2005), consumers deploy their own skills and ability to elaborate resources that the market provide them. This elaboration can include stories too. Consumers reframe the marketing stories told by companies. Consumers alter, enrich, and complement those stories. Consumers are also able to create totally new stories. Sometimes, consumers are even able to create stories on behalf of the brand itself and with the brand as main

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character. Is it the case of stories around the Baumgartner endeavour, for instance. The high-jump made by Baumgartner inspired some consumers to create a video that imitates the jump, but with a different brand-related protagonist: a LEGO character. In a video posted on YouTube, a LEGO toy repeats the jump made by Baumgartner. It is a case of brand surfeits (Nakassis 2013), when the consumers complete the meanings of a brand (in this case, LEGO) by adding their original content.

New approach to experiential marketing

We are moving from communicated stories (e.g. ads) to experienced stories (servicescapes and retail spaces). A new approach to experiential marketing provides some support to this move. In an experiential environment, individuals do not passively receive the story told by that space, but appropriate their own experience by mobilizing their personal skills and resources. For instance, the story experienced by a listener of an orchestra in a music hall widely changes across listeners. Each listener refers to her own cultural references, past attendance of music concerts, different entry points to the experience (Carù/Cova 2006). This appropriation is a way through which consumers extract different stories from the same text and experience.

The evolution of storytelling proceeds in parallel with the evolution of social networks. Social media can be the preferred context of consumer-based storytelling. At its inception, the social networks started as an ego-based phenomenon. Users profiles were the key asset and all the attention of scholars and managers was on them. Themes such as impression management, privacy, how much information users put online, how online accounts interact with the offline life, witnessed the interest

for a network meant as a new way to express the ego (boyd/Ellison 2008). Analogously, the interaction among individual profiles were another core of attention. In this phase of development, social networks failed or succeeded according to the ability to ease the connection among profiles. SixDegrees, one of the first social networks, has gone down also because it was ahead of time, without enough profiles available for connection (boyd/Ellison 2008). On the contrary, one of the success factors of Facebook was its gradual opening from the University users to the general public. To explain why some social networks succeed and others failed, studies on the structure of online networks flourished. Today, social networks add stories as a new core of attention for scholars and managers. Individual profiles remain important, as shown by the huge number of followers of celebrity accounts. However, the stories created in the social networks gain value. Appealing stories that pop up in social networks can generate sudden popularity for some otherwise unknown users. This phenomenon goes from well-crafted jokes gaining thousands of retweets, to the global shame hardly hitting normal people discovered in engaging in questionable behaviours. Stories are the key value in social networks, where individuals are (sometimes unintentionally)

storytellers. YouTubers become the new stars through their stories. Videogames commentators on Twitch follow the game as an unfolding story.

Micro-stories challenges

A common feature of the stories on social networks is that – differently from most company-based stories – they do not address grand themes and overarching myths. They rather show daily occurrences, corners of life that lean towards the personal and subjective. Yet, once these stories enter the circuit of social networks, they become public stories, with an interacting audience. Live videos are one of the best examples of this kind of communication. They move the storytelling from the textual form to the visual form. They extend the ability of telling a story from the planned story written and then published, to the live story that is built live in front of the audience. Periscope, Meerkat and similar applications allow people to express unplanned stories, fragments of their experiences. The sense of serendipity of these micro-stories challenges the idea that storytelling is a form of structured narrative. An instant video is a story open to many interpretations and its fleeting nature applies the usual rules of storytelling in a new way.

Marketing can find an interesting space at the intersection between consumer-based storytelling and story-based social networks. The table below synthesizes some of the key features of the three stages of brand storytelling and storytelling in social networks.

The two types of storytelling may converge on a new stage of development that is emerging in these years. On the one hand, companies are aware that the most authentic stories around their brands are those generated by consumers and fans of the brand. Through their own lived stories around the brand, consumers can deliver the sincerity, the

Management Summary

Storytelling on social media is a rhizomatic network of consumer stories. A brand can enter this narrative flow with a storyline based on an unfolding event that resonates with consumers' storylines.

Table 1. The evolution of storytelling in marketing and in social networks

Stage	Marketing storytelling	Storytelling in social networks
1	Rhetoric Marketing tries to get legitimacy as discipline by applying rhetoric tools	Ego-based Individual profiles and their traits are the core of social networks.
2	Persuasion Brand stories are told to persuade customers about some brand features and to drive them towards specific behaviour (e.g., word-of-mouth, purchase)	Story-based The core value of social networks is in the creation and diffusion of stories created by users (e.g., tutorials, jokes, viral content)
3	Consumer-based (with brand as umbrella set of meanings) Consumers create stories around brands with creativity and passion. Brands try to enable consumers to generate these stories by providing a common background with the main brand meanings.	Fragmented stories Stories are fragmented, serendipitous, social, and visual. They form a network of micro-stories that do not necessarily form a macro-story.

Source: Own enquiries.

roots with inner feelings, and the connection with a higher story that characterise brand authenticity (Beverland/Farrelly 2010). For instance, by discussing one's first experience with a brand – the first Star Wars movie watched when one was a kid in 1977, for example – a consumer can relate a quite intimate story. This story is authentic and it conveys the authenticity of the brand. On the other hand, social networks show that these stories are often live micro-narratives with no visible consistency with other stories, challenging the consistency that brand identity should have. For instance, the story of the circumstances of the first Star Wars movie watched by an individual can be idiosyncratic and subjective. That story may not resonate with other individual stories. A usual approach to deal with the confusing content generated online would be to provide a background reference that can unite the consumer micro-stories into a wider and consistent story. In that approach, a brand acts as the background universe where one can locate each consumer-created story. If Star Wars is a heritage brand dating back to the origin of modern sci-fi movies, the

individual first-time experience with the original movie – despite any difference – may be seen under the common theme of being a real fan, opposed to newbie fans of recent sequels or prequels of the original saga. However, this attempt to provide a common meaning to disparate stories through the brand may have some backlash. For instance, the distinction between classical old fans and recent would-be fans may divide the audience, instead of increasing it.

A new approach is needed to connect brand storytelling and social network storytelling. Instead of a brand presented as an overarching set of meanings containing consumers' stories, the brand provides specific storylines (i.e., narratives based on live events, real characters, well-defined endeavours) and users interact with them through their own stories. We can find this new way of storytelling in events. Events are the best context to see the features of this convergence between brand storytelling and storytelling in social networks. An event is a complex context where the material and the digital dimensions test the ability to narrate the brand story.

Case: Mercedes-Benz Italia and Mille Miglia

This section describes a case of integration of the modern social networks into the strategy of a well-known brand: Mercedes-Benz. Mercedes-Benz Italia has frequently used the social media for its communication and branding campaigns. The most recent campaign has been launched for the Formula 1 championship in Monza (September 2015). In May 2015, Mercedes-Benz Italia has followed the Mille Miglia race with its Twitter and Periscope campaign. Established in 1927, Mille Miglia is one of the most famous endurance races for vintage and classic cars. With its total route of around 1.000 miles, it combines the vintage flavour of classical cars, notable landscapes, and some of the thrills of a car race. It is a ritual for car lovers. Adopting an approach based on netnography (Kozinets, 2015), the digital communication campaign by Mercedes-Benz Italia has been examined by analysing the content and videos generated during the Mille Miglia race, the media press releases by the company, the reactions and comments by users, and miscellane-

ous online content linked to the communication initiative and event. In the case of the present study, we rely on a grounded approach. The analysis explored the overall space of relevant content with an extensive use of memos and notes (Kozinets, 2015), which are a key starting point for an ethnographic work. Once obtained the key meanings and themes of the event, the analysis focused on specific content, for instance the content linked to #MilleMiglia (around 200 tweets) and related Twitter hashtags, which were used by the brand and participants to convey their content. The analysis of this content (e.g.: tweets, linked videos) followed the steps by Spiggle (1994), with open, axial, and selective coding. The aim of qualitative content analysis is to cover all the themes emerging from a given qualitative dataset. In our case, the aim was also to determine whether a main brand storyline emerged from the overall set of stories, i.e. a relevant story around which the content of the brand was produced and discussed.

Gamification element

The video at the address <https://vimeo.com/133533212> produced by Oki Doki Film (www.okidokifilm.it) describes the communication initiative around Mille Miglia, as it follows. For the Mille Miglia race, Mercedes intro-

Main Propositions

- Three stages of the evolution of marketing storytelling: rhetoric, persuasion, empowered consumer
- Three stages of the evolution of social media storytelling: ego-based, story-based, fragmentation
- Social media storytelling is rhizomatic. Single brand storylines integrates umbrella storytelling
- Storytelling on social media implies monitoring and developing emerging consumer stories

duced the “Periscope car” driven by brand ambassadors for the live-streaming of the key moments of the event. Four Periscope promoted videos were issued from the Mercedes account to promote the initiative. The Twitter hashtag #MilleMiglia was the aggregation point for the Twitter discussion for the event; fans used that hashtag together with hashtags and content linked to the Mercedes campaign, showing the effect of the initiative. A gamification element was present too: users could unlock video content on classic Mercedes cars by participating to a game on Twitter. Through Twitter poll cards, users could vote for their preferred Mille Miglia decade through the images of related Mercedes classic cars. The poll cards achieved 7.000

interactions. Twitter multi-image cards showed photos of the cities touched by the event. As per the results of the communication campaign, the themes related to the Mille Miglia and Mercedes-Benz boomed during the campaign. The total impressions delivered were 1.85 million. The engagement rate was 3 percent overall, with a peak of 12 percent. As the video affirms at the end, the 2015 Mille Miglia was “the most social #MilleMiglia ever”.

By analysing the hashtag #MilleMiglia used on Twitter together with the brand-related #MilleMigliaMB, it is possible to understand the effects that the storytelling may have on the brand. Mercedes issued the majority of these tweets. Fans and other users

Communication initiative around Mille Miglia



reacted through retweets and comments. Some drivers, participating in the race with their own Mercedes, posted their content too. The overall content around Mille Miglia – including that related to Mercedes – has been characterized by the visual dimension. The generated content was frequently featuring pictures of cars participating in the race, close-up portraits of cars, details (e.g.: the shiny chroming of vintage cars), cars with beautiful landscape in the background, vintage pictures of earlier editions, including the legendary feat by Stirling Moss and his celebratory participation in 2015 edition.

Users interacted with the storyline

A key storyline generated by Mercedes – and a key branding approach – has been the commemorative attendance of the 2015 Mille Miglia by the former racer Stirling Moss, who celebrated his all-time record established sixty-nine years before driving a Mercedes. This participation and the related content provided a specific storyline combining the heritage of the race, the enduring passion of different generations, the classic cars mythology with its heroes/drivers. Instead of general brand themes and marketing

communications, Stirling Moss was a concrete figure with a real story of victory to celebrate.

Users interacted with the storyline of Stirling Moss with their stories. The interactions went from pride of having him among the attendants of the event (as in the tweet “Even more fantastic to see Sir Stirling Moss & Lady Susie watching the cars on the #millemiglia”), to users tweeting links to online documents concerning the Moss’ legendary win in 1955. Those documents included the commemorative documentary produced by Mille Miglia and Mercedes. The celebration of the presence of Moss included pictures of his participation (e.g., “Sir Stirling Moss arrives in Rome in his 300 SLR #722 #MBMille”, followed by a picture of the driver) with the aim of living a relevant moment similar to that of 1955. The story of Moss in the 2015 edition of Mille Miglia activated the reactions of users with the resulting effect of adding a further layer of heritage to an event that was already historical. The sense of special occasion that characterizes authenticity was achieved by the story of the Moss’ presence, augmented and elaborated by Mille Miglia fans and participants.

From the Mercedes initiative and this storyline, we can draw some sug-

gestions for brand managers willing to generate storytelling in social networks.

1. Enter the narrative stream with your own storyline

The campaign by Mercedes-Benz is a form of storytelling that calls for an interaction between the company and other actors of social media (including customers and fans). On the one hand, the company feeds the social networks with content based on the event. On the other hand, the company-based storytelling enters a wider stream of content generated by other brands, users and anyone interested in the event. All these different content lines are quite varied and they form different discourses. However, they may complement each other with their respective emotions, thoughts, comments.

In the case of Mille Miglia and other events, where the main storytelling can be located? Is it possible to define a main theme around which a brand can build its own story? Due to the nature of storytelling in the digital age as described above, the meanings of complex events like Mille Miglia are fragmented and multifaceted. There is no single theme that, by itself, can contain the meanings of the event. Rather than locating a main theme, a brand can contribute to the story



stream with its own storyline. In the case of Mercedes, a key storyline was the celebration of the Stirling Moss race. As far as this storyline contributes to the overall story, it can be appreciated by users and fans. In the case of Mercedes, its main storyline was coherent with Mille Miglia storytelling because it conveys the sense of a heritage that is still lived in modern roads. A legendary driver like Moss is still a respected figure of the race. Once this storyline is established, the other stories can connect and refer to it. This approach is at the opposite of the strategy of providing an overarching theme as a reference for any consumer. Consumers can appreciate this approach, because it does not enforce any top-down theme, but rather it plays at the same levels of individuals. Instead of a general look-and-feel or abstract brand values, specific stories like the race by Moss can offer tangible elements for consumer-generated stories, such as comparing old and new races, tracing the history of the best racers of Mille Miglia.

2. Monitor and develop the emerging micro-stories


The storyline of the brand is partly planned (for instance, the promotional videos), but most of its content depends

on actual occurrences as they unfold during the event. The overall story stream of the event may suddenly turn towards unplanned directions. For instance, in the case of Mille Miglia, a particular beautiful day may inspire people to post pictures of a landscape; a car raising interest in collectors and fans during the race can catch the attention for some time; a driver may gain unexpected popularity thanks to his ability to communicate via social media. Each of these micro-stories can emerge and the brand manager should be able to contribute to them with the brand storyline. The key attitude is that the single brand storyline should serve the larger plot of the event as it unfolds, and not vice versa.

Lessons learned

- Social networks provide a narrative context for your story. Enter the narrative stream with your storyline. Select one specific story that may resonate with the stories of consumers.
- Brands can provide a background for the consumers' discussion on social network (e.g., the heritage and spirit of Mille Miglia classic car race). Consumers apply that background to their stories.
- Brand-related events represent an ideal context for social media storytelling. The social media apps available today can make use of the live and visual nature of the events.

Write a narrow storyline

Storytelling in the digital context calls for narrative abilities that are still rooted in the typical skills of marketers, but in a new way. In the past, the main narration of a brand was a strong and clear positioning, replicated in different forms in the different available media channels (as in the case of trans-media or cross-media approaches (Jenkins 2010)). Today, an event requires that the brand contribute by narrating a specific storyline. In addition to the grand story of the brand, the marketers should write a narrow storyline and weave it into the rest of the story tissue of the event. 

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