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Article

Fostering corporate values through storytelling

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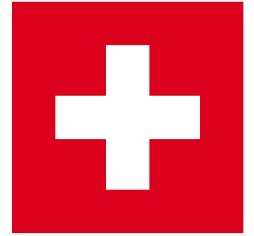
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Storytelling in Marketing & Sales





Fostering corporate values through storytelling

In 2008 Kempinski Hotels found itself facing rapid expansion with the number of employees set to double by 2015. At the time, managers needed to find a way to foster the company's core values and communicate them in a way that would appeal to people in different countries and cultures. In the following interview Mia Norcaro, Director of Corporate Communications at Kempinski, takes us on a journey through the genesis of the "DNA" project and the challenges that presented themselves along the way.

The interview has been conducted by Chiara Bossard, collaborator at the Competence Center for Luxury Management at the Institute of Marketing at the University of St. Gallen.

Mrs. Norcaro, could you briefly introduce us to the "DNA" project and the drivers that led to its creation?

There was a strong business reason behind our choice to start working on our internal and external brand. At Kempinski, we realized that the way we are positioned externally did not quite fit with how we feel internally as a company. Externally we were seen as maybe slightly boring, quite Germanic, traditional and dusty. Whereas, internally we felt and feel passionate about what we are doing, excited and empowered about our jobs and serving guests. In 2009, we decided to take action. On one hand, we looked at our external brand. Particularly, what we had been delivering to our guests as guest experience. On the other hand, we were interested in

Mia Norcaro

completed her degree in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1996. She has over 15 years experience in public relations, marketing and communications in industries as diverse as fashion, telecommunications (subsidiary of Deutsche Telekom), consulting and investment management. Mia joined Kempinski Hotels in 2003, where she is currently Director Corporate Communications.

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our internal brand. We were interested in understanding what it essentially was and what we were delivering to our employees. We wanted to ensure our external brand reflected our internal brand. In addition, by developing a coherent external and internal brand, we could drive business performance. We wanted to help our employees understand what our culture was, buy into it and deliver it consistently so that we could hope to encourage retention and loyalty. As a result, we expected less absenteeism, less sick days, and other benefits such as these. We also expected we could create a consistent brand experience, a strong brand promise and, as a consequence, greater customer loyalty. We decided to take a very authentic approach by asking our employees who we are. We avoided organizing focus groups with top-level management, but rather went straight to the source: the people who are actually delivery services in our hotels. We conducted about 180 interviews with employees from our hotels from all geographical areas and all levels of the organization. As a result, what we received as a feedback felt instinctively right. It corresponded well with how the project team perceived the company culture. However, what was most interesting was the format that feedback came in. In many interviews, people would say: “Let me tell you a story that will show you what it means to work at Kempinski”. This already planted the seeds for the storytelling idea afterwards.

We discussed the values, we read stories together, brainstormed and developed activities that managers could then implement in their own hotels. Adaptation on a regional level was very important at this point.

Did the idea of using storytelling come as consequence of the approach employees were using to share values?

Yes. Right at the beginning we were looking for a way to transport messages in areas where English is not the main language, where not everybody is highly educated, and where the objective was to engage people. The first model that we used was that of the theater. If you think of a hotel, the theater metaphor could have fit quite well. The front of

house is where the actor greets the guests, and the back of house is the stage lighting, the crew, the costume designer and all these other roles. The imagery was beautiful, but eventually we became uncomfortable with it. We discussed it a lot within the team and finally, we realized that it would not work for us. Because we are all Kempinski, whether we are in the laundry ironing sheets, or serving the guests food and wine. We are not acting, and we are not pretending to care about our guests. We genuinely care about our guests. So we had to look for an approach to convey the values that was genuine. This is when we started leaning towards storytelling and decided to choose the best stories from the interviews that would correspond to our values.

How did you transform the initiative into reality?

Well, there is a technical aspect and the fact that it was already reality, we were just putting it into words. From a technical point of view, we used an internal communication cascade, going up and down. We believe managers are key to transmitting the culture in our organization. For many people, their experience of a brand or the company experience is their experience of their manager and their management style. More concretely, we used an experiential training approach. We discussed the values, we read stories together, brainstormed and developed activities that managers could then implement in their own hotels. Adaptation on a regional level was very important at this point. For example, when we talk about our value “Passion for European Luxury”, which could be off-putting in regions such as China or the Middle East, we put it in a different context: „In Europe people have a general respect and appreciation of other cultures, so our approach to luxury is similar - to enjoy the best of everything there is available in the world”. We combined the experiential training approach with other materials. We had a storybook (Figure 1) and an executive summary for managers, which explained what was required and expected from them. Moreover, we also used traditional communication material such as fliers and posters, which people could see in offices, corridors and back of house common areas. I think this integrated approach was good, because training and communication proved to work extremely well together.

What challenges did you face throughout the project and how did storytelling aid in solving them?

Most of the challenges were around making sure that we respected the different cultures. In that, the choice of stories

we made helped very much, because we took some from each region to compose our storybook. In many cases, we would take the stories, make them anonymous and discuss them during training sessions. What would happen was that many more employees could identify with them and this made our approach very inclusive. We were also very concerned with reaching the average employee, the person that faces the guest, who does not necessarily have a high level of education, and that in some countries, is not able to read

As storytelling has become very strong in our culture, this influenced the launch of a social media campaign on the Kempinski Facebook page.

or write. Storytelling proved to be brilliant for reaching everyone because every culture has some kind of storytelling tradition and in many cases, it is an oral tradition. There is something very powerful about using a story to convey a value, we could reach people without necessarily needing them to read or write themselves. In the Middle East, a member of staff told us about the Hakawati and we began to use this local tradition of the Hakawati (Figure 2), a storyteller, or wise man, who wears a turban and people gather around them to listen to stories.

How is the project moving forward now?

Now, we are looking at the employee and guest experience through the perspective of managerial behavior. One thing we have learned from this experience is that not all managers are good communicators, and in this business that is a skill which is very important to have. So, one of the next steps could be looking at managerial skills and managerial communication.

How would you imagine using storytelling to train managerial behavior?

For example, once upon a time in a hotel in Germany, there was a young trainee, who was assigned room service during the night. As it happened, the trainee's manager got sick and the trainee could rely on the kitchen staff to cook the room service orders but nobody to do the delivery or answer the

calls from the VIP guests. The hotel general manager happened to be present and it came to a point where he said: "Listen, I know you're short staffed, just get the order ready and I'll deliver it myself. I'll be a waiter tonight, and that's fine". This is the managerial behavior we like to see and we want to encourage. If we see guests waiting for something or a colleague finding it hard to fulfil a request, it's all hands on deck. These are the stories we would use in managerial storytelling.

If you had to look at Kempinski's communication, do you find storytelling to be more useful internally, for corporate communication, or externally?

I would say that in general the storytelling has remained internal. We have had discussions for the corporate website, to bring our stories out to the public. One of the issues we always have is that of using somebody's data. This is something we still have to resolve. To prepare for this we have created an online storytelling forum to gather stories and for each one that is submitted we ask for a certificate, which states that the story is true and it happened in a certain hotel at a certain date, and an authorization to use the story. This way Kempinski can use it internally and externally. One idea is to use these stories to update our job website, because it is something that people find very attractive. As storytelling has become very strong in our culture, this influenced the launch of a social media campaign on the Kempinski Facebook page where our "Ladies in red", the ambassadors of our hotels, share their stories. This was not forced out the original storytelling forum. It was simply a campaign that shows how storytelling has become a strong part of what we do.

One last question. Of all those gathered, is there one story that is your favorite?

I find it hard to choose one particular story. Some I have been delighted by, some have made me cry. However, the one that has moved me the most has been the story of a long time guest who after a personal tragedy still decided to spend her Christmas holidays at one of our hotels. The way the guest was welcomed and treated during her stay truly represents our values, our culture and what we stand for. **+**