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Storytelling in Marketing:

On some initiating events in stories of companies, products and brands

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Abstract: The article identifies some typical initiating events occurring in product creation stories and some other genres of marketing storytelling. These are events referring to the initial stage of a product's life cycle explaining how a product, company or brand was born. Five types of such events are discussed: (1) company/product/brand's birth through several generations' hard work, (2) company/product/brand's birth through experiment or by accident, (3) purchase or present, (4) company/product/brand's birth as a result of misfortune, and (5) naming of the product. It is argued that marketing stories resemble advertising from the point of view of their functions, allowing companies to achieve two primary goals: (i) of getting noticed by attracting emotional responses from consumers and (ii) of ensuring that the product or brand is remembered and well-liked.

Keywords: storytelling, copywriting, company/product/brand stories, product creation stories, initiating events, product life cycle.

Introduction

In the age of marketing savvy stories¹ represent an important variety of company, product and brand communication. Being versatile and multifaceted, stories can be incorporated in several genres of marketing, advertising and PR texts and are applied by companies in a variety of ways.

Marketers tell persuasive stories about products to increase sales, to reach their target audiences, to increase product or brand awareness and to build customer engagement. Besides, stories allow companies to simplify complicated issues, build trust, and increase the memorability of their message. As Jantsch points out, “the marketing story is an effective tool because it allows you to do several things that traditional marketing or advertising does not” [8, p. 67].

Besides, PR managers use storytelling to influence public opinion, whereas business leaders tell stories to inspire employees, instill corporate values and manage knowledge flows, among other important goals [11; 6; 10; 1].

Research shows that marketing and organisational stories exist in several versions. According to Jantsch, marketing stories fall into client stories, ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘where’ stories, narratives about company values and ‘lessons learnt’ stories [8, p. 67-68]. Furthermore, based on a story's topic and source, Fog, Budtz and Yakaboylu identify eight types of stories companies can tell various audiences: employee stories, stories about the CEO, stories about

¹ Following Alexander [1, p. 13], for a given audience, the story is defined in this article as “a sequence of content, anchored on a problem, which engages that audience with emotion and meaning”. This broad definition allows studying stories published in a digital format in addition to those published offline.

the founding of the company, stories about the company's milestones, product stories, stories from working partners, stories from customers, stories from opinion leaders [5, p. 99-118].

In addition, every successful company or product needs a *creation story* that generates trust in the product by telling the back story and by setting the stage for companies and brands [7, p. 11]. Such stories frequently “touch on the core values and mindset on which the companies rest” [5, p. 104]. This genre probably exists because the issue of origin “is not only important to end consumers, it is important to new and existing employees, to vendor and partner relationships, to advocates – including lenders and Wall Street” [7, p. 12].

Interestingly, product creation stories may constitute a separate genre of marketing stories or they can be incorporated in other types of marketing or PR texts as story fragments aimed at informing, persuading and/or entertaining the readers. The following product category description entitled “Role of infant formula” containing a succinct mention of Henri Nestlé's life-saving invention illustrates the latter:

Mothers may choose not to breastfeed for social, cultural, health or socio-economic reasons. Situations such as illness, inflexible work schedules, working away from home or necessary medications may prevent a mother from breastfeeding her baby.

Infant formula was developed to address a critical need for a safe and nutritious alternative when breast milk is not available or not chosen. It is the only product recognised to be a suitable breast-milk substitute by the United Nations Codex Alimentarius Commission, the international food standard setting body.

Since Henri Nestlé invented a milk and cereal food to save the life of a neighbour's baby who could not be breastfed, Nestlé has striven to continually improve infant formula. Innovations include infant formulas enhanced with probiotics or infant formulas specifically designed for Caesarean-born babies. Learn more about [Nestlé Commitment to Innovation](#).

Infant nutrition products are subject to much stricter regulation than products for adults. Nestlé is committed to give consumers the highest levels of quality and safety. Mothers trust that the Nestlé products that they feed to their children are nutritious and safe and produced to the highest possible quality standards. Learn more about [Nestlé Commitment to Quality and Safety](#).

(www.babymilk.nestle.com/breastfeeding-is-best/role-of-infant-formula/Pages/default.aspx)

As we can see, this marketing text pursues several goals: to inform mothers about breastfeeding in general and the advantages of Nestlé infant formula in particular. Besides, it promotes Nestlé's other products by highlighting the company's commitment to innovation. The brief reference to the life-saving episode is probably employed in this text to boost the company's credibility and to establish an emotional link with the audience.

It is possible, however, to find marketing texts in which the description of this and similar inventions becomes an end in itself, as will be illustrated below.

It should be noted that in many marketing stories events occurring during the initial stage of a product's life cycle², i.e. its market introduction stage, are often followed by events referring to other phases, such as the growth, maturity, saturation and decline stages.

² See Day [4] on the concept of product life cycle.

Consequently, applying the concept of product life cycle to the structure of marketing stories it seems possible to group all product story events into three major categories: (i) events referring to the birth of product/company/brand, (ii) story events depicting the product's flourishing, and (iii) those describing its decline or transformation.

In what follows I shall focus on the first group of marketing story events. Although corporate storytelling is a relatively well researched field of marketing, there seems to be a knowledge gap on the range of events that constitute narratives belonging to various copywriting genres.

My analysis is based on the stories in English, Russian and German derived from several sources: collections of printed stories, such as [2], digital collections (e.g. www.top-fashion-designers, www.brandpedia.ru, fashionlives.com/modnye-brendy, www.historyofthings.info, www.trustedwatch.com/knowledge/history-of-brands), corporate websites, biographies of famous entrepreneurs, as well as blog entries dedicated to the history of trade marks.

A noteworthy feature of digital product stories is that they may be presented in several forms, usually as text or combinations of text, photography and graphics. Occasionally audio- and video files are also employed to tell product or brand stories. Besides, marketing stories can be narrated by representatives of the company, by endorsers of the product (e.g. professional actors recounting the story on behalf of the company or famous personalities acting as brand ambassadors) or by anonymous copywriters.

So what can marketing stories tell us on how the product, brand or company is born?

1. Company/product/brand's birth through several generations' hard work

This study shows that company founders take the central stage in many product creation stories and are frequently mentioned in other genres of marketing stories. These story characters are usually "driven by passion and the will to make a difference" [5, p. 104]. Besides, they often possess some noteworthy features and are typically depicted as strong personalities who overcame many obstacles in the way of development (e.g. financial hardship, loss of relatives, resettlement), as the following story fragment demonstrates:

Here's a true story about a young lad named John. Just a local farm boy, but there was something special about the lad... a glint in his eye, a fire in his belly, a spring in his step. And one day he went for a walk. Now, this walk began when his father died. The year was 1819 and he was just 14 years old. Bereavement counseling? Well, these were the days when young boys were sent into the fields, the mills, the mines... tough times. But young John was smart enough to be lucky. His father's farm, where he was born and raised, was sold and the proceeds used to open a grocer's. Big responsibility for the wee lad...

(“The Man Who Walked Around The World”, www.johnnie-walker.com/en-ca/themanwhowalkedaroundtheworld)

Unsurprisingly perhaps, digital timelines of many companies contain the legendary founders' pictures (see, for example, [Marks & Spencer's timeline](#), [Sainsbury Archive](#)) that

accompany the web copy providing the founders' biographies. By using such combinations of textual and visual narratives companies probably try to build trust and legitimise their claims for historic significance.

In some cases, corporate websites may present short films dedicated to the founder's family's effort. To illustrate, Johnnie Walker, the most widely distributed brand of quality Scotch whisky, showcases the six-minute commercial entitled "[The Man Who Walked Around The World](#)" starring Robert Carlyle acting as a narrator of the family history as he is walking through the Scottish Highlands. The production is shot in a single continuous take to render the idea of the brand's unstoppable progress achieved by the family's serious, uncompromising men marching forward to turn a humble grocery store into a world brand. In this short film, visual and verbal storytelling is combined to produce a powerful impact on the viewers.

Yet another interesting variety of corporate digital biographies is represented by an e-diary, that is, an electronic book with several hyperlinked chapters depicting various episodes of the company's history. These chapters are usually structured so as to visually present achievement credited to several generations of company owners and employees (e.g. Baum & Mercier's "[Secrets of a Family of Watchmakers](#)").

One key idea featuring in many product creation stories is that the company's founder inevitably has to pass on the baton to his/her younger relatives or business associates who subsequently multiply business successes by applying new approaches. Compare the following excerpt from the history of Marks & Spencer, a major British retailer that specialises in the selling of clothing and luxury food products:

Michael Marks was originally born in 1859 in Slonim, then part of Russian Poland. He escaped anti-Jewish repression and moved to England around 1882. He was unable to speak English, had few friends and little money. However he had a sharp mind for business and understood what customers wanted.

At first he travelled the towns and villages of West Yorkshire, selling wares from his bag. He soon set up a permanent market stall in Leeds which developed into a successful retail business. [...]

Michael Marks' son Simon became Chairman in 1916, at the young age of 28. He is perhaps the most important chairman in the history of M&S, presiding over the greatest period of change and expansion of M&S from the 1930s to the 1960s. He developed the *St Michael* brand which M&S was famous for throughout most of the 20th Century. Simon worked tirelessly to improve and modernise the company adopting the revolutionary policy of dealing directly with manufacturers. [...] Simon Marks died at his desk in 1964, after 48 years as Chairman.

marksintime.dbda.net/timeline

However, besides the hard work of several generations, there are other – serendipitous – opportunities for products or brands to see the light of day.

2. Company/product/brand's birth through experiment or by accident

In stories containing this event, company founders or employees may feature as inventors or as clever implementers or someone else's innovation. As a result of this innovation, the

whole enterprise is launched or the company receives a competitive edge that changes its life drastically, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

The bread company as we know it today was formed in 1898 but the ideas were seeded by a miller (no pun intended) in 1886. Richard Stoney Smith changed the way flour was milled by finding a way to successfully combine wheatgerm into the bread. Previously it had only fermented which ruined the bread. But he believed if he could find a way to include it, people would benefit from the nutritional value it would add. And how right he was! It was originally called Smith's Patent Process Germ Flour but found that was a bit of a mouthful, so they ran a competition for a new name and in 1890 Hovis was officially born.

(oldelondon.org/2011/07/27/history-of-hovis)

One frequent advertising scheme employed to showcase an improved version of the product in marketing texts that contain this event is 'before and after'. The following excerpt from the history of Cadbury's drinking chocolate provides an illustration of how the invention of a cocoa press revolutionised the chocolate manufacturing business:

Because there was so much cocoa butter in the cocoa – a whopping 50% or more – manufacturers at the time had to add things to it, like potato flour and sago (a type of starch), to try and absorb the fat and mask the taste. Some ruthless manufacturers added brick dust and even poisonous red lead to their products.

So, how did the Cadbury family get involved in chocolate? John Cadbury opened a grocer's shop in Bull Street, Birmingham in 1824. He sold tea and coffee, *but experimented with cocoa and drinking chocolate too*. It really was a hands-on business, breaking up the cocoa beans with a pestle and mortar and adding common contemporary ingredients such as treacle and starches. [...]

Then something happened which was to change Cadbury forever. In 1866 John's son George brought back a cocoa press from Holland. It had been made by Coenradd Johannes van Houten, a manufacturer who'd been looking for a way of reducing cocoa's high fat content – and his van Houten press did just that. With some of the cocoa butter removed, suddenly cocoa and drinking chocolate was much tastier. Flour was no longer needed, and Cadbury launched a new product 'Cocoa Essence', advertised as 'Absolutely pure, therefore Best'.

(www.cadbury.co.uk/cadburyandchocolate/historyofchocolate/Pages/cadburyfamily.aspx)

It is typical for such texts to emphasise the inventor's hard work, passion and dedication, with such features of his/her character as patience, diligence, forward thinking, and sharp business acumen being also mentioned frequently.

A variation of this story event is realised in textual fragments that describe the invention as resulting from *observing consumer behaviour*. To illustrate, Ruth Handler invented the Barbie doll in 1959 when she noticed that her daughter Barbara preferred playing with the dolls to which she had given adult roles. Based on this observation, one of the most famous toys of the 20th century was created.

Interestingly, the motive of invention is suitably supported in product stories by mentioning cases of successful *initial product application*. For example, as indicated above,

Henri Nestlé, a chemist in Vevey and founder of Nestlé, saved the life of a neighbour's baby who could not be breastfed by launching his nutritious gruel for children *Henri Nestlé's Milk Flour* in 1867.

One subtype of the invention motive that frequently occurs in product creation stories is *accidental invention*. In fact, discoveries are often made inadvertently when inventors pursue goals other than creating a new product, as the following excerpt from the history of Raytheon, a major American defense contractor and producer of commercial electronics demonstrates:

Raytheon's discovery of microwave cooking in 1945 was initially an accident, but its development, like so many others, can be credited to Percy Spencer [an engineer at Raytheon]. A candy bar in Spencer's pocket began to melt as he stood in front of a magnetron tube that had been switched on. Intrigued, he placed kernels of popcorn in front of the tube, and they too popped. He then conducted a similar experiment with a raw egg, which exploded when the inside yolk cooked faster than the outside of the egg. Scientists familiar with magnetrons knew the tubes generated heat at the same time they radiated the microwave energy that made radar possible. Spencer was the first, however, to discover that one could cook food using microwave radio signals. In 1947, Raytheon demonstrated the world's first microwave oven and called it a "Radarange," the winning name in an employee contest.

www.raytheon.com/ourcompany/history/leadership

Yet another variant of the story event reflects the process of *goal substitution while developing the product*. It happens because the inventor or a third party sees an opportunity to apply the invention in unexpected fields. To illustrate, both the independent inventors of a direct method for synthesising silicones E.G.Rochow and R.Mueller had other applications in mind, not the silicone implants which were subsequently developed and marketed based on Rochow's and Mueller's invention. E.G.Rochow's task was to synthesise silicone for electrical cable insulation, while R.Mueller worked on artificial fog that could envelop cities in case of war.

A lucky chance sometimes takes the form of *a serendipitous meeting* leading to the appearance of a product, brand or company. For instance, several fashion collections (*Let It Rock*, *SEX*, *Seditionaries*, *Pirates*, and *Buffalo Girls*) were created as a result of partnership between Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren, famous British designers.

We may hypothesise that by mentioning such curious facts and episodes from a history of product copywriters attempt to hold attention and generate positive emotional responses from their audiences. Thus by incorporating such events in marketing stories copywriters probably increase retention of brand memories in the customer's mind. Besides, references to such story events seem to be helpful, because it is significantly easier for consumers to identify with the brand that is presented in such a personalised and entertaining way, which may contribute to customer loyalty.

3. Purchase or present

Ideas, formulas and technologies can also be acquired by or presented to the company founder. In such cases, the initial owner is either uninterested in or incapable of developing the product him/herself.

To exemplify, the famous perfume *Chanel No. 5* was developed for Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel by Ernest Beaux, a Russian-French chemist and perfumer. The perfumer, who at that time had little prospect of promotion with his employer and was seeking new projects, arranged a meeting with the rising couturier to present his former and current works. The following excerpt from a blog entry dedicated to the world’s most famous perfume exemplifies this variant of the initiating event:

Coco was never a big perfume fan. In fact, it’s said that she thought that “women perfume themselves only to hide bad smells”. Things seemed to change after Coco’s lover, Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich of Russia, took her to Cannes and introduced her to perfumer Ernest Beaux and toured his lab. It was here that he presented Coco with his 10 samples, numbered 1-5 and 20-24. He became forever known as the man who created Chanel No. 5.

Coco was also known to have said, “I want to give women an artificial perfume. Yes, I really do mean artificial, like a dress, something that has been made. I don’t want any rose or lily of the valley, I want a perfume that is a composition.”

www.oldergirlbeauty.com/pretend-french-vacay-pt-5-the-history-of-beauty-chanel-no-5

A product’s history may also begin with a present, as the following excerpt from the history of *4711 Original Eau de Cologne*, one of Cologne’s oldest internationally famous brands, shows:

On 8 October 1792 a Carthusian monk gave the young entrepreneur Wilhelm Muelhens a unique wedding present: the secret formula for an “aqua mirabilis”, a miracle water for internal and external use. From the very outset, Wilhelm Muelhens believed in the success of this extraordinary formula and opened a small manufactory in Cologne’s Glockengasse shortly afterwards. The revitalising and stabilising effect of his “Kölnisch Wasser” (“Cologne Water”) was instantly captivating and enjoyed phenomenal popularity.

www.4711.com/historie0+M52087573ab0.html

4. Company/product/brand’s birth as a result of misfortune

In many of the stories on which this study is based, company founders’ various trials and tribulations (e.g. illness, death of relatives, financial problems) provide an impetus for development. Though suffering, the protagonist – the entrepreneur, inventor, scientist or designer – becomes aware of his/her mission and starts fulfilling his/her talents.

This variant of the initiating event is realised, for example, in the biography of Ludwig Leichner (1836-1912), a successful German opera singer, chemist and entrepreneur. Having undermined his health by using theatrical make-up that contained lead and glycerin for 10 years, Ludwig Leichner left the stage and founded a cosmetics factory in Berlin in 1873 to produce ready-made greasepaint sticks based on his own improved formula. Since Leichner’s greasepaint was safe for actors’ skin, it soon became the standard for theatrical and clown make-up.

In addition to the several varieties of triggering events describing the product/company/brand's birth mentioned above, there is also an important corollary event related to the process of choosing a name for the newly born.

5. "What's in a name?": naming the product or brand

As is well known, effective name development is one of the most crucial tasks in marketing. "A truly great name is an advertisement in itself. It is the foundation on which the brand can grow and thrive" [3, p. 9].

The ritual of choosing a product name is sometimes rich in curious or entertaining facts that consumers may find amusing or intriguing. By mentioning such facts in their product or brand stories marketers can successfully create 'emotional hooks' that are a vital component of emotional branding.

This approach to branding is based on the idea that "[e]motion not only shapes our unconscious reactions to advertising; it also feeds into, shapes and controls our conscious thought about brands, products and services" [9, p. 107].

In exceptional cases, the whole touristic infrastructure is built around places or objects that contributed to the product's birth and its name development. To illustrate, the above mentioned *4711* received its name in 1794 during Cologne's occupation by the French army, whose Commander General Daurie decreed that all buildings were to be given consecutive numbers:

Glockengasse was numbered by one of the French soldiers, who – as the story goes – while passing by without even dismounting from his horse, painted the numbers onto the front doors. And this is how the house belonging to Wilhelm Muelhens got the number 4711 which later became the name of this Cologne Water.

www.4711.com/historie0+M52087573ab0.html

In the 21 century, this house belongs to Cologne's most famous tourist attractions housing a museum, musical and literary events and perfume seminars.

Furthermore, company founders are often on record justifying their choices of product names, as the following fragment from the history of Chanel No.5 demonstrates:

Word is that this scent was the No. 5 bottle out of 10 samples presented to her [Gabrielle Chanel], and that when asked how she would name it, she replied, "I always launch my collection on the 5th day of the 5th month, so the number 5 seems to bring me luck – therefore, I will name it N° 5".

www.oldergirlbeauty.com/pretend-french-vacay-pt-5-the-history-of-beauty-chanel-no-5

Although such facts are not particularly informative in terms of product quality, their mentions in promotional texts may be useful for creating positive association with the brand. And as is well known to advertising practitioners, "things that are tagged by emotion [...] as worthy of our attention go on to become our memories" [9, p. 95]. In other words, amusing

stories about products can be used to keep brand memories fresh in consumers' minds or to create new associations.

Conclusion

In sum, storytelling has become a vital tool enabling marketers to achieve several important goals. By spreading stories about companies, products or brands corporations attempt to reinforce their marketing message and to link emotions to their products. Consumers who read, watch or listen to such stories are encouraged to trust the products or brands and make emotional associations with them.

In a way, storytelling resembles advertising from the point of view of its functioning, allowing companies to achieve two primary advertising goals³: (i) of getting noticed by attracting emotional responses from consumers and (ii) of ensuring that the product or brand is remembered and well-liked.

This study has shown that the initial stage of a product's life cycle can be described as a logical outcome of someone's painstaking effort – several generations' hard work, founders' experiments and acquisitions, misfortune and mishaps. Besides, the founder can obtain the product as a result of a serendipitous event – an accidental discovery or present.

Several events may combine to constitute a product creation story (e.g. the Hovis bread story fragment, presented in Section 2, containing references to invention and product naming). Alternatively, different categories of initiating events may be incorporated in various advertising, PR and copywriting genres of texts as story fragments.

Story events describing further stages of product life cycle need to be explored and probable cross-cultural variation identified.

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³ On the main functions of advertising see, for example, [9, p. 107].

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