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The strategic use of Narratives and Narrative Elements in Corporate Communication and Corporate Genres

The slides of the presentation are presented below as figures 1 – 14 followed by a bibliography.

Introduction: Corporate communication and the business context

This presentation focuses on narratives in a business context. The presentation highlights the strategic use of narratives or aspects of narratives for a range of different strategic purposes in corporate communication. Based on the definition of corporate communication as a *management* function (Cornelissen, 2004; van Riel, 1995; figures 1 and 2), the presentation demonstrates how narrative features are used strategically to promote corporate identity, corporate image, and – not least - the corporate brand to multiple stakeholder groups inside and outside of the organization.

Theoretical framework and discussion

One of the major communicative challenges facing the modern corporation is the need to communicate its identity and its values in order to distinguish itself from competitors and to promote the corporate brand in a highly competitive and international business context in which branding becomes increasingly important (Hatch & Schultz, 2000, 2003, 2009). Also, the increasing demand in society for authenticity and transparency in the business world in general requires the corporation to speak with one, identifiable voice (Christensen & Morsing, 2008; figure 2), while at the same time addressing groups of multiple stakeholders with potentially different or even conflicting agendas (figure 3).

The focus on corporate communication as an all-embracing and strategically important management function has brought with it an increased awareness of communicating corporate values, image and identity. In this context, narratives have proven an excellent and fast communication tool (Denning 2001, 2005; figure 5) as narratives may serve to discreetly communicate and legitimize power structures within the organization (Morgan, 1997; Mumby, 1987). Further, the emotional and pathos-based appeal of narratives makes them easy to remember and helps overcome audiences' experiences of information overload in a working context.

Narratives, or elements of narratives, are also reflected in the new types of business genres such as mission and vision statements, CSR reports, sustainability reports, corporate narratives 'about us' as found on the web and in image-related annual reports. While traditional business genres such as contracts, business letters, requests, memos

etc. are logos-related and matter of fact orientated, the new business genres often rely on narrative elements such as personifications and the establishing of the corporate 'we' in mission statements (Williams, 2008) in order to communicate brand and corporate values to both internal and external audiences (figure 4).

In organizational communication, narratives primarily target internal members of the organisation in order to communicate organizational culture and norms and to socialize new members of the organization, while narratives within the framework of corporate communication are of a more holistic nature and directed at both internal and external audiences (figure 6).

New corporate genres such as CSR reports and sustainability reports tell narratives at both an abstract and a concrete level while centre staging the corporation as the responsible corporate citizen who makes a difference in society by improving the environment or peoples' lives in general (figures 8, 9). Further, traditional business genres such as job advertisements in some cases have developed into autocommunicative narratives of personal, professional and corporate identities (Norlyk, 2006, 2008; figures 10, 11).

A strong corporate identity and a clear internal awareness of 'who we are and what we stand for' (Hatch & Schultz, 2000, p. 15) depend on a successful and balanced interplay between corporate image, corporate culture and corporate vision. In brand related narratives, the question of identity is reflected at different levels.

In the first wave of branding, brand narratives are constructed around the product. The product is staged as the hero of the story, while the corporate author is found at the functional level, i.e. in the marketing department. In the second wave of branding, which is concerned with branding the corporation and corporate identity to larger audiences and different stakeholder groups to secure long-term survival, the product hero is written out of the story to be replaced with the corporate hero. The author is no longer to be found at the functional or departmental level but rather at the top level of the corporation. The corporation itself becomes the narrator of the corporate brand and becomes responsible for narrating stories that advance both the corporation as well as the corporate brand (Fog, K. et al. 2010; figure 7).

Brand narratives of the product and the subsequent brand narratives of the corporation are giving way to the third wave of branding which highlights the relationship between stakeholder, primarily consumers, and the corporation (Hatch & Schultz, 2009). Narratives of relationship branding, or network branding, aim at establishing value communities in which the consumer and the corporation co-create the narrative of mutual identities and life styles as illustrated in the case of the Toyota Sienna Swagger wagon (figures 12, 13). Branding relationships and establishing feelings/illusions of emotional bonding between the actors of the narrative is the central theme of these co-created narratives of mutual values which are typically narrated in social media such as Twitter, Facebook, corporate blogs etc.

Conclusion

In a context of branding and corporate management strategies, the key question in the present development towards relationship branding is the question of authorship (figure

14). Who owns the story and who has brand control? The establishing of emotional bonding between stakeholders/consumers and the corporation may enhance customer loyalty in a short term perspective. However, long term issues of brand control and potential risks related to co-authorship in narratives of relationship branding may present new and unforeseen managerial challenges in corporate communication.



Working with stories: ENN Conference 2011

The Strategic Use of Narratives and Narrative Elements
in Corporate Communication and Corporate Genres

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Figure 1: Stories and genres in a business context



Definitions of Corporate Communication/s

... Corporate communication is a management function that offers a framework and vocabulary for the effective coordination of all means of communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favourable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent.

(Cornelissen, *Corporate communication*, 2004: 23).

... Corporate communication is first and foremost an idea. It is the idea that a company can communicate as one totality or one body.

(Christensen & Morsing, *Bagom corporate communication*, 2008: 8. Translated from Danish).

Figure 2: Definitions of corporate communication



The concept of stakeholder communication

Multiple stakeholders:

- consumers/ customers
- investors/ present and potential
- employees/ present and potential
- suppliers
- governments
- trade associations
- political groups and NGOs
- potential competitors

Figure 3. Stakeholder groups



New corporate genres: Communicating identity and values

Traditional genres:

business letters, contracts, order confirmations, requests etc.

New corporate genres:

- Mission statements
- Vision statements
- CSR (corporate social responsibility and the corporate citizen)
- Sustainability reports and the environment
- Annual reports as image brochures
- Job ads as professional and corporate narratives
- self presentation 'about us', founder stories

Corporate narratives or elements of narratives communicate corporate identity, corporate values and corporate brand.

Figure 4: Business genres: Old and new



Narratives in a business context/1

[...] in the hectic modern workplace, people have neither the time nor the patience ... to absorb a richly detailed narrative. If I was going to hold the attention of my audience, I had to make my point in seconds, not in minutes.'

(Denning, 2005: 6).

Denning refers to minimalistic stories or stories with a small 's' in which 'the voice of the storyteller is implicit', and allows 'a lot of imaginative space for the reader to fill in the blanks' (Denning, 2001: 181-182).

Figure 5: The business narrative



Narratives in a business context/2

Narratives in organizational communication

Focus is primarily of an internal nature:

Socialization of new members

stories of culture and norms

Narratives in corporate communication

Wider, holistic focus.

Internal as well as external focus

Stories of identity, visions, values and brand.

Figure 6: Organizational and corporate narratives



Narratives and branding in corporate communication

Product branding – narratives about the product

Genres: traditional advertising

Narrator: the corporation. Hero: the product.

Corporate branding – narratives about the corporation

CSR reports, annual reports,

Narrator: the corporation. Hero: the corporation

Relationship branding – emotional bonding and co-created narratives

of meaning and relationships between corporation and consumers

Narrators: consumers and corporation. Hero: the relationship.

Figure 7: Narratives in a branding context



Corporate genres and branding: Narratives in CSR/1

CSR reports as narratives staging the responsible corporate citizen, who translates abstract values into concrete action

EX: Corporate social responsibility at Vattenfall

Vattenfall is committed to meeting society's need for energy in a responsible and sustainable manner. Within the framework set by society, Vattenfall operates and invests in energy solutions that support sustainable development – economically, environmentally and socially.



Figure 8: Narratives in CSR: the abstract level



Abstract values and concrete narratives in CSR/2

5240 – håndbold for Henrik, Hanin og Hüsne i Vollsmose

Vattenfall, HC Odense og Fyns Håndbold Forbund står bag initiativ med tilbud til børn i Vollsmose om at spille håndbold og blive en del af 5240.



Figure 9: Narratives in CSR: the concrete level

Corporate genres and branding: Job ads as narratives/1


- personal, professional and corporate narratives of a higher ethical and moral purpose as stated in the corporate vision
- autocommunicative elements
- personal and professional fulfillment
- co-creation of values and morals




Figure 10: Job ads as narratives of personal and corporate identities

Corporate genres and branding: Job ads as narratives/2

[Hjem](#) > [Karriere](#) > [Speeddating](#)
Speeddating



Maria Budek Hansen
Erhvervsrådgiver



Mit arbejde?	Min baggrund?	Mit team?	Mig selv?
Hvorfor Nordea	Uddannelse	Sociale miljø	Drivkraft
Hvad laver du	Arbejdsmiljø	Arbejdsmiljø	Nøgleord
En typisk dag	Erfaring	Nye udfordringer	Stadig her om 5 år
Karrieremuligheder	Yderligere uddannelse	Kolleger	Medarbejdere
Det bedste	Første tanker	Netværk	Fritidstilbud
Fordelen ved Nordea			

Figure 11: Job ads in new media: the personal meeting with employees



Corporate genres, narratives and network branding/1

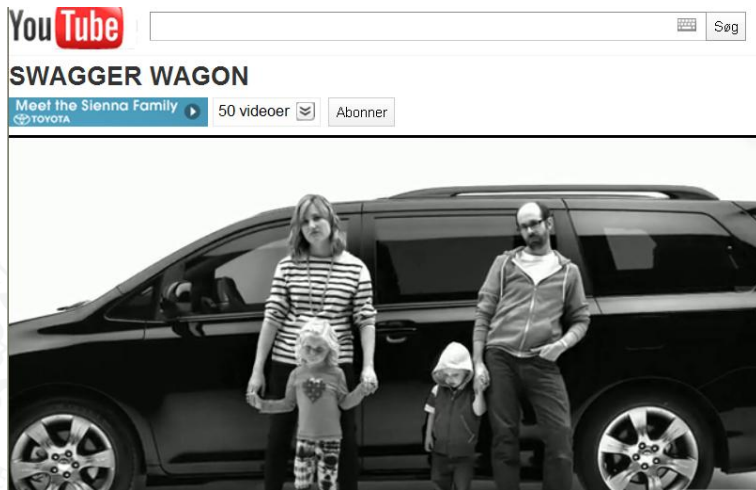


Figure 12: Narratives and identification in network branding: The Sienna family



Corporate genres, narratives and network branding/2

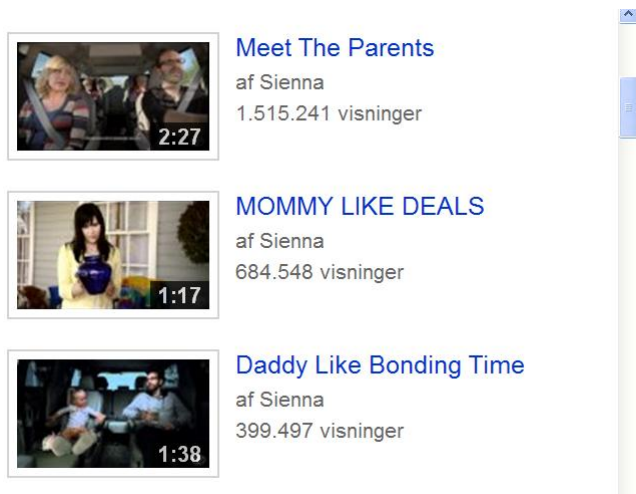


Figure 13: Network branding and different points of view



Conclusion: Narratives, brand and the issue of control?

First wave of corporate communication

Corporate communication: a function of *management*

Narratives as a *management* tool in internal and external communication

Narratives as brand stories of products and corporate identity.

Second wave of corporate communication

In relationship branding, *stakeholders*, especially consumers, become *co-writers* of the corporate narrative and *co-creators* of meaning.

Authorship

Who owns the story? Low degree of control, potential conflicts relating to meaning, values, and authenticity.

Figure 14: The cost of relationship building - losing brand control?

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