Stories in co-creating corporate brand identity

Kettunen, Hanne
Oulu Business School, University of Oulu, Finland
Kettunen.hanne@gmail.com

Saraniemi, Saila
Oulu Business School, University of Oulu, Finland
saila.saraniemi@oulu.fi

Oikarinen, Eeva-Liisa
Oulu Business School, University of Oulu, Finland
eeva-liisa.oikarinen@oulu.fi

Purpose
Storytelling is a natural way for humans to express ourselves – we have always told stories to each other (e.g. Shankar et al. 2001; Green 2006; Kent 2015). It is part of our cultures as an entertainment but also as means to pass e.g. knowledge and values (Spear & Roper 2016). Well-told stories and great myths (Holt 2004, 28) can raise emotions (Burke 1969, 55–59; Green 2004; Green 2006) and engage listeners to use their senses (Hiltunen 2002, XVI). Among organization researchers, storytelling has been studied as a part of organizational identity formation already for long (Boje 1991; Coupland & Brown 2004; Johansen 2014) but the subject is still relatively new for marketing researchers. There are modest signs that stories can be used to build the corporate brand identity (Janssen et al. 2012) and the identity formation is constant different stories acting as the fuel for the process (Coupland & Brown 2004; Johansen 2014). Even though companies are recommended to arise and lead conversations between stakeholders and the brand (Golant 2012) storytelling is not fully understood or investigated yet in corporate brand identity context. In this paper, we aim to explore how stories told by different stakeholders can support the co-creation of corporate brand identity.

Approach
Stories in corporate branding
Stories are always told in conversations (Boje 1991) or in interaction with other people. Stories also have multiple roles and benefits regarding to company’s brands. First, stories as communication tools resonate better with the audience and engage people more to the community than other types of communication (Kent 2015). Second, they ease to build long-lasting, emotional bonds and relationships with the stakeholders (Herskovitz & Crystal 2010) by increasing the credibility of the communication and making it more memorable (Dowling 2006). Third, stories can be used to make the brand identity and personality more appealing to enhance emotional connections with the consumers (Randazzo 2006). All brands have their own stories to tell (Hatch & Schultz 2003), and world’s best and most durable brands always tell stories (Papadatos 2006).
Brand stories are recommended and assumed to have plotlines and characters/archetypes (Holt 2004, 3; Herskovitz & Crystal 2010; Kent 2015) since most stories around the world are built around the same themes or figures (Kent 2015). Herskovitz and Crystal (2010) suggest five different archetypes for company and brand stories: champion battles regularly with his opponent, underdog is a tireless fighter who utilizes the way people underestimate him, rebel is against authorities, mother gives care and protection, and rugged individualist is about walking determined his own paths. Kent (2015) also names five different plots for companies: quest means searching some certain person, place, or thing from the protagonist’s point of view. Adventure differs from the quest in that the journey is more important than the protagonist. Wretched excess picturizes the inequity appearing in our everyday life. Rivalry places two persons, with complementary skills and hard motivation, against each other and only in the end the winner is clear. Underdog is a story about a small individual against a large company or government where the odds are never on his side, but eventually the obstacles are won with the help of e.g. intelligence, courage, and strength.

Co-creating the corporate brand identity

Broadly, the corporate brand identity takes an identity based view of the corporate brand (Balmer 2012). That definition, however, is rather plain, and the CBI has been tried to define with varying amounts of dimensions by several academics (e.g. Balmer 2012; de Chernatony 2010; Melewar et al. 2005). In this paper, we use Urde’s (2013) definition for corporate brand identity as he manages to define CBI in his matrix most unambiguous. According to Urde (2013) CBI includes nine (9) dimensions: mission & vision, culture, competences, expression, promise and core values, personality, value proposition, relationships, and position.

The construction of CBI is always about communication (Cornelissen et al. 2012) and it’s an on-going and never ending process (Blombäck & Ramirez-Pasillas 2012; Balmer 2012). Communication happens between different parties and the current co-creation theories have a broad understanding of actors involved: co-creation happens in interaction with a network of stakeholders – in stakeholder ecosystems (Pera, Occhiocupo & Clarke 2016; Gyrd-Jones & Kornum 2013). Stakeholder ecosystem includes a wider socio-cultural system in co-creation processes which are maximized when company stays open to all stakeholders’ inputs: inputs which become complementary to each other (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum 2013). In co-creating CBI accepting both internal and external point of views becomes thus important, and, in fact, different views and diversity should be embraced as even opposing opinions can contribute in with value (Pera et al. 2016; Gyrd-Jones & Kornum 2013).

Methodology

The research was conducted as a qualitative case study (Yin 2009) with the case company being a Finnish forest machine manufacturer. It is notable that the case company’s products, the forest machines, are not only an investment decision for their clients but a lifestyle and brand choice, as well, where the brand is part of the clients’ self-expressions (Holt 2004, 5).

The data consists of three (3) interviews (2 employees, 1 former employee and an owner/chairman of the board), owner’s oral company presentation to stakeholders (a group of forestry teachers) and 18 stakeholder stories from company’s webpages. In this study, we interpret all the data as stories i.e. narratives. We followed the narrative research process proposed by Czarniawska (2004). First, the stories were interpreted by reading through the data several times and then by paying special attention to especially in CBI elements suggested by Urde (2013) and plotlines and archetypes of stories (Herskovitz & Crystal 2010;
In organizing the data, we used NVivo qualitative data analysis program.

Findings
The research suggests that stories have a role in corporate brand identity formation and the different storytellers participate in the formation of CBI as co-creators. Stories are powerful as they give a more natural way for the stakeholders to be involved in the CBI formation. Interaction, the characteristic of co-creation, is the starting point for stories to emerge and stories told keep the identity formation process ongoing. Even if stakeholders aren’t aware they are talking about a certain part of the CBI, their expressions engage to the CBI co-creation.

When using both archetypes and plotlines as story analyzing tools, it can be suggested that these elements help to convey the all range of feelings and emotions the brand evokes and make the brand more human. Especially archetypes seem to fit for adding different characteristics to CBI personality whereas plotlines can be suitable for shaping several CBI parts at a time. That is due to plotlines feature – to describe longer events. The influence of a certain archetype or plotline, however, is harder to specify. Just as the CBI dimensions are a bit overlapping and connected to each other, so are the story elements, too. This notion, however, doesn’t make the archetypes and plotlines weaker but more powerful as they can change several parts of the CBI at once. Overall, the story elements persuade audience to accept the proposed features as a part of the CBI.

Our empirical findings also suggest that stories of different tellers become complementary to each other. When the company might pursue to give an overall picture of a certain part of the CBI, the stakeholders’ stories can focus on small but precise insights in the same dimension. It can be said that the company and stakeholders are working together: the themes on their stories are rather consistent and only told from a different angle. The different storytellers make the CBI more complete, vivid, and multifaceted. Consequently, the viewpoints from different stories co-create value by making the CBI richer.

Theoretical implications
The study shows that stories can be used to co-create a corporate brand identity. Stories and more specifically plotlines and archetypes are suitable to convey both strategical elements and emotions in corporate branding – forms of communication which have been demanded by several researchers (e.g. Janssen et al. 2012; Spear & Roper 2013). We expand and support existing theory by pointing out that the results are also in line with the organization researchers’ notions: The identity construction is an on-going process (Boje 1991; Brown et al. 2005; Johansen 2014) which takes place in conversations between different stakeholders and through storytelling (Coupland & Brown 2004). It is also notable that the length of the stories doesn’t seem to have an impact on their power to change the CBI (Boje 1991; Johansen 2014).

The stakeholders’ possibility to strengthen the value of the brand and the identity creation (Hatch & Schultz 2009; Gyrd-Jones & Kornum 2013) and the interactive nature of corporate branding (Iglesias et al. 2013) are also supported by our results. Storytelling shouldn’t be understood as an act for only managers (Spear & Roper 2016) but the stakeholders should be taken in to the corporate branding (Merz et al. 2009; Gyrd-Jones & Kornum 2013; Biraghi & Gambetti 2015). The proposition of the consistence in corporate and stakeholder originated
contents is also supported (Shao et al. 2015) and, accordingly, our results shed light on the overlaps between internal and external storytelling (Spear & Roper 2016).

**Practical implications**

Based on our findings we recommend companies to use storytelling and stories in branding and CBI co-creation. The potential of stories in co-creating the CBI is lying on their ability to engage stakeholders, evoke emotions and on their ability to create more complete, vivid, and multifaceted CBI.

**Limitations**

This study was a single case study with the case company being a Finnish forest machine manufacturer. Therefore, more insights could be gathered through multiple case studies and with different industries. However, the chosen company case was representative regarding the storytelling nature in corporate branding and thus offered a good starting point for investigating the phenomena. More research is needed in the future to understand the meaning of the industry context. The empirical study was also limited related to time when stories were collected, hence, representing a snapshot of the co-creation process. Consequently, longer term studies related to CBI co-creation process are needed.

**Originality/Value**

The main value of this paper is to demonstrate that storytelling is a powerful tool in co-creating CBI with stakeholders. When stories are used, the CBI gets more facets and characteristics. In other words, we encourage both academics and practitioners tackle this emerging but scarcely investigated way of corporate branding.

**Keywords**: corporate brand identity, co-creation, storytelling, corporate branding

**References:**


Green, M.C., (2004). Transportation into narrative worlds: The role of prior knowledge and perceived realism. Discourse Processes. 38 (2), 247–266.


