

Corporate Storytelling as an Effective Internal Public Relations Strategy

Rob Gill^{1,*}

¹Rob Gill is a senior lecturer in Public Relations at Swinburne University of Technology. Rob is a member of the Public Relations Institute of Australia and a graduate of the Corporate Public Affairs Institute residential program. He has more than 10 years experience as a communication manager, along with 15 years spent teaching in Australia and internationally.

*Corresponding author.

Address: Public Relations and Communications, Faculty of Higher Education, Swinburne University of Technology, Melba Avenue, Lilydale, Victoria 3140, Australia
Email: rgill@swin.edu.au

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Abstract

Corporate storytelling can be an engaging and effective means of internal public relations. The characteristics of internal storytelling make it an excellent medium for an organisation to engage with staff on a more personal level and strengthen employee loyalty. This integrated literature review explores the use of storytelling as an effective tool for internal communication and employee engagement, a key internal public relations responsibilities, which can build internal loyalty and strengthen the organisation's brand and reputation.

Literature reviewed in this paper demonstrates employees who are more engaged with, and have a deep trust for, their employer are more likely to feel buoyant about their work and conduct themselves in a constructive manner, which may translate into stronger internal and external reputation. The use of corporate stories as an internal PR communication strategy can strengthen the likelihood of employees becoming reputation champions for their organisation.

Key words: Corporate storytelling; Employer engagement; Employer-employee relationships; Internal communication

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INTRODUCTION

Internal public relations (PR) plays a key role in employee loyalty, particularly regarding effective communication and employee engagement (Mohan, McGregor, Saunders & Archee, 2008; Harrison, 2008). Current literature reflects the principle of a direct link between the use of corporate storytelling, heightened employee engagement and improved reputation. However, the convention of storytelling as a sound PR strategy for building internal reputation and corporate brand is not strongly evidenced in formal texts reflecting contemporary PR practice in organisations.

This integrated literature review demonstrates corporate storytelling as a PR strategy has significant benefits for employee engagement that may result in improved internal and external reputation, through making employees the organisation's reputation champions. Internal PR, which includes employer-employee relationship building, refers to the strategic process of maintaining employer-employee relationships that contribute to upholding satisfactory motivation, morale and productivity within the organisation. It involves the strategically using internal communication excellence in order to engage with employees on opportunities, support systems, and brand values (Harrison, 2008; L'Etang, 2008; Mohan et al., 2008).

Highlighted by many theorists is the identification of common characteristics to good corporate stories that exemplifies storytelling as a valuable internal communication strategy. The literature further evidences how employee engagement is improved through corporate storytelling, making staff more buoyant and engaged with

their employer.

Research demonstrates corporate stories that are targeted at building engagement with employees regarding the organisation's brand are effective at improving internal loyalty. Such engagement plays a crucial role in reputation for an organisation, both internally and externally, through improving staff satisfaction towards the brand values (Louisot, 2006; Donaldson, 2006). This may ultimately lead to improved stakeholder engagement, due to more enthused and motivated employees becoming the storytellers on behalf of their organisation to external stakeholders.

1. METHODOLOGY

An integrated literature review of contemporary academic writings and industry publications was used to ascertain support for the use of storytelling within organisations as a means to engaging with staff and improving reputation. The objective of the review was to audit reliable literature to identify common themes relating to: corporate stories and employee engagement; characteristics of good corporate stories; building brand and loyalty internally; and, reputation. An integrated approach (including text from industry and academic theorists) to the literature review was considered one of the best ways to capture data with a blend of concepts from various emerging fields, akin to human resources, management, communication and academia (Shuck and Wollard, 2009).

1.1 Framework of the Method

The framing for the review involved identifying and analysing literature relating to: corporate storytelling; employee engagement and relationships; brand loyalty; and, internal and external reputation. Literature was sourced from a variety of fields and disciplines, including human resources, PR, legal and management, in order to capture any diversity in conceptualisations.

The aim of the literature review was to collate and analyse solid theories and facts by recognised experts in the themes mentioned above. The objective of the review was to establish links between the identified concepts to determine if corporate storytelling can improve employee engagement and relationships, improve internal loyalty, and enhance internal and external reputation.

1.2 Selection of Relevant Literature

Included in the review are contemporary papers, documents and industry text published within the last 15 years from recognised academics and industry leaders in the fields of public relations, corporate communication and employee engagement, and brand management, including: Boje, 2008; Boyce, 1996; Post, 2004; Kaye, 1995; Denning, 2005; Sinclair, 2005; Simmons, 2006; Dowling, 2006; Lawrence and Mealman, 1999; Gardner, 2004; McKee, 2003, Matthews and Wacker, 2007; Brown,

Denning, Groh and Prusak, 2004; and, Gotsi and Wilson, 2001. Also reviewed were the industry websites for reputable research organisations relating to the key words.

1.3 Key Terms in the Review

Key terms searched relating to storytelling literature included: corporate storytelling, organisational storytelling, and corporate narration. Literature was also analysed for a relationship between storytelling and effective employer-employee relationships. These searches were conducted between 2008 and 2011. Many articles and papers were identified from the search, so the selected articles needed to reference work of the well-published authors identified above, or reputable organisations.

Synthesised definitions for the following terminology were also established through the literature: storytelling, corporate storytelling, employee engagement, internal loyalty and reputation.

It should be noted that narration and stories are applied in the same context throughout this paper, even though some theorists argue that narrations are fragments that collectively go towards creating a story (Polkinghorne, 1988; Denning, 2005; Gabriel, 2000).

1.4 Analysed Data

Overall, 48 sources of information were accessed and analysed: 24 journal articles and 24 textbooks (see reference list). The words corporate storytelling (or associated words) appeared in the title of 12 journal articles and nine books. Associated words for employee communication appeared in 10 journal articles and 12 books. All literature was analysed in relation to the above criteria and a summary of results are recorded in the tables contained in the text below.

2. CORPORATE STORIES AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Storytelling is a phenomenon that is fundamental to all nations, societies and cultures (Denning, 2005). Stories have the ability to transcend age-groups, cultures and genders and capture the imagination and attention of listeners regardless of their backgrounds (Gabriel, 2008). According to Sinclair (2005), stories can have both high social presence that bring people physically and psychologically closer, and media richness through a variety of channels. Stories can tap into personal elements enabling the presenter (narrator) to construct a meaning in tune with the receivers' own ideas and goals, making the narration more captivating (Sinclair, 2005; Simmons, 2006). A story can add a personal component of understanding and connection that statistics and data cannot achieve in isolation (Hansen, 2008).

Meaning is derived through reflection on experience as people make sense of situations they encounter in their daily lives to the narration. The value added by stories

and metaphor can be substantial (Lawrence & Mealman, 1999). Stories share knowledge amongst receivers who interpret the narration in line with their own experiences, allowing personalised cognition about problems, solutions and explanations that result in deeper understanding (Denning, 2005; Sinclair, 2005).

Therefore, storytelling is a natural, engaging and deeper form of communicating across a diverse audience (often characteristic of organisations) as stories allow listeners to tap into their own personal elements and reach the same conclusion as the desired conclusion of the narrator. Howard Gardner's (2004) research in the field of cognitive psychology supports using stories (in particular, the adults' sensitivity to basic narratives) to change people's minds and reinforce opinions, which complements many objectives for a successful PR internal communication program.

2.1 Corporate Storytelling

Corporate storytelling is the process of developing a message that creates a new point-of-view or reinforces an opinion or behaviour by using narration about people, the organisation, the past, visions for the future, social bonding and work itself (Gill, 2009; Wilkins, 1984; Witherspoon, 1997; Kaye 1995). Corporate stories can

motivate employees and create a message memorable enough for staff to take cause and action in line with organisational values. The objective for using corporate stories is more significant than just entertainment, and includes outcomes relating to changing or reinforcing behaviour, values and opinion (Prusak, 2001; Kaye 1996).

Traditionally, corporate stories have been associated with emphasising safety, wellbeing and decreasing risk (Prusak, 2001; Work Safe Victoria, 2004; Wilkins, 1984). However, internal PR worth also lies in corporate storytelling as a way of persuading, motivating and inspiring employees about their organisation, its brand and its strategies (Simmons, 2006; Barnes 2003; Poulton, 2005).

There were many connections made in the reviewed literature between the PR strategy of using storytelling internally. Table One summarises the primary benefits to using storytelling as an internal PR strategy for employee engagement and employer-employee relationships. It highlights specific themes that have been supported by three or more of the identified authors from the reviewed literature, and demonstrates that many leading theorists in the field have connected storytelling with a deliberate PR strategy to engage more deeply, and develop stronger relationships, with employees.

Table 1
Internal PR Benefits to Using Corporate Storytelling

Benefit	PR Link	Author
Storytelling is an effective means of communicating with internal employees	Internal communication, employee engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kaye, 1995 • Post, 2004 • Denning, 2005 • Sinclair, 2005 • Shuck & Wollard, 2009 • Brown et al., 2004
The use of stories by management is more engaging and appealing to employees, creating more meaning through symbolic representation	Good employer communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kaye, 1996 • Prusak, 2005 • Simmons, 2006 • Dowling, 2006 • Sinclair, 2005
Story objectives remain the same, even when the content is adapted by the narrator to make stories more personal to staff	Employer-employee relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lawrence & Mealman, 1999 • Gardner, 2004 • Sinclair, 2006 • Barnes, 2003
Knowledge presented through narration is more believable as receivers apply their own interpretation and experiences to the information	Employer engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boje, 2008 • Sinclair, 2005 • Simmons, 2006 • Hansen, 2008
Effective corporate stories appeal to emotions and values, and have a lifecycle relating to the organisation	Good employer communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brown, 1995 • Prusak, 2001 • Fryer, 2003 • Denning, 2005 • Dowling, 2006 Taliaferro & Ruggiano, 2010
Employees may adopt a notion of ownership over corporate narrations and stories by applying their own experiences to the message	Employer engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harris & de Chernatony, 2001 • Drucker, 1989 • Mohan et al., 2008

To be continued

Continued

Benefit	PR Link	Author
When employees are comfortable with their organisation's values and work practices they become important assets to enhancing company reputation	Employer-employee relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beder, 2002 • Post, 2004 • Herman & Gioia, 2004 • Leary-Joyce, 2004 • Dowling, 2006 • Brown et al., 2004 • Poulton, 2005

Table One demonstrates that there is strong consensus amongst leading theorists for the use of corporate storytelling as a means to creating a deeper engagement with employees by opening up more appealing internal communication channels where individuals apply their own intrapersonal interpretation and emotional connections to generic text (Mohan et al., 2008; Sinclair, 2005). Many theorists endorse the belief that engaging with staff on a more personal level builds a stronger connection to meaning, which may ultimately build loyalty as staff develop stronger relationships with their leaders. This can galvanise a positive internal reputation towards the employers and the organisation.

According to Denning (2006), leading companies are increasingly recognising the need to train leaders and managers in the use of calculated narrative to motivate and guide their organisation to respond effectively to strategic challenges. Yet, the use of storytelling as a PR strategy does not have strong representation in the key contents of leading global PR handbooks and texts, even though leading theorists (see Table One) endorse the PR benefit for the use of corporate stories (see for example: Mohan et al., 2008; Tymson & Lazar, 2006; Harrison, 2008; Skinner, Von Essen, Mersham & Motau, 2009; Theaker, 2009; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2006).

A key benefit of storytelling is its universal appeal to culturally rich audiences who have diverse interests and learning styles (Mohan et al., 2008). Many large organisations have employees from a range of backgrounds. Stories provide a flexible framework for a corporate storyteller to reflect the company's position in line with the selected interests of the particular internal stakeholders with whom it wants to engage with (Dowling, 2006). Through stories the PR practitioner can foster trust and support for the employer by creating an emotional bond between the organisation and employees, as a result of explaining the behaviour of a company in terms of its mission and morality (Dowling, 2006).

The role for PR in the use of corporate storytelling is to ensure the content is appropriate to the communication objectives and that the audience has the ability to comprehend the strategic message of the story (Harrison,

2008). This makes storytelling an ideal PR approach for delivering communication that is engaging and relevant to the employee 'in situ' (Boje, 2008).

2.2 Employee Engagement and Relationships

Employee engagement can be defined as contributing to the individual employee's involvement, satisfaction and enthusiasm for their opportunities and responsibilities at work (Harter, Schimdt & Hayes, 2002). According to Shuck and Wollard (2009) employee engagement focuses on building an engaging relationship between employer and employee to facilitate higher productivity and strong profits as a result of staff being healthier, safer, less likely to leave and more willing to engage in discretionary efforts. Therefore, employee engagement involves outcomes at an individual level (i.e. satisfaction, understanding, commitment and loyalty) and organisational level (i.e. attaining outcomes). (Schneider, Erhart, Mayer, Saltz and Niles-Jolly, 2005; Shuck and Wollard, 2009).

Successful employee engagement is reliant on effective internal communication; the sharing of meaning between employer and employee, and between employees (Waters, 2010; Mohan et al., 2008). Scholes (1997) considers internal communication to be the professional management of interactions between all those with an interest or 'stake' in the organisation. Storytelling can strategically uphold and improve employee engagement through its ability to appreciably personalise the meaning for the receiver.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF CORPORATE STORIES

3.1 What Makes a 'Good' Corporate Story

There are number of fundamental considerations evidenced from the literature that PR practitioners need to consider when using stories in corporate communication. Included below is a snapshot of the key fundamental considerations.

Table 2
Fundamental Considerations to Effective PR Through Corporate Stories

Effective Corporate Story Fundamentals	Author	Year
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move beyond text to a living example • Use collective memory from the organisation • Supplement the individual' s memory with organisational memory • Decentralise the narrative • Sense-making from retrospective, here-and-now, prospective narrative 	Boje	2008
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attention to aesthetics through design • Empathise with audiences' circumstances • Sympathy through holistic pictures with all the pieces • Injecting fun into the activity • Extend the value beyond the moment 	Matthews and Wacker	2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To create interest in the organisation • Help shape expectations of stakeholders (internal and external) • Lifecycle models - unfold over three parts: yesterday, today and tomorrow • Where the organisation has come from • Where it currently is • Where it is heading • Employees become part of the history of the organisation 	Dowling	2006
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similar to Dowling' s lifecycle • Springboard approach to the future • Future is kept vague so that listeners are encouraged to be part of the solution and direction • Employees get a sense of contributing to the future 	Denning	2006
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs to project expertise, sincerity, likeability and powerful characteristics • Expertise fosters esteem and respect • Sincerity promotes trust and corporate citizenship • Stakeholders will identify with the organisation if they like what it stands for • Organisations are leaders as a result of their perceived power 	Rossiter and Bellman	2005
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Display a struggle between expectation and reality • Personalise the message • Present all the statistics, including the negatives • Acknowledge the weaknesses along with the strengths • Self-knowledge is the root of great storytelling 	McKee	2003
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong central plot line • Clear values • Lots of emotion • Compelling characters 	Barnes	2003
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suggests four attributes - endurance, salience, sense-making, and comfort level • Durable stories may have changed names and circumstances, but the behavioural lesson remains the same • Salience refers to relevance and punch in the story • Sense-making, meaning that is true to the receiver' s own experience • Receivers need to be comfortable with the feeling they get from the narration 	Prusak	2001

Many of the considerations identified by the leading theorists (Table Two) have a function in creating effective engagement through corporate storytelling, based on the objective for the story. Identified considerations include: an inclusive approach; emotional content; relevance; prospective value; strong characters; familiarisation; and, promotion of trust. Considering the key characteristics, a well designed and executed corporate narration links well with the premise of using stories to be more engaging with staff through heightening their understanding and commitment to the message.

The role of PR managers utilising corporate stories is to keep content true to the organisation's communication strategy, and ensure that the audience has the capability to effectively interpret meaning in line with the

identified objectives (Harrison, 2008). The research above demonstrates many theorists see storytelling as an effective PR strategy to delivering communication that is engaging and relevant to individual employee's roles and contexts (Boje, 2008).

3.2 Limitations to Corporate Storytelling

There are many significant deliberations to consider for corporate storytelling that may affect its ability to fulfil PR objectives. These include:

Corporate storytelling is but one PR approach that can be used as an effective means for employer-employee relations. It is necessary to consider the theory of varied communications in order to provide the opportunity for shared meaning and mutual understanding across a diverse

audience (Mohan et al., 2008).

Storytelling even as a less formal and more personal approach to information sharing still applies the general principles of effective communication (Harrison, 2008). Consideration for the audience, their abilities, aspirations and their motivations are still critical principles for any strategic communication plan (Dowling, 2006).

Narrative patterns must consider the identified goals and objectives for the storytelling in line with leadership and desired outcome embedded in the PR planning (Denning, 2005).

PR practitioners need to focus on storytelling as 'one tool from the toolbox' for delivering verbal information, when face-to-face delivery is considered as the most effective medium. The composition, style and delivery of the narration will have a critical effect on achieving objectives, and should often be used in combination with other verbal modes of communication (Harrison, 2007, Mohan et al., 2008).

Storytelling supplements decision-making by enabling employers to highlight new perspectives. This structure is ideally suited to communicating change and stimulating innovation. The ability of employees to practice analytical thinking through other methods of communication means the decision-making process isn't replaced, but is supplemented, by storytelling (Denning, 2005).

The physicality of the more personal approach to storytelling may be restricted by time and location practicalities. Even though podcasts and video-streaming can overcome the variables of distance and time-zones for storytelling, the personal engagement of face-to-face delivery is diminished through these media (Harrison, 2007; Macnamara, 2005).

The construction of tone and pitch in a positive format is crucial to in order to inciting productive action. It is important that the narrator delivers the story from a perspective that will resonate positively with the audience. Using a story of a negative tone may fail to spark action, as opposed to a springboard story which communicates complex ideas and launches people into action (Denning, 2006).

4. BRAND, INTERNAL LOYALTY AND REPUTATION

An organisation's success is increasingly attributable to 'soft forms' of capital - reputation, trust, goodwill, brand strength and relationships, commonly referred to as intangible assets (Post, 2004). The corporate brand is considered to be what stakeholders perceive the organisation as, while reputation is the esteem in which the organisation is held (Beder, 2002). These intangible assets, which are generated from inside the organisation, undeniably deliver value to the company according to 96 per cent of executives polled in an Accenture Survey

(Post, 2004). Other previous Accenture surveys have also shown that in 1980 the book value of a company comprised 80 per cent of its market value. In 1990 the book value comprised 55 per cent, while intangible assets comprised 45 per cent of the market value. In 2002 only 25 per cent of a company's book value was reflected in the market value, with intangibles ballooning to 75 per cent (Donaldson, 2006).

4.1 Brand

A key objective of internal PR is to advance employee commitment to the organisation through developing and reinforcing the brand values (L'Etang, 2008).

An organisation's brand and reputation are important assets that need to be nurtured and protected, and need to be considered for their value in line with all other assets (Beder, 2002). An important element to the brand, from an internal perspective, is the organisation's measured support for staff and its responsibilities within the community (Harrison, 2007; Macnamara, 2005).

The use of narration via face-to-face stories is one of the most valuable methods for engaging with staff about their organisation's brand values. According to Sinclair (2005) the richest communication medium in the hierarchy of internal organisational communication is face-to-face engagement, which complements the use of personalised narration. Leaders within an organisation can use stories to fast-track trust and credibility, both internally and externally (Naidu in Hansen, 2008). Gaining employee trust is critical to building a healthy internal loyalty and opening the lines of engagement with employees (Dowling, 2006; Sinclair, 2005).

4.2 Internal Loyalty

Employee loyalty is defined by Pina e Cunha, (2002) as the commitment employees have to the success of an organisation, and the recognition that working for that organisation is their best option. Such connection and support is significantly influenced by how the employee identifies with the brand of the organisation. Employer communication is an important predication of employee satisfaction, and storytelling has been shown to be an important strategy to building employer-employee relationships (Madlock, 2008). Therefore, organisations, especially knowledge-intensive organisations, require almost as much attention to employee loyalty as customer loyalty (Gallicano, 2009; Pina e Cunha, 2002; Alvesson, 2001).

Many theorists have highlighted the positive link between heightened employee loyalty to the brand and an organisation's reputation (see for example: Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Welch and Jackson, 2007; Brown, 1995). Internal reputation refers to the respect in which the organisation is held by its employees (Beder, 2002; L'Etang, 2008; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). It is significantly influenced by the organisation's internal brand, including

the: vision, culture, formal policies and internal media activities. Internal PR is charged with the challenge of clearly communicating to staff the values and strategy (brand) for the organisation to encourage employee identification with the corporate identity, which in turn strengthens the internal reputation. Storytelling has been shown as a valuable contributor to this process (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001).

A strong internal loyalty to the brand and a healthy internal reputation are inter-dependent. An effective internal PR program highlights the employee benefits and aligned values staff may share with the organisation (Louisot, 2006). Internal respect for the brand often translates into a healthy reputation, both internally and externally (Post, 2005).

4.3 Reputation and Corporate Brand

Employees contribute to the organisation's reputation through their interaction with stakeholders, and the way in which they represent the brand through their work practices. PR plays a critical role in engendering the brand values, particularly through internal communication (L'Etang, 2008). The way employees perceive the organisation to be 'living the brand', the higher the regard staff will hold for their employee. This reputation is then represented to external stakeholders and the public via the interaction they have with employees (Beder, 2002; Post, 2005). Employees who are comfortable with their organisation's values and work practices are important assets to enhancing their employer's reputation (Herman & Gioia, 2004; Leary-Joyce, 2004).

Organisations must pay attention to the worth of making employees the organisation's reputation champions (Campbell, 2004). Internal storytelling is ideally placed to significantly contribute to reputation management and building a strong corporate brand for the company (Dowling, 2006). The significance of narration regarding an organisation's values can endure beyond the original delivery, as it has the capacity to become a story in itself told by employees to other stakeholders (Prusak, 2001).

Employees take ownership of relevant information from corporate stories, passing on appropriate information to colleagues and other stakeholders. According to Harris and de Chernatony (2001) employees constitute the interface between a brand's internal and external environments and can have a powerful impact on consumers' perceptions regarding the brand and the organisation. In a sense, stories generate brand value like business relationships, commitment and discussion on vision and values, along with enabling employees to share and understand organisational culture and opportunity (Sinclair, 2005).

The task facing PR practitioners is to craft a corporate narration with style and content appropriate to building and promoting the company's external on the strength

of its internal reputation (Dowling, 2006; Kaye 1995; L'Etang, 2008).

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that the internal PR strategy of storytelling has a significant role in advancing employee engagement and improving internal and external reputation.

The analysed literature presented (Table One) signifies many leading theorists believe the more personal approach of internally communicating through stories, especially from an employer-employee perspective, promotes employee engagement and shared meaning. The role of PR is to ensure the narration elevates the brand values and remains contemporary with the communication strategic plan for the organisation. Many theorists have put forward key considerations to ensuring the PR value of storytelling remains aligned with communication plans (Table Two).

The reviewed literature supports the concept of more engaged employees demonstrating a healthy loyalty to the organisation's brand, leading to a robust internal reputation and heightened external reputation, as the employees become reputation champions for their organisation through dealings with external stakeholders.

The next phase for this research is to analyse to what extent corporate storytelling is currently used by PR practitioners and corporate communication managers, as it doesn't appear to be well supported in traditional texts on PR strategies for internal communication. Gathering empirical data on the use of corporate stories and the objectives behind their use will provide deeper insight in to the practice of corporate storytelling.

This integrated literature review has demonstrated that corporate storytelling has a genuine capacity to improve employee engagement, thus ultimately strengthening an organisation's internal and external reputation. Corporate storytelling concept should be afforded stronger representation in the traditional PR strategic communication plans.

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