



THIS IS MY STORY, TELL ME YOURS

A key role for corporate communicators is organisational engagement – helping audiences to find their place in the story of the organisation. The art of storytelling can help communicators with this task

by David Willows

I am not sure precisely where or when this particular story began; but, looking back, I would say that it was just around my tenth birthday when I first stumbled upon the writings of C.S. Lewis and his imagination-absorbing tales of Narnia. The fascination continued when, as a young theology and philosophy undergraduate, I learned of a world where Truth could no longer be reduced to a series of objective facts, but captured in the meta-narratives that define and guide our reading of the way things are. Then I started reading the work of people like Stephen Denning and his ground-breaking work on storytelling and organisational change. Despite the fact that at that time I knew nothing about the world of corporate communications, what he had to say still had a ring of truth about it. Today, more than a decade later, nar-



rative approaches to what we do are everywhere, and Denning is arguably responsible for a brand new school of thinking.

In his book *King Arthur's Round Table: How Collaborative Conversations Create Smart Organisations*, David Perkins argues that all organisations are really only about conversations and that, notwithstanding the particular line of business we are in, effective leadership is always about helping people to have better, smarter conversations. And if you talk about conversations in one breath, you surely have to mention stories in the next. After all, stories are the 'stuff' of most conversations and unique in their ability to bring meaning, pattern and order to the otherwise disconnected fragments of our lives. Not convinced? Well just try and think of any recent, meaningful conversation, at work or in the office, in which you did not tell a story to il-

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lustrate your point, contribute an idea, raise an issue or make a connection with somebody.

STORYTELLER In short, it is all about stories. In fact, these days, notwithstanding the complexity of our art, we are in the end nothing more and nothing less than a band of storytellers: telling the story of our organisation and helping other people find their place in that story. It really is that simple. Everything else – our plans, budgeting, annual targets, policies, and protocols – is just white noise.

Now this does not mean that we have left reality and plunged into a realm of fantasy and make-believe. On the contrary, as Michael Margolis explains in *Believe Me: Why Your Vision, Brand, and Leadership Need A Bigger Story*, for those of us who communicate on behalf of our companies or organisations, it is high time we faced up to the fact that “people don't really buy your product, solution, or idea, they buy the stories that are attached to it.”

So what does a storytelling approach to corporate communications look like? The good news is that today there are people out there, like Margolis and Denning, who are redefining and bringing the narrative dimension of what we do into sharp relief. Rather than simply tell you what they already know, I will therefore stick to what I know best: my practitioner's tale, which turns upon three story-focused questions we happened to ask along the way, and some pointers for further discussion.

1. IS OUR STORY COHERENT AT EVERY STAGE?

Have you ever sat down at your desk only to stumble upon a lack of coherence in the story that you were trying to tell. It is the moment you first notice that, despite the best laid plans and awe-inspiring publications, inconsistencies have appeared like bubbles on a freshly painted wall. Of course, at my organisation – the International School of Brussels, which has 1,500 students from 70 countries and 300 employees – inconsistencies are everywhere. So where to start?

Our approach began by recognising that – just as epic tales conjure up characters, each one of which may happen to be on some kind of journey – everyone connected with our organisation is also on a journey and could literally be mapped on a continuum between first 'attraction' and 'release' (See Figure 1). Of course, each one of my colleagues focuses upon different aspects of this life-cycle depending upon their prescribed roles within the team. From a storytelling point of view, however, it was critical that we came to a common understanding that it really is all part of the same process: telling the story and helping people – students, parents, donors, partners – find their place in that story. Hav-



ing seen ourselves connected in this way, we went on to ask whether there was sufficient coherence between each of these ‘staging posts’. Concretely, was the experience of ‘inclusion, challenge and success’ that is so much a part of our brand proposition in Stage 1 so keenly felt as students and their families journeyed through the school? After all, it is one thing to have a story. It is quite another to see it lived out in every aspect of who we are and what we do. Finally, a few questions you may want to ask yourself about this life-cycle approach to corporate engagement: what would this approach look like in your organisation? How coherent is your story along this path, and how are you measuring this? Who is responsible for identifying and reduced anomalies when they arise?

2. DOES OUR STORY MAKE SENSE? As John Steinbeck wrote in *East of Eden*, “if a story is not about the hearer he [or she] will not listen ... A great lasting story is about everyone or it will not last. The strange and foreign is not interesting – only the deeply personal and familiar.” From a storytelling point of view, the idea that a story is as much about the listener as the narrator is hardly new. Yet it was only a few years that we all sat reading *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, transfixed by the suggestion that this truly was the end of business-as-usual; pondering that audacious proposal that markets are now conversations and that “in just a few more years, the current homogenised voice of business—the sound of mission statements and brochures—will seem as contrived and artificial as the language of the 18th century French court.”

A little more than 10 years on, sitting in our communications offices, it is all too apparent how prophetic this manifesto was. The internet, to say nothing of Web 2.0 and social media, has changed everything – forever. Even at

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

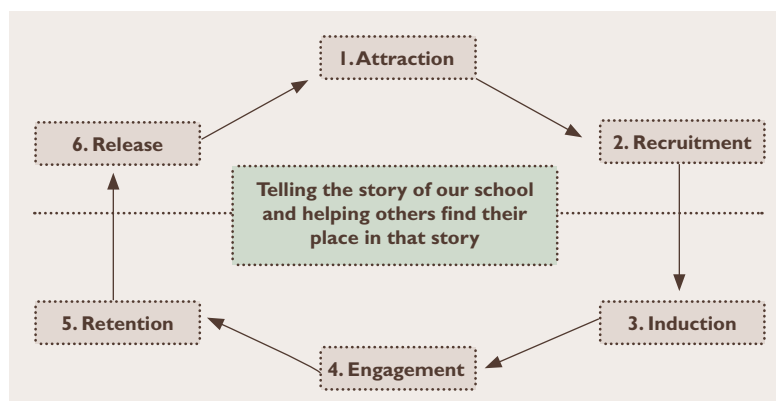
Communication is telling stories

- ➔ Communications is the art of telling stories about an organisation and helping people to find their place in that story
- ➔ Stories should be coherent at every stage
- ➔ Stories should relate to the audience
- ➔ Communicators have to be playful – by avoiding predictability, stories take on a life of their own, evolving over time

school, we have become accustomed to a world of daily Google alerts and moderated Facebook or YouTube comments. Via our website and other online platforms, we have got used to the fact that we can no longer get away with the digital equivalent of our dusty, old brochures, but instead are required to offer a space where conversations about learning take place; a dynamic environment in which people feel that their questions are pondered, opinions heard, and values, well, valued. Personally, I do not believe that we are there yet. That said, we keep coming back to this question with two simple observations.

First, in story terms, our school website is slowly becoming as much a narrative about the organisation we want to be as the organisation we already are. Again, to Margolis’ point, it is not the product (even if that ‘product’ is an education) that is driving effective conversations with our prospective customers or future employees. No: it is the stories behind that product – the values, aspirations, struggles, ideas and customer feedback – that capture the imagination and inspire people

Figure 1 A Life-cycle approach to organisational engagement



to believe that we really could become the school we desire to be. So, rather than being narrators of a static script, everything today is more fluid. It is less about giving information, more about sending out invitations to join the discussion.

Second, there is the issue of losing control versus losing the plot. As social media inevitably and relentlessly pushes us to become more flexible in relation to our ‘customers’, it is clear that sooner or later we will all have to give up the myth that we can control what people are saying about us, our companies or organisations. The fact

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is, they always did talk about us: the only difference now is that we can listen in more easily and maybe measure what people are saying out there. However, even if we have lost control a lot of our customers are enjoying a great deal of airtime right now and it is time to ask ourselves whether we are really ready to throw up our hands in despair and give ourselves up to the winds of common opinion? Or is there another way of championing the story, holding on to the vision, and guiding people in the right direction.

3. CAN WE PLAY WITH THE STORY? If effective communications is all about storytelling, then it follows that there must also be an innate playfulness to our art. This association is not new. Alan Kelly has spent his career analysing the communications role and come up with what he believes to be a series of es-

sential, irreducible elements – ‘plays’ – which together make up a lexicon, a lingua franca, by which we can talk about, strategise, organise and predict the impact of the conversations we are having out there. As he argues in *The Elements of Influence: Introducing The Playmaker’s Standard*, communication is thus akin to a game of chess: a game with rules, strategies and, if not predictable outcomes, predictable moves.

However, as we reflect upon our roles within the organisation, it may be that predictability is not the first word that comes to mind. We may consider ourselves playful, but more along the lines of the Shakespearean fool who pops up at key points in the narrative to simplify things, summarise, explain or simply bring a different perspective to the conversation – always looking for new ways and new opportunities to engage those around us. The key to change, in this sense, is innovation. So we can never forget that ours is also the task of understanding, communicating, criticising and reinventing the story almost on a daily basis – like a child rearranging Lego™ bricks to mirror constantly the imaginations of his or her mind. There is a chance, of course, that under the pressure of re-invention the story will shatter into a thousand fragments. At the same time, as C.S. Lewis once wrote, it is only by playing that we can break the story and begin to tell a truer tale.

CONCLUSION Talking of truth, you may well ask, is any of this true? Well like a good communications plan (or any other good story for that matter), to ask the question is to miss the point entirely. After all, stories – even corporate stories – are always personal and can never be reduced to matters of fact. Are the tales of Narnia true? Of course they are! Like all effective communication, they are sealed with a ‘ring of truth’ and spoken with an authentic voice. In the end, even as communications professionals, that is surely as much as we can ever hope for. |



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*A former member of the EACD Board and the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education Commission for Marketing and Communications, Dr David Willows is a regular contributor and blogger on the role of storytelling in school branding, marketing and communications. His latest book is entitled *Fragments: Stories and Reflections on Modern Family Life* (Createspace 2010). He blogs at www.davidwillows.com.*

