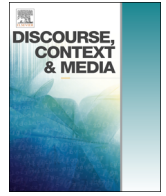




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Employee testimonials: Animating corporate messages through employees' stories



Cindie Maagaard*

Institute of Language and Communication, University of Southern Denmark, Campusvej 55, 5230 Odense M, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

This article explores why and how organizations use the personal experiences of ostensibly real employees as a persuasive strategy in image management. It analyzes the verbal and visual discourse of the corporate genre of employee testimonial to understand how the production of meanings is distributed between organization and employee, and how this distribution influences the effect that they are authentic employee stories. I argue that the personalization of the narratives, particularly through verbal and visual evaluation, is a strategy which shifts the voice of organizations to employees, and in doing so illustrates the precarious balance between narrative interest and authenticity in promotional texts.

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1. Introduction

This article takes a point of departure in the corporate narrative genre of employee testimonial in order to explore why and how organizations use the personal experiences of ostensibly real employees as a persuasive strategy in business contexts.

In testimonials, the values and culture of a corporate entity are represented by individual employees, each with a story conveying experiences and qualities of the human beings who constitute the company. Testimonials therefore personalize organizations and serve strategic communicative functions – both the overt function of providing career information for recruitment, and the more covert function of managing image and countering negative publicity.

Testimonials are a genre characterized by complexity. Their legitimacy in general derives from their origin in the first-hand experiences and words of the teller (Warner, 2009), and employee testimonials are designed to appear to be naturally occurring oral narrative. Yet they are in fact blends of corporate and individuals' events and voices, laminations of narrating participants who contribute to the stories and influence both their perceived authenticity and the values they reveal. An added complexity is the multimodality of the testimonials, with both employee and organization contributing multiple verbal and visual meanings.

On the basis of examples from the global energy provider BP and the Walmart retail chain, this article discusses the way that the employee is staged as animator (Goffman, 1981) of the organization's messages. As part of a larger project that explores how multimodal narratives are used in the construction of corporate identity, it seeks to understand how the production of verbal and visual meanings is distributed among participants and how this contributes to the effect that employee stories are authentic. I argue that the personalization of the narratives, particularly through verbal and visual evaluation, is a strategy which shifts the voice of organizations to employees, and in doing so illustrates the precarious balance between narrative interest and authenticity in promotional texts.

1.1. The structure of the article

The article begins with a presentation of the genre of employee testimonial and associated aspects of communicative purpose, participant roles (Goffman, 1981) and authenticity, as well as an introduction to the data and the questions they raise.

In order to build a framework for analyzing how meaning is anchored in participants, concepts are presented that I see as central to this process: narratological concepts of verbal evaluation (Labov, 1997, 1972; Labov and Waletzky, 1967) and experientiality (Fludernik, 2003) and a discussion of evaluative paralinguistic signals. Following an analysis of employees' oral storytelling, I turn to the means by which organizations stage these stories. I discuss means of visual meaning-making (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006;

* Tel.: +45 65 50 31 59.

E-mail address: cindiem@sdu.dk

Van Leeuwen, 2005), including how evaluation is realized in film (Maier, 2009), applying these concepts in an analysis of visual strategies used by the organization. Throughout, Goffman's participant roles provide a lens for understanding how meanings appear to be anchored in employees and organizational agents.

2. The employee testimonial

The employee testimonial is a text by a first-person narrator, attributed to an employee and conveying first-hand experience of life as a member of an organization. Testimonials are posted on organizational websites, typically under hyperlinks to career opportunities. Their length and elaboration vary from brief statements of an employee's opinion of a company to longer narratives ranging from chronologies of advancement to stories of career journeys, crises and self-realization.

As they relate the experiences of employees, testimonials go beyond traditional job advertisements in delineating professional and personal challenges and rewards. They are a multimodal extension of the job-image advertisement, a hybrid genre that serves dual purposes of recruitment and advertising (Norlyk, 2008) while also addressing employees within the organization, as "auto-communication" (Christensen, 1997) providing role models and success stories.

Studies of consumers' reactions confirm the persuasive potential of testimonials, especially those in video form (Walker et al., 2009), and have found that employee testimonials are effective at communicating "quality of work life," allowing potential applicants to "assess important person-organization fit" (Cober et al., 2000 in Walker, et al., 2009: 1355). Employee testimonials have been found to encourage identification with an organization, because they "show the more human side" of it (Cober et al., 2000: 487, in Walker et al., 2009: 1354). Recruitment-related information has also been shown to have some effect on organizational attractiveness in the face of negative publicity (Van Hoye and Lievens, 2005).

In testimonials, showing "the more human side" becomes a strategy for anchoring and embodying corporate values, as the role of telling appears to shift from an anonymous corporate entity to singular, identifiable human beings sharing their personal experiences. Nevertheless, readers have been shown to question anecdotal information that organizations provide about themselves (Highhouse et al., 2002). A challenge testimonials present, therefore, is creating the effect that they originate in the employee.

3. The data: testimonials and their contexts

The testimonial is a widely used corporate genre (Walker et al., 2009). The texts for analysis here were selected from the websites of BP and Walmart. A limited number, chosen for their representative patterns and themes, form the data for analysis that follows in Section 5 below.¹

From BP, the stories of Laura, Vice President of Science, Technology, Environment and Regulatory Affairs, and Jim, Vice President for Safety and Operational Risk Culture and Leadership, were selected and can be viewed here (Figs. 1 and 2):

From Walmart, the stories of Personnel Coordinator Lori Richardson, Store Manager Tonya Pullen, and Zone Merchandising Manager Natasha Ter-Markova were selected and can be viewed



Fig. 1. BP: Laura.



Fig. 2. BP: Jim.



Fig. 3. Walmart: Lori.

by linking to Walmart's Media Library (Figs. 3–5): <http://news.walmart.com/media-library/videos/>.

For ease of reference, all the testimonials are summarized in Table 1.

The stories were selected with the aim of illustrating a range of generic and narrative features shared by testimonials from different organizations and across contexts. Although my analysis is not comparative as such, the stories do show differences that reveal how testimonials convey messages specific to organizations, and I will point to some significant differences in the analysis.

BP is a knowledge-intensive organization whose operation depends upon employees with university-level degrees, specialized training and competences for research and development. Walmart, as a large retailer, emphasizes convenience and low prices for its customers which depend upon economies of scale and ways to increase efficiency, although Walmart does have employees with a range of educational backgrounds, and offers support for employees who pursue an education.

One feature shared by the companies is negative publicity. Not only are global energy corporations and "big-box" stores associated with profit-seeking at the expense of the environment and

¹ The testimonials appear on the companies' career webpages: <http://careers.walmart.com/our-people/videos/> and <http://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/careers/working-at-bp/our-stories.html>. All are available on youtube.com, and Walmart's appear in their Media Library, <http://news.walmart.com/media-library/videos/>.

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