



Why the PR strategy of storytelling improves employee engagement and adds value to CSR: An integrated literature review



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 August 2013

Received in revised form 10 February 2014

Accepted 12 February 2014

Available online 14 March 2014

Keywords:

Employee engagement

Corporate storytelling

Reputation

Corporate social responsibility

ABSTRACT

This literature review paper examines theoretical text on corporate storytelling to ascertain if it can be a valuable public relations (PR) strategy to heighten employee engagement, and to identify how storytelling may improve internal loyalty to the corporate brand that ultimately strengthens internal and external reputation – validating its worth for an organisation's corporate social responsibility (CSR).

The paper includes an integrated literature review of contemporary text and theories on storytelling from academics and industry leaders relating to the benefits of using corporate stories; corporate stories and employee engagement; employee engagement and enhanced internal reputation; the link between internal and external reputation; the benefits of PR strategies to CSR; and the limitations of corporate storytelling. Results from a 2012 Australian corporate survey on the use of storytelling are also integrated into the review. Many theorists endorse corporate storytelling as a valuable medium for engaging with employees and improving internal reputation. However, both contemporary academic and industry analysis appears limited in acknowledgement of a link between internal storytelling and improved CSR.

The paper draws a link between using corporate stories to engage more deeply with staff in order to strengthen internal loyalty and effect a stronger external reputation, as organisations seek to heighten their CSR credibility and make employees their reputation champions. This link appears to be given limited attention in current PR academic text.

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Introduction

Can storytelling be a valuable internal communication strategy to engage more effectively with employees and advance an organisation's corporate social responsibility (CSR) reputation? The following integrated literature review examines the link between corporate storytelling, employee engagement and CSR reputation, and concludes that a strong link exists.

The purpose of this paper is to identify from the literature how corporate storytelling has significant strategic benefits for internal communication and employee engagement, leading to improved internal reputation and enhanced CSR (Mittins, Abratt, & Christie, 2011). The paper also identifies distinct criteria to effectively use storytelling as an employee engagement strategy, as opposed to more traditional communication mediums. The literature review in this paper demonstrates that

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Table 1

Primary benefits relating to the use of storytelling in an organisation (updated from Gill, 2011).

Benefit	Link	Author
Storytelling is an effective means of communicating with internal employees	Employee engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Forman (2013) ■ Fog et al. (2010) ■ Shuck and Wollard (2009) ■ Denning (2010, 2005) ■ Sinclair (2005) ■ Brown et al. (2004) ■ Post (2004)
The use of stories by management is more engaging and appealing to employees	Good employer practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Kaye (1995) ■ Dowling (2006) ■ Simmons (2006) ■ Kaye (1996) ■ Prusak (2001)
Story objectives can remain the same, even when the content is adapted by the narrator to make stories more personal	Internal communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Forman (2013) ■ Fog et al. (2010) ■ Sinclair (2005) ■ Gardner (2010) ■ Lawrence and Mealman (1999)
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"> ■ Fenton Taylor and Carroll (2010) ■ Hansen (2008) ■ Simmons (2006) ■ Sinclair (2005) ■ Boje (2008)
Effective corporate stories appeal to emotions and have a lifecycle relating to the organisation	Internal communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fog et al. (2010) ■ Taliaferro and Ruggiano (2010) ■ Dowling (2006) ■ Denning (2010, 2005) ■ Fryer (2003) ■ Prusak (2001) ■ Brown (1995)
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"> ■ Forman (2013) ■ Fenton Taylor and Carroll (2010) ■ Archee et al. (2013) ■ Harris and de Chernatony (2001) ■ Drucker (1989)
When employees are comfortable with their organisation's values and work practices they become important assets to enhancing company reputation	Good employer practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Johnston and Everett (2012) ■ Dowling (2006) ■ Brown et al. (2004) ■ Herman and Gioia (2004) ■ Leary-Joyce (2004) ■ Post (2004) ■ Beder (2002)

many theorists highlight the value of corporate storytelling, but there is limited mention in PR academic texts regarding the use of storytelling as a strategy to build internal loyalty in order to strengthen external reputation and CSR, even though practitioners and academics endorse its value to corporate communication (see e.g. – as a cross section of academic texts: Chaney & Martin, 2011; Chia & Synott, 2012; Freitag & Quesinberry Stokes, 2009; Johnston & Sheehan, 2014; Newson, VanSlyke Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2013; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009).

This paper is important as it repositions storytelling as a legitimate strategy to building a positive internal and external reputation that is under-theorised in academic text (see also Mittins et al., 2011). Public relations (PR) practice can play a critical role in advancing an organisation's CSR through internal communication strategies that engage with employees and effectively engender the organisation's values. There appears to be consensus in literature that these values are represented externally by staff to stakeholders and publics, and have a critical effect on the organisation's reputation, as indicated by Dowling (2006).

Corporate storytelling is the practice of using narration from within the organisation relating to its people, practices, policies and visions to effectively engage with staff (Dowling, 2006). Contemporary literature (both industry and academic reviewed in this paper) already supports the relationship between the use of corporate storytelling and heightened employee engagement. This literature demonstrates storytelling as a PR strategy has the ability to reach out and connect with employees on a more engaged level by personalising the message and greatly enhancing the capacity for commitment and recollection (Forman, 2013; Simmons, 2006; Sinclair, 2005). "Effective internal communication is crucial for successful organisations as it affects the ability of strategic managers to engage employees and achieve objectives" (Welch & Jackson, 2007, p. 177).

Literature indicated that as employees understand the organisation's values, and can draw connections from their own values with their organisation's, they may become more comfortable in their employer's mission (see Table 1). This is evidenced through their external dealings, which reinforces the reputation for the organisation due to employees reflecting

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