



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Public Relations Review



When the past makes news: Cultivating media relations through brand heritage

Valentina Martino^{a,*}, Alessandro Lovari^b

^a Department of Communication and Social Research, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

^b Department of Political Sciences, Communication Sciences and Information Engineering, University of Sassari, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 August 2015

Accepted 25 February 2016

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Brand heritage

Corporate communication

Corporate museums and historical archives

Media relations

Made in Italy

Public relations

ABSTRACT

The paper deals with heritage branding, investigating communication and PR models promoted by historical companies representing Made in Italy in the global market, in order to focus on their distinctive approach to media relations strategies and related practices. The study has adopted a multi-method approach, involving a panel of companies in the food & beverage sector. In-depth interviews from PR professionals highlight the potential of heritage branding to develop an authentic form of storytelling, based on quality branded contents and the strategic management of corporate history, thus cultivating long-standing relationships with the media.

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1. Introduction

Heritage branding represents an emerging strategic approach, rapidly rising internationally within the communication market (Misiura, 2006; Montemaggi & Severino, 2007; Urde, Greyser, & Balmer, 2007). It is based on the narrative reconstruction and strategic management of corporate history (Martino, 2013), also with reference to a company's products and marketing brands.

In the new millennium, the practice of valuing and communicating industrial tradition has seen a real boom in Italy, as companies started to rediscover their own history and make it a distinctive communication strategy. Representative expressions of such phenomenon are the celebration of company anniversaries, often packaged in the form of communication events with high media potential. Secondly, the opening of historical archives and museums conserving industrial memory and ensuring a permanent fruition by the public. Furthermore, a rich digital storytelling combining the use of corporate website and social media.

On the one hand, the phenomenon of heritage branding concerns especially those historical companies representing a selected niche of the business market. They distinguish themselves for a special longevity, as they are proud of an at least centennial tradition and, generally, of a family ownership which is deep-rooted in the territory (de Geus, 1997; Giaretta, 2004; Rossato, 2013; Stadler, 2011). On the other hand, even companies which are not so ancient can value their own place within collective memory if they do not choose to promote a pure marketing storytelling (Boje, 2008, 2011), but to deeply rediscover their own history and share it with their stakeholders (Panda, 2006; Urde et al., 2007).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: valentina.martino@uniroma1.it (V. Martino), alovari@uniss.it (A. Lovari).

From this scenario, the paper aims to investigate the specific communication and PR models promoted by a group of brands representing the heritage of Made in Italy in the global market, in order to focus specifically on their approach to media relations strategies and related practices by means of an explorative and multi-method approach.

2. Literature review

2.1. From corporate memory to heritage

The rediscovery of memory, representing nowadays a strongly emerging phenomenon, sees the history of organizations and private companies rising into *heritage* and, thus, a form of strategic cultural and relational capital. Especially during the last decade, several international researchers have investigated the strategic-operational models supporting the management of corporate memory and, more marginally, its communication policies and practices.

From this scenario, the literature review has investigated two major fields: on one side, the phenomenon of historical business and its evolution; on the other, the rise of topics concerning corporate memory and heritage within the frame offered by management and PR studies, with special reference to media relations function and its contemporary evolution. The diverse theoretical approaches have been reviewed from an interdisciplinary perspective and integrated by the analysis of the most authoritative sources, professional experiences, and associative networks promoted in both the Italian and international context.

In particular, several contemporary trends can explain the strong rise of heritage branding: first of all, the evolution of strategic communication from a marketing into a corporate approach, promoting organizations beyond their products and services (Argenti, 2009; Cornelissen, 2011; Fabris, 2009; Goodman & Hirsch, 2010). Moreover, the topics concerning organizational *longevity*, *vitality*, and *memory* are attracting a growing interest by both scholars and professionals (Rossato, 2013), since the economic crisis is dramatically challenging life expectancy which is already short for companies. Such a rising sensitivity is also demonstrated by the number of associative networks which have been launched in Italy, especially from 2000, in order to promote historical companies' culture and role in the country.

The phenomenon of *historical companies* has been highlighted by international scholars investigating, mostly in the context of family business, those economic and socio-cultural conditions assuring organizations' vitality and longevity (de Geus, 1997; Giarretta, 2004; Rossato, 2013; Stadler, 2011). Conversely, organizational studies have developed, especially within knowledge management and cultural approach, the concept of *organizational memory* and investigated its role as an intangible asset (Brooking, 1999; Krandsdorff, 2006; Walsh & Ungson, 1991), which can be subject to an instrumental use or, in alternative, to an expressive and narrative one by organizations (Wexler, 2002).

Scholars suggest that organizations tend to rediscover their own memory and roots when they have to cope and adapt to a changing environment (Pethes & Ruchatz, 2002), as the awareness of the past can reinforce corporate identity and relationships, stimulating brand reputation and attitude towards innovation. From this point of view, radical organizational changes and crises, as well as the celebrating of relevant corporate anniversaries (especially centennials) can offer companies decisive occasions for rediscovering their own history and identity, by acting as moments for analysis in their life as well as for future changing (Martino, 2013).

Such an attitude toward cultivating corporate memory concerns primarily those historical companies which are at least centennial (Giarretta, 2004; Rossato, 2013). Indeed, ancient companies represent a specific economic-cultural system and an extraordinary ambassador of Italian excellence worldwide especially in the most competitive business sectors, such as fashion, design, and food & beverage. Not by accident, in the last years many historical Italian brands have been acquired by multinational corporations, wanting to collect these excellences in their own commercial portfolio (Fara & Attili, 2013).

Especially in the last decade, Italian historical and heritage brands are participating to a cultural movement promoting the protection, conservation and valorization of industrial heritage. Indeed, several projects and associative networks have been launched for initiative of both public sector organizations and private companies (Rossato, 2013). In particular, the most specific expression of such a trend is probably the widespread phenomenon of company historical archives and museums, distinguishing the Italian case in the international scenario, since from the Nineties the number of new industrial archives and museums opened to public has been without equal in Europe (Amari, 2001; Bonfiglio-Dosio, 2003; Bulegato, 2008; Gambardella, 2013; Martino, 2015).

2.2. The communication of brand heritage

In the recent years, both practitioners and scholars started exploring the temporal dimension of branding (Burghausen & Balmer, 2014). They have argued the special relevance of memory for corporate marketing and communication strategies in an age characterized by economic crisis and globalization, when companies become conscious that "any brand, but especially those that are struggling, can benefit from going back to its roots and identifying what made it special and successful in the first place" (Aaker, 2004, p.7).

Corporate heritage represents an *attribute of brand identity* that scholars have discussed only marginally within management and PR theory. Its communicational potential, which cannot be imitated by competitors, can provide a basis for a distinctiveness in positioning (Aaker, 1996, 2004; Balmer, 2013; Urde et al., 2007). In particular, several key dimensions define a specific *heritage quotient model*, developed by Urde et al. (2007). According to those scholars, the heritage potential

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