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ARTICLE

“Once upon a brand”: Storytelling practices by Spanish brands[☆]



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Abstract We have all listened to and told stories. People are captivated by good stories since they have the power to translate us into new worlds and enable us to live the lives of others. In addition, our thoughts and emotions seem bound by the structure of stories. However, not only do consumers interpret their exposure to and experiences with brands through stories, but stories can persuade and strength the brand. Nowadays, companies are making efforts to build their brands through storytelling. After reviewing the concept of story and some of the impacts that arise from storytelling, this exploratory research analyses the use of this practice by Spanish companies from six different sectors. Content analysis is applied to identify differences among companies that use or do not use storytelling, and the characteristics and elements used in 104 stories from 247 websites are analyzed. Additionally, through a cluster analysis, four different groups of stories are identified. The results show the main objectives of the stories, the plots and the archetypes used, among other aspects. Nevertheless, storytelling is underused by most Spanish companies and there is room to increase the quality of stories. Managerial implications of these findings are also discussed.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Narrativas;
Marcas;
Comportamiento del
consumidor;
Comunicación

“Erase una vez una marca”: el uso de la narrativa por las marcas españolas

Resumen Todos hemos escuchado y contado historias. La gente es cautivada por las buenas historias pues tienen la capacidad de trasladarnos a sitios nuevos y hacernos vivir la vida de otros. Además, nuestros pensamientos y emociones parecen estar estructurados en forma de historias. Sin embargo, los consumidores no solo interpretan su exposición a las marcas y su experiencia con ellas a través de las historias, sino que las historias pueden persuadir y fortalecer la marca. Hoy en día, las empresas realizan enormes esfuerzos para construir su marca

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a través del uso de narrativas en sus actividades de comunicación. Este estudio exploratorio analiza el uso de esta práctica por parte de empresas españolas de seis sectores. El estudio usa el análisis de contenido para identificar diferencias entre las empresas que usan y las que no usan las historias, las características y elementos usados en las 104 historias analizadas de 247 sitios web. Además, a través de un análisis cluster se identifican 4 conglomerados. Entre otros aspectos, los resultados muestran los principales objetivos de las historias, las tramas y arquetipos usados. Sin embargo, se constata en general que la narrativa o el uso de historias como parte de la estrategia de comunicación está infrutilizada por parte de las empresas españolas y queda mucho por hacer para mejorar la calidad de las mismas. Las implicaciones empresariales de estos resultados también se ponen de manifiesto.

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"In 1835 the young Manuel Maria Gonzalez Angel used to take long walks with his uncle Jose Angel y Vargas for long walks in the old town of Jerez, when in the city the sound of the hooves of the horses could still be heard making their way through the streets. Manuel Maria found in his Uncle Pepe the best support to get started in the fascinating business of sherry. In those years, Jose Angel, Uncle Pepe, begin a very personal selection of casks in order to find the perfect wine... Years later, Manuel Maria Gonzalez Angel called this vintage "Solera del Tío Pepe", and the inscription can still be read in one of the vintage casks. This is how the legend of the most famous sherry of Spain and the world began to be forged."

And the story continues to be written...

<http://www.gonzalezbyass.com/familia-del-vino/>

Introduction

People are exposed to stories throughout their lives from the moment of birth (Van Laer, Ruyter, Vsconti, & Wetzels, 2014), because stories are informally told all the time. From parents to children, from grandparents to grandchildren, from teachers to students; at bars, around campfires, and so on (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). Storytelling is a fundamental human activity because through it people are able to better understand their world and organize their experiences to communicate them to others (Cooper, Schembri, & Miller, 2010; Moore, 2012). Furthermore, reliving and repeating stories is inherently pleasurable to the teller and permits to experience an archetype fulfilment in their own story (e.g., being a hero, a lover, a rebel) (Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008). However, storytelling also plays a role in persuasion, because the best way to persuade someone is by telling a compelling story (Woodside, 2010).

This natural human process of people organizing their experiences through the construction of stories is also present in consumption contexts (Chiu, Hsieh, & Kuo, 2012). Researchers of a myriad academic fields – such as advertising, leadership and information processing – have studied how consumers interpret their exposure to and experiences with brands through stories. Furthermore, with the advent and popularity of social media (e.g., discussion forums, travel and consumer blogs, social platforms), consumers'

role in brand storytelling is more active than ever¹ (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012) and these stories can spread as rapidly as those created by companies, implying that brand owners no longer have complete control over their brands and the meanings of these brands (Henning-Thurau et al., 2010; Muñiz & Schau, 2007).

Whether created by consumers or by firms, storytelling has become a powerful communication tool that makes it possible to better differentiate the brand and to make sure that it is not just another commodity (Kaufman, 2003). As storytelling is used to bring brands to life and provide them with a personality, in the academic literature there is a strong belief about the benefits of storytelling to brands (Lundqvist, Liljander, Gummerus, & van Riel, 2013). Specifically, it has been proven to add favourable and unique brand associations, which in turn increase brand equity (Lundqvist et al., 2013); in addition, storytelling can better embrace the core brand values compared to traditional forms of marketing communication (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). It also strengthens emotional brand connections (Escalas, 2004; Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010), and has positive effects on brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Chiu et al., 2012).

As a consequence of the qualities inherent in stories, particularly their emotional and relational power, meaning-creating and memorable properties (Wachtman & Johnson, 2009), research efforts and interest in storytelling within the field of marketing, and especially in the branding literature, has increased during recent years,² such that storytelling has moved from being primarily used in advertising, to being viewed as an essential element in developing and managing the brand strategy.

Despite its benefits as a powerful form of communication (see Barker & Gower, 2010; Hegarty, 2011, p. 95; Smith,

¹ For instance, a search via Google for blogs by brand names (e.g., "Cola Cao") brings forth numerous blog entries of mundane reports of consuming Cola Cao. See, for example: <http://colacaomayo.blogspot.com.es/>, <http://dulcemenadia.blogspot.com.es/2014/09/cola-caoy-galletas.html>, <http://nonperfect.com/2012/12/11/cola-cao-con-azucar-por-supuesto/>).

² For example, the *Journal of Psychology & Marketing* devoted its June 2010 special issue to brand-consumer storytelling theory and research.

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