

Storytelling: The Effects of Corporate Stories on the Appreciation of Organizations

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Abstract - Organizations increasingly resort to corporate stories in order to positively influence their stakeholders' perceptions. However, no substantive results are available that prove the effects of corporate stories. Apart from that, recommendations on which content elements should be included in corporate stories, nearly all rely on conceptual theories and not on empirical studies. The first goal of this study is to test whether corporate stories have more positive effects on the appreciation of organizations than a plain, factual summary of corporate information. The second goal is to take the first steps towards composing guidelines on what comprises a good story. Based on an online experiment among 201 participants, the effects of corporate stories as compared to corporate information on the appreciation of organizations were measured, in the context of a for-profit and a not-for-profit organization. Subsequently, the effects of including the elements 'conflict' and 'character' were examined. The results indicated that the effects of a story were less beneficial than expected. Statistical tests showed only a few differences between participants who read corporate information and those who read a story. In addition to that, no effects were found for the presence of a conflict and a character in a corporate story.

Index Terms - Corporate story, corporate information, narrative, story elements.

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is an age-old phenomenon that is essential to all nations and cultures and has been proven to be an effective way of communicating for thousands of years already [1], [2]. Within stories, complex information becomes simplified into a logical series of proceedings, which captures our attention [3]. According to Shaw *et al.*, this logic is achieved because stories contain causes and effects, relationships and a logical order of events, which gives stories the ability to make complex concepts understandable and memorable [4]. In comparison to

plain, factual information, stories are placed in a context, contain details and are structured, which makes them consistent, memorable and more believable [5], [6]. Because of these positive associations of storytelling, many organizations deploy storytelling as part of their reputation management strategy. Instead of or in addition to presenting factual information on the characteristics and qualities of their organization, they present a corporate story to their stakeholders: 'a structured textual description that communicates the essence of the company to all stakeholders, helps strengthen the bonds that bind employees to the company, and successfully positions the company against rivals', p. 144 [7].

According to the definition, corporate stories may function internally in an organization as a means to build a corporate culture marked by engagement between staff and management [8]. When employees are becoming more engaged and their connection with the corporate brand grows, their interaction with external stakeholders will positively contribute to the organization's reputation [1], [6], [9]. However, managing the corporate image could also be performed through carrying out the corporate story directly to external stakeholders [10]. Dowling states that this external communication is just as important for building an organization's reputation as the internal function is [6]. The focus in this study is on external stakeholders.

It is commonly assumed that corporate stories have positive effects on external stakeholders' appreciation of an organization. This assumption seems to be justified by the vast amount of literature on storytelling in general. However, there is a lack of empirical studies in which the effects of corporate stories are tested. One of the very few examples is the qualitative study of Lundqvist *et al.* [5]. The results of this study show that reading a corporate story has a positive effect on consumers' brand experience. More empirical studies are needed to be able to justify the common assumption that corporate stories are beneficial.

The first aim of the current study was to investigate the effects of corporate stories versus corporate information

on the appreciation of organizations. Based on the literature, it was expected that corporate stories would result in a higher level of appreciation than corporate information.

Apart from the fact that it is not clear yet to what extent a corporate story has beneficial effects, there is not much agreement on what comprises a good corporate story. Content analyses have demonstrated that organizations do not agree on which elements to include in their corporate stories, since the stories analysed appear to be dissimilar when it comes to the elements present [9], [11]. In the literature, numerous guidelines can be found on which story elements should be taken into account by organizations [3], [6]. The vast majority of these guidelines, however, is based on conceptual models and, with a few exceptions, there is nearly no attention paid at empirically investigating which elements really enhance positive perceptions.

However, there are certain elements on which the authors do largely agree. A story should describe what an organization does and what it stands for. So, the core activities, mission and vision of an organization should be included in a corporate story. Besides these basic elements, there seems to be an agreement on two other elements that should be incorporated: a conflict and a character. Although there are authors that mention only one of the two elements of conflict and character, it seems that these two aspects could be intertwined and should therefore both be included in a corporate story.

Fog *et al.* state that every good story contains a conflict that marks the turning point in a story [12]. Several authors agree on the fact that a corporate story should include some kind of conflict, also denominated obstacle [13], inciting incident [14], twist [15] or turning point [16]. McKee and Fryer emphasize the importance of a conflict, because ‘you empathically do not want to tell a beginning-to-end tale describing how results meet expectations’ (p.3) [14]. According to Mossberg, the solution for this conflict should be the central message of the story the organization wants to tell [17].

Fog *et al.* also indicate that a corporate story needs a compelling character, in the form of a hero pursuing a goal [12]. According to them, these characters are required for the conflict to be resolved. The guidelines of Denning and Woodside are in line with this [16], [18]; there should be one character present in each corporate story, representing a human hero, who is there to resolve a problem that an organization faces. Barnes agrees with the fact that a corporate story should contain one or more compelling characters that for example competes intensely for new business or takes on a giant competitor [19]. According to James and Minnis these characters, or ‘heroes and heroines’, most often appear in the guise of leaders or founders [20]. The characters should serve as role models, whose values are communicated by the story.

The second aim of the current study was to investigate the effects of two specific story elements, conflict and character. It was expected that the presence of these elements would result in a higher level of appreciation of the organization. According to the literature, incorporating a conflict and a character results in a better corporate story, which probably would have positive effects on the appreciation of the story’s topic.

METHOD

I. Materials: corporate information and corporate stories

For two different fictitious organizations, corporate information was created. The first fictitious organization was described as a for-profit organization that produced cosmetic products. The second organization was a hospital, a not-for-profit organization. The corporate information consisted of a dry enumeration of some facts about the organization, such as the year when the organization was established, the number of employees and the core values.

For both organizations, the cosmetic manufacturer and the hospital, there were also four different variants of a corporate story created. The stories included the facts about the organization that were also described in the corporate information, but these facts were now part of a story that described the history of the organization in a narrative way. The basic requirements for stories as explained in the literature were taken into account [2], [7]:

- The stories were composed according to a begin-middle-end structure, while the corporate information consisted of an enumeration of facts.
- The stories developed causally over time; chronological plots were included. The corporate information was not presented strictly chronologically.

Furthermore, the point of view and the tone of voice differed between the stories and the corporate information:

- The stories were written from the viewpoint of the organization; ‘we’ and ‘us’ were used. In the corporate information, the organization was referred to by its name.
- The stories addressed the target group of external stakeholders directly, by using ‘you’. In the corporate information, the stakeholders were addressed using words as ‘consumers’ and ‘patients’.

In the stories, sentences like this were included: “We know that going to a hospital is not something you’d like to do very often. So, we do our utmost best to make you feel at ease.” In the corporate information, this was

formulated as: “The hospital employees do their best to make the patients feel at ease.”

The four variants of the story differed from each other based on the presence of a description of a conflict in the organization that was solved recently and on the presence of a human character that had played an important role in the history of the organization.

- The first version of both stories did not include a conflict or a character.
- The second version of the stories did not include a conflict, but did include a character.
- The third version of the stories did not include a character, but did include a conflict.
- The fourth version of the stories included a conflict and a character.

II. Study design

The participants in this study were exposed to corporate information of the two organizations or to one of the four variants of the corporate stories of both organizations. So, there were five groups of participants who expressed their appreciation for both organizations after having read corporate information or a corporate story about the organizations. The level of appreciation for the organizations of the group participants who read organizational information was compared to the level of appreciation of the four groups of participants who read one of the variants of the corporate stories to get more insight into the first aim of the study: to investigate the effects of corporate stories versus corporate information on the appreciation of organizations.

The levels of appreciation for the organizations of the four groups of participants who read one of the variants of the corporate stories were compared to each other to get more insight into the second aim of the study: to investigate the effects of two specific story elements, conflict and character, on the appreciation of organizations.

III. Measures: appreciation for the organizations

Appreciation for the organizations was measured by asking the participants to indicate on a five point scale to what extent they agreed with a number of statements, which were all related to their appreciation for the organization.

After being exposed to corporate information or a corporate story about the cosmetics manufacturer, the participants were asked to respond to:

- Five statements on their *attitude towards the organization*, e.g. “The organization is appealing”. These statements were created by Spears and Singh [21].
- Five statements on the *interestingness of the organization*, e.g. “This text gave interesting information on the organization”.

- Four statements on the perception of *the organization as an employer*, e.g. “This organization looks like an organisation that treats its employees well”. Three of these statements were based on [22].
- Three statements on the *perceived quality of the organisation*, e.g. “The products of this organization seem of high quality”. These statements were also partly based on [22].
- Five statements on the *perceived social responsibility of the organization*, e.g. “This looks like an organization that takes into account the interests of future generations”.

After being exposed to corporate information or a corporate story about the hospital, the participants were asked to respond to almost the same statements, but the statements on *perceived social responsibility* were replaced by:

- Five statements on *perceived patient centrality*, e.g. “I think that there is enough attention for every individual patient”.

Factor analyses and reliability tests were done to ensure that the five groups of statements were suitable to measure the possible effects of the variants of the corporate stories and of the corporate information.

IV. Procedure

Participants were recruited both online and face-to-face via the personal network of the first author. Offline acquaintances were asked if they wanted to participate in a study and if they agreed, they were given a web link to the questionnaire, which they could use to take part in the study at a moment that suited them. This web link was also distributed online, via the social networks Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn and via email.

The participants were randomly assigned to one of the five conditions (being exposed to the corporate information or to one of the four variants of the corporate stories). So, participants had to read the same type of information about each of the two organizations.

To start with, they were instructed via an introduction text. This text stated that the answers given and the demographic information of the participants would be treated confidentially, and that participation would take approximately 10 minutes of their time. Also, participants were asked to read the texts thoroughly before answering the questions, but they were also assured that there were no right or wrong answers possible. This procedure was equal for all participants. The average duration was about 12 minutes.

All participants were exposed to the same list of questions which was applicable to all five conditions. The questionnaire consisted of several parts. After reading the

instruction text and agreeing on participating voluntarily in the experiment, firstly participants had to answer questions regarding constructs applicable to the first text they read (either about the cosmetics manufacturer or the hospital), secondly they had to do the same for the second text they read (either about the cosmetics manufacturer or the hospital). So, in order the control for boredom, the order in which the participants had to read the two texts varied.

After they had read the texts and answered the questions on the appreciation of the organization, the participants answered a question to verify if the texts that they had read about the two organizations appeared as stories to them or not. This question served as a manipulation check. Lastly, participants were asked to fill out several demographic details: age, gender, and educational attainment.

V. Participants

A heterogeneous group of 201 respondents took part in this study. Inclusion criteria for participation were the age of 18 years or older, a minimum educational attainment of completed primary education, and Dutch as native language. These criteria were required to make sure all participants were able to understand the full texts and corresponding questions they were exposed to. A total of 234 participants completed the questionnaire. Thirty three participants were excluded because of either a too long (> 60 minutes: 3 participants) or too short (< 5 minutes; 30 participants) participation time. This resulted in 201 useful responses; about 40 participants in each of the five conditions. The age of the participants was ranging from 18 to 75 ($SD=12.4$), with an average age of 30.4. The lowest level of education was primary school, while the highest was university, which at the same time was the most frequent educational attainment (42%). The gender distribution was 67 men (33%) against 134 women (67%).

STUDY RESULTS

I. Corporate stories versus corporate information

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to test whether the 39 participants who were exposed to the corporate information had different opinions on the appreciation of the organizations than the 162 participants who were exposed to one of the versions of the corporate stories. This statistical test was performed for both organizations, the cosmetics manufacturer and the hospital.

For the cosmetics manufacturer, the test showed that there was, in general, a significant difference between the appreciation for the organization after having read the corporate information and after having read one of the variants of the corporate stories ($\Lambda = 0.94$, $F(5, 195) =$

2.49 , $p = .033$). To find out on which specific groups of statements the opinions of the participants who were exposed to the corporate information differed from the opinions of those who were exposed to one of the versions of the corporate story, separate univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted. These tests showed that the two groups of participants had a statistically significant different opinion on the *perception of the organization as an employer*, $F(1, 199) = 4.97$, $p = .027$. Surprisingly, the participants who were exposed to *corporate information* rated the *perception of the organization as an employer* higher than participants who were exposed to a *corporate story*. The mean score of the first group was 3.85 on a five point scale and the mean score of the second group was 3.65. The mean score of the two groups did not differ significantly from each other in their opinion on the other variables (see also table 1).

TABLE 1. EFFECTS OF CORPORATE STORIES VERSUS CORPORATE INFORMATION ON THE APPRECIATION OF THE COSMETICS MANUFACTURER (MEAN SCORES AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS ON A FIVE POINT SCALE; STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN BOLD)

	<i>Corporate story</i>	<i>Corporate information</i>
Attitude towards the organization	3.95 (0.56)	4.04 (0.57)
Interestingness	3.16 (0.64)	3.25 (0.84)
Perception of organization as employer	3.65 (0.50)	3.85 (0.52)
Perceived quality	3.78 (0.52)	3.63 (0.62)
Perceived corporate social responsibility	3.80 (0.55)	3.78 (0.57)

For the hospital, the test also showed a significant difference between the appreciation for the organization after having read corporate information and after having read one of the variants of the corporate story ($\Lambda = 0.91$, $F(5, 195) = 3.73$, $p = .003$). Separate univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to find out on which specific groups of statements the opinions of the participants who were exposed to the corporate information differed from the opinions of the participants who were exposed to one of the variants of the corporate story. Statistically significant different opinions were found on the variables *interestingness* ($F(1, 199) = 5.11$, $p = .025$) and *perceived patient centrality* ($F(1, 199) = 7.92$, $p = .005$). As expected, both groups of statements were rated higher by participants who read one of the versions of a corporate story than by those who read corporate information (see also table 2).

TABLE 2. EFFECTS OF CORPORATE STORIES VERSUS CORPORATE INFORMATION ON THE APPRECIATION OF THE HOSPITAL (MEAN SCORES AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS ON A FIVE POINT SCALE; STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN BOLD)

	<i>Corporate story</i>	<i>Corporate information</i>
Attitude towards the organization	3.94 (0.52)	3.88 (0.64)
Interestingness	3.10 (0.57)	2.86 (0.67)
Perception of organization as employer	3.58 (0.48)	3.49 (0.48)
Perceived quality	3.71 (0.58)	3.78 (0.45)
Perceived patient centrality	3.67 (0.47)	3.44 (0.48)

Based on these results, it can be concluded that reading a corporate story does not have a clear positive effect on the appreciation of the company. For most groups of statements, no differences were found. But as expected, for the hospital, a corporate story did result in positive effects on the interestingness of the organization and on the perceived patient centrality, compared to corporate information. However, contrary to the expectations, for the cosmetics manufacturer, corporate information resulted in a higher perception of the organization as an employer than a corporate story.

II. The effects of adding the story elements character and conflict

After testing the differences between the levels of appreciation for the organization of the participants who were exposed to corporate information and the levels of appreciation for the organization of the participants who were exposed to corporate stories, the appreciation levels of the participants who were exposed to one of the four versions of the corporate story were compared with each other. So, it was tested if adding a description of a *conflict* within the company or adding a human *character* to the story had an effect on the participants' appreciation of the two organizations. Positive effects of adding a conflict or a character were expected.

The results of the first multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) showed that adding a conflict had no effect ($\Lambda = 0.98$, $F(5, 154) = .58$, $p = .718$) and that adding a character had also no effect ($\Lambda = 0.99$, $F(5, 154) = .25$, $p = .937$) on the combination of the groups of statements that were used to measure appreciation for the cosmetic manufacturer. There was also no interaction effect of the two story elements ($\Lambda = 0.97$, $F(5, 154) = .84$, $p = .523$).

Table 3 shows that the mean scores of the participants in all four groups do not differ very much from each other.

TABLE 3. EFFECTS OF THE FOUR VERSIONS OF CORPORATE STORIES ON THE APPRECIATION OF THE COSMETICS MANUFACTURER (MEAN SCORES AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS ON A FIVE POINT SCALE; STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN BOLD)

	<i>Story without additional elements</i>	<i>Story with conflict</i>	<i>Story with character</i>	<i>Story with conflict and character</i>
Attitude towards the organization	3.98 (0.63)	3.91 (0.55)	3.91 (0.50)	4.00 (0.57)
Interestingness	3.07 (0.74)	3.15 (0.62)	3.13 (0.52)	3.25 (0.69)
Perception of organization as employer	3.65 (0.49)	3.61 (0.47)	3.68 (0.37)	3.66 (0.65)
Perceived quality	3.76 (0.50)	3.80 (0.57)	3.84 (0.40)	3.73 (0.62)
Perceived corporate social responsibility	3.72 (0.54)	3.84 (0.60)	3.85 (0.43)	3.82 (0.59)

The results of the second multivariate analysis of variance showed comparable results for the appreciation of the hospital. Adding a conflict or a character to the story did not result in statistically different scores on the groups of statements used to measure appreciation (conflict: $\Lambda = 0.97$, $F(5, 154) = 1.11$, $p = .359$; character: $\Lambda = 0.99$, $F(5, 154) = .45$, $p = .813$; interaction: $\Lambda = 0.96$, $F(5, 154) = 1.15$, $p = .334$). In table 4, the mean scores of the four groups are shown; they are close together.

TABLE 4. EFFECTS OF THE FOUR VERSIONS OF CORPORATE STORIES ON THE APPRECIATION OF THE HOSPITAL (MEAN SCORES AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS ON A FIVE POINT SCALE; STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN BOLD)

	<i>Story without additional elements</i>	<i>Story with conflict</i>	<i>Story with character</i>	<i>Story with conflict and character</i>
Attitude towards the organization	3.93 (0.41)	3.89 (0.57)	3.93 (0.54)	4.02 (0.56)
Interestingness	3.14 (0.58)	3.04 (0.55)	3.04 (0.50)	3.19 (0.66)
Perception of organization as employer	3.49 (0.39)	3.57 (0.52)	3.59 (0.36)	3.69 (0.60)
Perceived quality	3.70 (0.50)	3.68 (0.68)	3.84 (0.48)	3.63 (0.64)
Perceived patient centrality	3.69 (0.42)	3.63 (0.49)	3.65 (0.42)	3.73 (0.54)

Based on these results, it can be concluded that, contrary to the indications in the literature, the specific elements of a story do not seem to have any effect on the appreciation of the company.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The first aim of the current study was to investigate if a corporate story results in a higher appreciation for the company than a dry, factual description of the organization's characteristics and qualities. Based on the literature, it was expected that a corporate story would result in a higher level of appreciation. The results of the current study however, do not show a convincing beneficial effect of corporate stories. Although the results show that a corporate story has a modest positive effect on the appreciation of the not for-profit organization, the hospital, the results show a modest negative effect on the for-profit organization, the cosmetics manufacturer.

In the context of for-profit organizations, it can be stated that a corporate story did not have an advantage over corporate information when it comes to the appreciation of those organizations. This puts a nuance on the findings of Lundqvist *et al.*, who found that people come up with more positive connotations about a brand after being exposed to a corporate story in contrast to corporate information [9]. On the basis of those separate positive connotations however, one cannot state that a

corporate story as a whole positively influences the appreciation of an organization. The study of Lundqvist *et al.* could therefore be seen as a starting point, from which follow-up studies need to be conducted in order to determine on the basis of which elements corporate stories are effectively having a positive effect on an organization's appreciation [9].

The second aim of the study was to investigate effects of including the specific elements *conflict* and *character* in corporate stories. Again, the results were not in line with the expectations. Including a conflict or a character did not have an effect on the participants' level of appreciation of the organizations.

In the advisory literature, conflicts and characters are considered to be important elements in corporate stories. Looking at the relevant content analyses that have been conducted concerning corporate story elements up until now, a turning point (conflict) was found in almost half of the stories by Spear and Roper and in approximately one-third of the cases by Janssen *et al.* [9], [11]. Also, characters were found in more than half of the stories assessed [11]. The findings of the current study indicate that the addition of conflicts and characters in corporate stories does not have a positive influence on the appreciation of an organization in comparison to omitting these elements. So, it seems redundant to use this information in a corporate story. Although Spear and Roper found a difference between for-profit and not-for-profit organizations in the elements these types of organizations use [9], when it comes to influencing people's appreciation of an organization this difference is not justifiable. However, it might be that the presence of conflicts and characters in corporate stories do have other required effects on stakeholders, such as increased memorability or attracting attention to the organization.

As most studies, the current study has some limitations. The first limitation is that the participants' answers to the question to verify if the texts that they had read about the two organizations appeared as stories to them were not consistent. Part of the participants who read corporate information indicated that this text appeared as a story to them and some participants who read corporate stories indicated that the text did not appear as a story to them. The cause of this result is probably that the participants did not have a clear idea about what actually entails a story; they consider every text to be a story, to a certain extent. However, it may also be that the participants did not read the texts carefully.

A related limitation is that it was not verified if the participants noticed the presence of a conflict or character in the story. In future research, a more elaborate manipulation check should be part of the study.

Another limitation is that the study did not control for interests and personal values of the participants. These factors may have influenced the results. It might be, for

example, that the majority of the participants was not interested in cosmetics. If so, the results of the current study may have been different when another fictitious organization was chosen.

The most important implication of this study is that more empirical research is needed before we can safely advise organizations on using a corporate story instead of a plain, factual summary of their characteristics and qualities. Apart from that, if organizations would like to use a corporate story, we do not know yet which elements are essential.

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