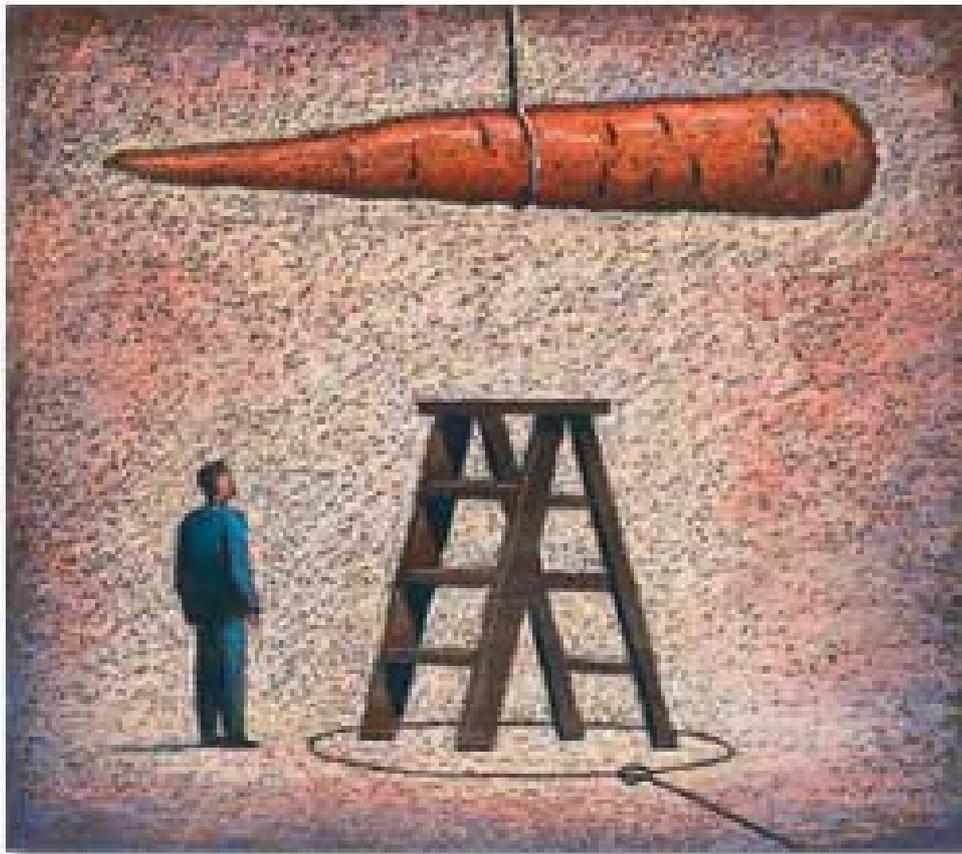


# CORPORATE NARRATIVE

Communicating Values With Stories



John Alexander

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*InterMedia Publications*

## **Corporate Narrative**

Communicating Values With Stories

Also by John Alexander

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## The Author

John Alexander's career began in radio and television journalism with the Australian Broadcasting Commission in Melbourne. Since then he has worked in the publishing and media industries, in the UK, and elsewhere, before moving to Sweden in the mid 1980s.

John Alexander has a PhD in narratology – the study of narrative texts and structures – from Stockholm University. He has lectured at universities throughout the Nordic region and continues to work with companies and organisations throughout Europe, including Electrolux, Akzonobel, Ericsson, Scania, Bayer, Astrazeneca, the Swedish Institute, UNESCO, Nordea, SEB and the Wallenberg Institute.

# Introduction

"It is no longer the company with the best product that will succeed, but the company with the best story." Rolf Jensen, *The Dream Society*

Electrolux has both a brand manager and a company historian. The role of the brand manager is to cultivate the Electrolux brand for marketing and consumer awareness purposes. The company historian maintains and preserves what the Electrolux brand has meant for consumers in the past.

Newcomers to the company are provided with an historical overview, a tour of products from the past, and a few anecdotes and stories to illustrate Electrolux striving for quality. One of these stories tells of an old lady living in one of the more well-to-do quarters of Stockholm who takes her vacuum cleaner to the local appliance repair shop. 'It needs a new hose,' she tells the repairman. The repairman looks at the suction hose, which has worn through, and at the vacuum cleaner, which is 40 years old. 'I'll see what I can do,' he tells the old lady and calls to the Electrolux service department. 'No chance', he is told; 'we haven't made suction hoses for that model in more than 20 years.' As a gesture of goodwill – and impressed that there is a

customer with a still functioning 40 year old vacuum cleaner - Electrolux agrees to provide the old lady with a new model, free of charge. 'No,' says the old lady, 'this model is perfectly all right. It just needs a new suction hose.' The old lady is adamant, and the Electrolux service department custom-makes a new suction hose. Another satisfied customer.

The story has other implications of course – it exemplifies the Electrolux brand as representing quality, service, and product durability. It is a story that communicates values.

In *Corporate Narrative* we will be looking at how stories communicate values, test values and help shape and define a corporate profile and a company brand. We look at four basic questions:

- Why stories? What are the advantages storytelling has over more traditional approaches to profiling the corporate message? Whether selling a pair of jeans, a party political leader, or an environmental ideology, is storytelling a better alternative to other forms of media rhetoric?

- How stories communicate values. What makes a good story? How do we create a story that has both impact and credibility? What is the art of storytelling? How do we engage a listener? What makes a story memorable?
- The meaning of cultures and stories. How do we make storytelling work for us? Where do we get our stories? We look at the inside stories; stories generated from within the organisation; from the company name, to brands, logos, history and vision. How do we transform corporate core values into stories that can be shared?
- And finally, what happens when storytelling does not work for us? For every product, and every company, there is a story. The question is, who writes it? The consumer, the media or the organisation? What happens when our company or product becomes the centre of a scandal? Thus *Corporate Narrative* is as much a guide for consumers as it is a guide for managers, leaders and marketing directors. Inside the organisation storytelling can bring a company together, as well provide a solid marketing platform. Outside the organisation understanding the mechanics of

corporate narrative gives us some insight into how storytelling persuades and steers our everyday choices. A course in *Corporate Narrative* is a course in consumer self-defence. We shall consider why successful storytelling requires a strong moral foundation.

Inside the organisation getting the story right can lead to profound transformations. A good story can:

- inspire change inside the company or organisation
- initiate change that leads to a better product, vision or morale
- change the person – a strong story can help an individual find balance, motivation and inspiration

## Why Stories?

A Brazilian client walked into the Mercedes showrooms in Stuttgart. He was dressed in typical Brazilian fashion – slacks and colour print short sleeved shirt. He stood out amongst the European executives in their dark suits and ties. The Brazilian client waited patiently, but after 30 minutes of being ignored by the apparently ‘busy’ sales staff, he left his business card on the desk and walked out. On the back of the card he had written a short message: ‘Can be contacted at this number.’ The front of the card listed the company, one of Brazil’s largest exporting companies, and his position, President. The number he had left on the back of his card was to the BMW office in Munich.

This story circulated through the company’s European offices. Were changes made? According to an account manager from Chrysler-Daimler’s Denmark office, this story initiated a series of changes regarding both policy and in-house training. ‘It was a matter of changing deep-rooted attitudes,’ he added.

Companies and organisations invest vast sums of money in developing a profile, through advertising, logos, mission statements, core values and

questionnaires to gauge consumer response. What can stories provide that the traditional avenues of profiling and marketing cannot? Why should managers and company leaders invest in the 'how-to' of storytelling? How feasible is storytelling as a business development strategy?

These responses are from managers and leaders representing both public and private sectors. From large established multinational corporations to small entrepreneurial companies just starting out, the reasons are consistent. Likewise from private schools, local community services to government organisations, including health, taxation and law enforcement. Here are some of the plus points:

- stories inspire
- a story unifies a group around a common goal
- a story can illuminate the corporate soul
- stories provide 'how to' examples of success
- stories tell us what works and what doesn't
- stories give us a sense of history and achievement
- stories have morals – they tell us what is right or wrong
- stories concern people and people communicate trust
- stories invite participation

What about the objections? Why stories? Stories are made-up, works of fiction, not true. How can

'untruths' serve the common interest of any company or organisation? Stories are entertainment. What does entertainment have to do with profiling a company? Or a product or a service or an idea? Companies have names, logos, slogans. There are core values, mission statements and corporate guidelines. All designed to define and profile. It is an approach that is concrete and factual. Doesn't storytelling belong to the realm of fiction and fantasy?

But perhaps there is more to fiction and fantasy beyond mere entertainment value. Fiction enables us to explore possibilities and potentials. Fantasy begins with the question 'what if?' Fantasy is the springboard to vision.

Core values and mission statements are also springboards – they provide a theme to the organisation's story. Every organisation has a story – the question is how much is written within the organisation, and how much by those outside – clients, customers, investors, employees, competitors, the media. Core values are vague, abstract, even unrealistic – a story is the flesh to the bones of the business concept. In the final analysis what a potential customer, investor, employee, media representative really wants to know is not 'what is your business, your product, your service', but 'what's your story!'

We all tell stories. Sure, we need information as well. About company policy, about prospects, products and services. But information is limited. There is no insight in information – only facts. The information age belongs to the past – we have, in the words of futurologist Rolf Jensen, entered an age of imagination. It is no longer the company with the best product that will succeed, but the company with the best story.

What substance is there to such a claim? Let us consider what storytelling can do for a company in practical terms. In an age of inspiration and life-style, product alone is no longer the primary sales and marketing criteria. How does 'product thinking' and 'story thinking' compare?

PRODUCT	STORY
information	inspiration
technology	style
facts	interpretation
questionnaires	'buzz'

A good story inspires. A good story transcends boundaries of culture, country and region. 'Brand and image are more important than national preferences,' writes Interbrand in their survey of 2000. They

estimate Nokia's brand name to be worth \$US 38,5 billion, although few Americans are aware of Nokia's Finnish origin. This in spite of the fact that in Europe the cultural priorities of Finland are synonymous with hi-tech, quality, good design, and reliability.

A brand is not a story. Nor are logos, names or mission statements. These are story bytes. Bits of story. Points of departure. Story bytes are part of the storytelling process, but they do not tell the whole story. They are springboards into the storytelling process.

# Good Stories?

What's wrong with this story?

A hot dog vendor has been selling hot dogs for 20 years. He sets up a hot dog stand on a busy shopping street. It is a Saturday afternoon, there are plenty of people about, but he doesn't get a single customer. What he doesn't know is that just around the corner, is another seller – he is 18 years old – with his own hot dog stand. The thing is – he doesn't get any customers either.

What's wrong with this story? It has no point. There is no moral, no premise, no change and therefore no drama. A story needs to be about something.

A story has plot, character, structure, theme. A *good* story is something else. Some people say that storytelling is an art, a gift. Either you have it or you don't. A good story must engage the mind and the heart, our thoughts and our feelings. Yes, there is a creative element to storytelling. But storytelling is also a craft. There are skills to storytelling that can be defined and learned. These include:

*a conflict*

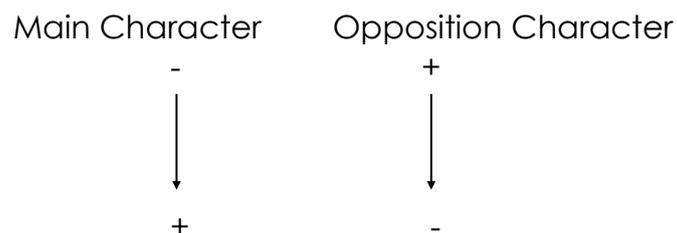
*an engaging character*

*structure*  
*the strong opening*  
*the satisfying ending*  
*a theme - it's about something*

## **A Conflict**

Without conflict there is no story. You can describe a situation, you can describe a person, or a place, or a product. Without a conflict it is only description. A conflict introduces a problem, a dilemma, an obstacle

The elementary form of the dramatic conflict is a contest. A contest needs two opponents; a protagonist - main character, and antagonist - opposition character.



The most effective stories involve a change. By overcoming the problem or crisis the main character is transformed in the process. This change means

defeating the opposition, whatever that opposition may be. The traditional villain, the circumstances of fate, an unjust system.

### **An Engaging Character**

We can make a character of anyone, or anything. We can make a cartoon figure, a robot, a desk lamp, a dinosaur into a character. What we need to create is a situation we can identify with, and a character we have feelings for.

A poor sod is someone we feel sorry for. A young man who loses his job, the woman with a brutal husband, the kid who suffers at the hands of a sadistic teacher. Like young David against Goliath. Goliath is huge, wears armour, and carries a sword. All David has is the slingshot. And he's so small. Poor sod.

The poor sod scenario serves two functions: 1. arouses the feelings of the viewer – feelings for a character stimulates interest in the story; 2. allows the viewer to identify with the character because we identify with their situation.

## Structure

Drama, like chess, has its opening, middle game and end game; like board games, or games of sport and competition. Hollywood screenwriting manuals describe 'crisis – climax – resolution' or 'exposition – development and conflict – resolution' or 'problem – conflict/crisis – climax' or 'the set-up – confrontation – resolution', or 'crisis – complications – resolution', even 'disturbance – struggle – adjustment'.

Whatever the terms, the structure is classic Aristotlean 'beginning, middle and end', or as described in *The Poetics* (ca 330BC) 'an action that is complete and whole... has a beginning, a middle and an end... a well constructed plot must conform to this pattern.'

Beginning	Middle	End
Presentation Situation Character (s) Problem	Conflict conflict leads to confrontation	Resolution conflict resolved; problem solved

### *The Aristotlean narrative model*

Even a short anecdote requires this basic structure. In the presentation we introduce the main

character, the opposition, the situation and the problem. In the conflict the main character deals with the problem, overcomes obstacles leading up to a confrontation. The confrontation forces the main character into action, and action leads to resolution. A positive resolution – the happy ending – tells us anything’s possible; risk can lead to victory and a crisis can be overcome. A negative resolution – the tragic ending – tells us there are limitations; some things are possible, some things are not.

### **A Strong Opening**

The strong opening is a hook that grabs the listener’s interest. It could be a question; ‘what would happen if...?’; a moral position; ‘Should hard work go unrewarded?’; the anecdotal: ‘You’ll never guess what happened this morning...’ An opening tantalises, arouses interest, engages.

### **A Satisfying Ending**

A story requires a conflict: someone wants something but something stops them getting it. There

are two possible outcomes; (a) the main character overcomes the obstacle and gets what they want, or (b) the main character fails to overcome the obstacle and is defeated. Either outcome defines a moral premise or theme: Outcome A = life affirmation; Outcome B = acceptance of limitations.

This is why a good story does not have to end with the obligatory 'happy ending.' Sometimes an 'open ending' is more satisfying, allowing the listener to fill in the gaps. Sometimes an ending that is sad or tragic is more satisfying because such an ending can say something truthful about the human condition.

### **A Theme – it's about something**

Some stories entertain. Some stories resonate. It is these stories people remember and pass on to new listeners and new audiences. There is a theme, a moral point, a premise. A story that has meaning is a story that endures. It can be told many times and with each telling the listener can provide their own personal meaning.

# How Do Stories Work?

Communication consists of three parts: a message, a sender and a receiver. In communication a message works because:

*It is noticeable - you see it*

*It is different - you remember it*

*It is visual - pictures are stronger than words*

*It is about people - not product*

*It is arousing - for the mind, feelings, senses*

*It is about something! it communicates a moral value*

In short, a message works because it has:

1. impact
2. credibility

The same applies to stories. The three parts of the narrative consist of the teller, the tale and the listener. Everyone tells stories. Not least about their work. At the water-cooler, at the canteen, during coffee breaks, at conferences. Stories about the company, the boss, the product, the campaign, colleagues, and the way things are run. Sometimes these are positive stories, sometimes not.

Leadership requires positive stories – stories that can inspire effort, change, and commitment. The corporate message needs to make an impact, and to sustain credibility. Credibility is long-term; impact is short-term. A good story arouses interest, and endures; it is short term and long term. Arousing interest requires that a story appeals to the intellect; endurance requires that a story touches the listener's emotions. In classical narrative these two processes are referred to as hypothesis and catharsis.

### **Hypothesis and Catharsis**

A story invites participation and in order to participate we need to understand the conflict. There is some kind of problem to resolve. But this is not enough for a story to engage. A story needs to work on two levels if we are to find it meaningful.

Firstly, in terms of 'what happens next?' The brain is an organ developed for solving problems. Story conflict sets a process in motion – a process of speculating possibilities and hypotheses. The dilemma of the story activates our emotional responses. A dilemma is a choice between two bad options. Your money or your life? Work, at the expense of the family;

or family, at the expense of a career? 'What would I do in that situation?'

Hypothesis and catharsis. They are as necessary to a satisfying novel, to an engaging film or television programme, as they are to corporate narrative or product story. So how does catharsis and hypothesis work in storytelling?

### *Hypothesis*

- *'intellectual theorising'*
- *is about speculation*
- *'what happens next' questions*
- *and 'what do I think?'*

### *Catharsis*

- *'emotional release'*
- *is about dilemma*
- *'what would I do?' questions*
- *and 'how do I feel?'*

Good storytelling appeals to both the mind and the heart, to our intellect and curiosity, and to our feelings. A good story gives us a problem or intrigue, and the right kind of character that makes us want to participate from the beginning.

# Story Bytes

A good story can transport the listener into a new way of thinking, provide a different perspective, give insight, affect change. If our focus is on corporate narrative, where do we begin? What can we use as a starting point?

Any company or organisation has built-in starting points – default values – that can be shaped into a story. A name, a logo, a history. These are not stories in themselves, rather story bytes; bits of story. They can be *visible* - out in the open; *implied* – beneath the surface; or *abstract* – ideals and principles created for the sustainability of the enterprise.

## *The Visible*

- name
- logo
- slogan
- personality

## *The Implied*

- history
- national identity
- brand

### *The Abstract*

- vision
- mission statement
- values

### *The Visible: What We See*

#### *Name*

Springtime was founded in Stockholm in late 2000 as a result of a merger between two media profiling companies. One company focussed on profiling through PR, media promotion and publicity campaigns; the other specialised on profiling and branding via the net.

‘We were sitting around the coffee table brainstorming,’ says a company director, ‘and came up with words like ‘new’ ‘growth’ ‘potential’ ‘fresh’, ‘innovative’ and came up with Springtime.’

In 2001 the company moved into new offices, and began the process of what they normally do for other organisations and companies; define and profile their corporate identity in order to market themselves.

At a storytelling seminar we looked at Aesop’s fable ‘Springtime and Winter.’

What if Springtime and Winter were characters? Where were they from? What do they look like? What do they read? What car do they drive? What's their style? Dress? Mannerisms? We ended up with:

#### Springtime

fresh and innovative  
bright, new ideas  
colourful  
casual dress  
Goldie Hawn  
USA  
Cabriolet

#### Winter

discipline, hard work  
serious  
conservative  
suit & tie  
Herr Dr Karl Winter  
Germany  
Mercedes

Imagine different scenarios in which these two contrasting personalities are both members of the board. Springtime is 'good' – new ideas, fresh perspective. What about Winter? Maybe Winter can be

#### **Springtime and Winter** (Aesop's fable # 144)

Winter scoffed tauntingly at Spring. 'When you appear,' said Winter, 'no-one stays still for a moment. Some are off to the meadows or the woods, picking flowers and examining blossoms. Others go off on boats or set off travelling, and no-one worries about strong winds or downpours of rain. Me, I am like a ruler or dictator. When I command people don't look up to the sky, but down to the earth in fear and respect. Sometimes they must resign themselves to staying indoors all day.'

'Yes,' replied Spring, 'and that's why everyone would be glad to get rid of you. With me it's different. People think my name is delightful – yes, the most delightful of all names. When I'm gone they cherish my memory, and when I reappear they are full of rejoicing.'

good too. Winter provides a balance of discipline with innovation, commitment with freshness. It is an integration process that begins by defining the corporate character and its opposite.

*Logo*

What do we associate with this logo?



Here are a few of the more common associations:

*Innovation*

*GUI*

*Steve Jobs*

*A bite out of the big apple*

*Temptation*

*The tree of knowledge*

*Wilhelm Tell*

*'the 'irritating one click mouse'*

Associations are rich and varied; according to a survey in 1993 the Apple logo had a 'mindshare' of 83% amongst US consumers. In the same year the market share was 6%. The BMW logo likewise. About 80+% recognition, and 6% market. So what is the advantage of having a logo that 83% of consumers can identify, but only 6% are prepared to invest in? Ask their sales staff. What does the consumer pay for a Mac. Or a BMW? Always more than their competitors. What kind of brand loyalty does Mac sustain? And BMW? A loyalty that is the envy of their competitors.

The logo is a story byte that works on associations. The M sign looming over the roadside carries clear associations to the consumer: value for money, family orientated, fast service, and the sense of security that comes with the familiar.

A survey in 2005 found the world's most recognised symbols as: Olympic Rings, Shell, McDonalds, Mercedes Benz, Red Cross, UN. McDonald's is the most recent of these dating back to 1972. A logo, once established, endures.

## *Slogan*

The word 'slogan' comes from Gaelic and means 'battle-cry.' The slogan is the corporate one-liner that serves the dual purpose of uniting the internal corporate community toward a common goal, and edifying the consumer into a favourable association with a product or service. Hewlett Packard's 'invent'; Nokia's 'connecting people'; Nikes 'just do it', Carlsberg's 'probably the best lager in the world'; SEB and 'more than a bank'.

An effective slogan is the slogan tied in with other story bytes, or that functions as a point of departure to storytelling. L'Oreal's 'because you're worth it,' relates to personality (see below); an epithet which works with personality icons connected to a time or place.

Copyrighter Alan Sharpe lists *34 Ways to Write a Slogan* (2000, see [www.adslogan.com](http://www.adslogan.com)) including some of the more identifiable approaches as: unique commitment ('we try harder' Avis); call to action ('just do it'); the single word imperative ('think', IBM). The downside of the slogan story byte is when it is a battle cry without a battle, words without a story. To quote a slogan of my own, 'it's the tale, not the tag.'

## *Personality*

The personality story byte is a matter of placing 'the engaging character' as central to the story. The personality can be real or fictional; the digital broadcasting company, Boxer, created a digital personality (Robert); the coffee-house chain, Coffy, tells the story of a poor Cuban girl (Coffy) with a passion for quality coffee who emigrated to the USA to fulfil her dreams of serving perfect coffee to satisfied customers in a coffee shop of her own.

Often the personality is the colourful CEO; Anita Roddick of Bodyshop, Pehr G Gyllenhammer, former head of Volvo, Richard Branson of Virgin. For the marketing of the SEB Bank slogan, 'more than a bank', SEB Germany employed the services of Peter Ustinov. Such personalities have built-in default values comparable to the casting of known actors in movies roles. But everyone has a story to tell, and ordinary people make excellent personality stories: a customer, an employee, a trainee, a manager, a colleague.

## *The Implied: What We Learn*

### *History*

History is also a long-term process, and an invaluable story byte in promoting continuity, reliability and sustainability. When Jan Carlzon took over the reigns of SAS his first strategy was to create a team-spirit by evoking the company's historical narrative: an airline for business people in the new post war Nordic community.

Becton, Dickinson and Company – suppliers of medical technology - has its head office in Franklin Lakes New Jersey, USA, and some 50 offices worldwide. Adorning the walls of these offices are the portraits of founders Maxwell W Becton and Farleigh S Dickinson.



The story goes that the two men met on a sales trip in 1897 – Becton the entrepreneur and Dickinson the scientist. They sealed their partnership with a handshake and the same year manufactured and sold their first product, an all-glass syringe. In 1948 their respective sons took over the leadership and BD expanded worldwide. In 2005 BD was listed as one of Fortune magazine's 'America's Most Admired Companies.'

For Electrolux the company's sense of history became paramount during a period of expansion through acquisition. Thus an Electrolux company historian (see Ch. 1) works to instil new managers with a sense of historical significance, as well as promoting the sustainability of the brand to consumers.

### *National Identity*

In a global economy cultural differences shouldn't make a lot of difference. From the corporate perspective economic regional areas make much more sense than nations defined by borders. From the corporate perspective regional economics has a logic

that is hard to resist. It bears the rationale of economic theory. And nationalism does not. Nationalism is about feelings. It might not be rational, but the feelings evoked by the tribalism of national identity are powerful and influential, politically, economically, individually. In times of crisis the logic of economics is readily forsaken for feelings of national identity.

For example: in March 2001, the European meat industry faces a crisis. Media coverage of BSE, foot and mouth disease and transport conditions lead to EU border controls and import restrictions. Meat consumption drops. Scan, a major Swedish meat packager, take out full page advertisements in the daily papers. The advertisement includes the company logo and two words:

Alltid svensk

Always Swedish. Two words which, for Scan, are enough for the reader to make the connection to the Sweden meta-narrative; Swedish meat is quality, controlled, risk-free. 'Swedish' suggests the cultural priorities of all that 'Swedish' and 'non-Swedish' mean to the Swedish nationals to whom the message is addressed.

Every country has their own 'default values.' For Swedes, Swedish means safe, reliable, quality. It could be meat, Volvo automobiles or Ericsson telephones. Outside Sweden's borders, Swedish also means design, innovation, even sexy. (Old myths die hard). We think of German cars, Italian clothes, French wine, Belgian chocolates, Swiss watches.

The cultural priorities of any national group are also going to influence the style of the message. In the US advertising is hard sell; direct and unambiguous – big is best. In Europe, advertising strategy is more soft sell, relying on understatement and subtlety. The French like to seduce, the British favour humour. In advertising culture = customers. Address the culture, and you address the customer. Locally this works fine. What happens when companies become global? Stories can help. An advertisement is based on local priorities, a good story has universal appeal.

### *Brand*

Apart from the name, what more identifies the company or organisation? Basically anything that characterises that identity. Personality, brand, logo, region, product, whatever. In storytelling terms, it is

character that engages our interest. What makes an engaging character? We have considered the 'poor sod' scenario as an approach to arouse feelings. Even a small black dot could be made a poor sod given the right situation.

What else helps create an engaging character? I have taken this list from my own book on scriptwriting. Can these attributes be applied to the corporate identity?

*clear goals*  
*a problem*  
*helplessness*  
*another character (contrast)*  
*determination and resolve*  
*smart*  
*a past*

Corporate identity is most readily defined through brand. Brand, like personality, to work well, must be characterised.

According to Sweden's Business Weekly (*Veckans Affärer*), the strongest brand name in Sweden is Volvo. A brand is not a story, but also a story byte – like a logo, or a personality, or a mission statement. Put enough story bytes together and you'll end up with a

story. If someone else puts the story bytes together, the result is another version, the 'outside' version; scripted by the media, consumer, competitor.

The Volvo brand is a significant story byte; a major contribution to the Volvo story. According to Al and Laura Ries in *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding* Volvo 'has been selling safety for some 35 years ...(to) become the largest selling European luxury car.' Volvo sells more cars in the US than BMW or Mercedes-Benz. Volvo embodies their 22nd 'immutable law', the law of singularity; 'the most important aspect of a brand is its single-mindedness.'

Compare this to the story's engaging character:

*clear goals (the safest car)*  
*a problem (competing on the US car market)*  
*helplessness (40 years ago; against all odds)*  
*another character (BMW, Mercedes-Benz)*  
*determination ('law of single-mindedness?')*  
*smart (for the discerning buyer)*  
*a past (40 years)*

A brand, according to Ries, is 'a proper noun that can be used in place of a common word... instead of a safe car, you can ask for a Volvo.'

A brand defines the unique qualities of a product like character defines the uniqueness of a good story. For Volvo the brand is a story by itself that goes into the wry stories of Volvo advertising campaigns: a New York Rastafarian hesitates to admire a Volvo and avoids getting hit on the head by a falling brick; a guy about to swat a fly is distracted by a Volvo cruising by outside his window; an upwardly mobile urbanite trades in his flashy cabriolet for a Volvo Estate to make room for the stray dog he has befriended. Regardless the story, the moral is the same after 40 years on the US market: Volvo saves lives.

### *The Abstract: What We Interpret*

#### *Vision*

For a lot of companies, it is not a matter of lack of ideals or vision, but a lack of time. Reality gets in the way. Regardless of mission statements, core values, and future visions, there are only so many working hours to a day, so many days to the week. A time filled with appointments, meetings, administration, dealing with clients. When does anyone have time to fulfil the vision that highlighted the annual kick-off?

For Ernst and Young Nordic the conflict was between consultants' 'billable hours' and the leadership vision of 'think global, act local.' If company directives, memorandums, and conference speeches couldn't change people's 'billable hours' mindset, then maybe a story could. Not just any story, but their own story.

E & Y looked at storytelling as a way to express the corporate vision into work-day affairs. "If I change, the organisation changes." This was the concept incorporated into Nordic management seminars, and actualised in the participants' storytelling exercises.

'Imagine yourself in ten years. You are reflecting back to an event or incident that sparked off a change. Make that incident a story. With the assistance of your colleagues, share that story with us.'

What sort of stories did participants come up with? Company reunions, reflecting back on key successes; a debate show on television, a news report, a gallery exhibition (the work of art is the 'vision' and the artist, now a celebrity.)

Which stories worked best? Not surprisingly, the most obvious stories. At an inter Nordic seminar participants decided on 'The Story of Ernest Hood'.

Here was a clear message about morals, ethical responsibility and care for the smaller specialised clients as well as the larger established ones.

### *Mission Statement*

The abstraction of a company vision, core values and mission statement can easily become redundant with the intervention of reality. It is the difference between what a company claims and what a company does; actions speak louder than words, as they say. The Swedish insurance company Skandia, had long prized the essence of a mission statement around the principal of 'corporate citizenship.' During the 1990s and early 2000s Skandia was involved with community projects, developing properties in run-down urban areas for youth and immigrant groups. In the early 2000s an emerging scandal involving the Skandia realty division, where division heads were revealed as having developed their own properties, salaries and pension funds to unprecedented levels, resulted in so dramatic collapse of image, that a buy-out bid by South African Old Mutual in 2006, was accepted by shareholders.

Pharmaceuticals and health company, Johnson & Johnson, refers to the company mission statement as 'Our Credo.' It is a one page document divided into four sections, outlining responsibilities to the customer ('doctors, nurses, patients, mothers and fathers...'); to employees; to the community ('corporate citizenship'), and to the stockholders.

In 1935 company co-founder General Robert Wood Johnson, produced a pamphlet 'Try Reality' which urged fellow industrialists to embrace "a new industrial philosophy." In 1943 this evolved into the Johnson & Johnson Credo received acclaim principally for 'putting customers first, and stockholders last.'

What makes the Credo of interest from a corporate narrative perspective is that it served as a company plan of action during the so-called Tylenol crises of 1982 and 1986, when a subsidiary company product was adulterated with cyanide and used as a murder weapon. The company's reputation was preserved with the idealism of a company mission statement put into practice.

\*

## *Values*

Core values represent the corporate version of desired perception. They are a form of one-way communication; one perspective. They describe, but they do not narrate. Masterfoods list their core values as:

- Quality
- Responsibility
- Mutuality
- Efficiency
- Freedom

As a set of values they could be applied to many companies – as is often the case with core values, there is a lack of identity and specificity.

IKEA refer to ‘guiding principles’ as opposed to core values:

- Products are identity
- IKEA spirit - a living reality
- Simplicity is a virtue
- A different way
- Responsibility to the customer

There is specificity (they relate to IKEA), but also generality. What do these values mean when

confronted by media scandals; the German IKEA bribery scandal in 2006; the third world exploitation scandal of 2001; the founder of IKEA, Ingvar Kamprad lifestyle scandal of 2004?

Electrolux list their values as:

Performance  
Innovation  
Superior talent  
'the Electrolux way'

For Electrolux, as with many companies compelled to reduce manufacturing costs, in the wake of globalisation, there is a clash between company values and company praxis:

Values	Praxis
Performance	price
Innovation	acquisition
Superior talent	closure - outsourcing
'the Electrolux way'	'cheap labour'

To create a corporate narrative requires many perspectives. The whole story. 'Corporate social responsibility ' Think global, act local'; core values and slogans. Abstractions and battle-cries, not a story.

Core values represent the company version. To create a story we need other perspectives:

- what do customers actually say? (rather than what we want them to say)
- what does the competition say? (competitor perspective is attuned to strengths and weaknesses)
- what do people inside the company say? in sales? in research? in production?
- what do the financial journalists say? or the market analysts? Those who disregard mission statements and corporate values, in favour of turnover figures and market psychology?

# Archetype

How do you identify your company? If your company was a character, what name do you give that character? How do your clients and customers identify your company? What character do they see; what name would they use?

A company profile is structured on the principle of 'best of intentions', but intentions do not make an identity. Actions make a profile, and in the world of drama and narrative, the agent of action is character. It is not simply that a company has a character; a company **is** a character. Dramatists traditionally define character through archetype. What archetype best represents your company profile?

Margaret Mark and Carol Pearson apply archetypes to companies under the title, *The Hero and the Outlaw* (2001). A Hero company is one kind of archetype, the Outlaw another. Some of the more common corporate archetypes and what they represent include:

Hero	Courage
Outlaw	Revolution
Magician	Change
Caregiver	Compassion
Creator	Innovation

Explorer

Possibilities

Like character in a story, an archetype is open to interpretation. For example:

ARCHETYPE	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
Hero	Courage	Arrogance
Outlaw	Revolution	Destruction
Magician	Transformation	Manipulation

The Hero – Outlaw approach has its critics; that this is more about stereotypes than archetypes, that it is branding at a superficial level, and, in the words of one critic, ‘taking the theories of Jung, Joseph Campbell and their followers, to help companies sell soap.’

Another approach is to involve people in the company, and see how they perceive their own corporate Identity, and how they would define their own company archetype. Here are a few examples devised by people within their respective companies:

COMPANY	ARCHETYPE
Hewlett Packard	Inventor
E&Y	Sherpa/Guide
DELOITTE	The Expert
STRIX	Trouble Maker

A Hewlett Packard group tested a number of archetypes: the rally driver ('everything is possible'); the giant ('slow but strong'); the enabler (combining the qualities of the hero and the entrepreneur); and a dualistic approach with the wise man and the rebel, attempting to extract the positive attributes of both.

With a large group the idea is to get an archetype that everyone can relate to; thus it was The Inventor, incorporating the revised HP slogan, 'invent'. Given the HP state of play around 2005, a consensual archetype must unite the new, the old, and the acquired, including Compaq, Digital and parts of Ericsson.

An archetype is a good starting point because the companies already have their stories; now they need new stories. HP has a foundation story; Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard putting their first computer together in a garage in Californian suburb. Compaq has a foundation story too; two guys in a coffee house sketching a laptop prototype on a table napkin. The archetype can be the first step in creating a new *meta-narrative*. (See below). From the archetype, the next step is to explore the kind of stories than can be told.

# What Kind of Stories?

“You see things as they are and ask ‘why?’ I see things as they are not, and ask ‘why not?’ G B Shaw

Narratives include stories, fables, legends, myths, tales, anecdotes, yarns, allegories, parables, chronicles. There are narratives in literature, drama, audiovisual media, multimedia, courtroom summaries, academic dissertations, sales pitches, self-introductions and daily conversations.

Through the ages narrative has been a fundamental response to making sense of the world; storytelling is a form adapted to the complexities of human thought and action. Stories make sense of economics, legal discourse and scientific discourse, psychoanalysis and self-awareness. All embrace narrative as a means to help us understand each other, ourselves, and the world around us. Storytelling is omnipresent in human affairs.

In the world of business, politics and decision making, the sources for stories are as rich and varied as anywhere else. Yet when we consider the specific function of the corporate narrative our options are more tangible. A corporate narrative must reflect the values and visions of the organisation.

For the outsider the most apparent narrative is contained in an organisations company report. Here the values and visions are laid out and 'authorised' by a Chief Executive Officer. The basis of the report is annual turnover figures. An organisation's annual turnover provides the basis for three principle narratives:

- What the CEO tells the Board of Directors
- What the Board of Directors tells stockholders
- What the Corporation tells the consumer

The company report provides a description, but a description is not a story. And no matter how hard the corporate storytelling team may work the story the company wants is not always the story the company gets. No-one has a copyright on storytelling. A company can invest in a multi-million media campaign that makes a captivating story around a new product. Maybe it will help sell the product; maybe the consumer will make up a new story, and any positive effects of the narrative approach will be negated. Here's an example:

Procter and Gamble launched a new product – Liquid Ariel – in the autumn of 2001. The European media campaign includes TV ads of incompetent men

that mess up their clothes; dropping pizza onto white shirts, spilling wine, sauce, whatever. But Liquid Ariel is so effective; even incompetent men can achieve excellent results. A story with a message and a moral. Compare this narrative approach to the pseudo-science of washing powder commercials in the past; Brand X vs Brand Y, and 'laboratory tests show conclusively...'

But a counter-narrative dramatised on consumer programmes (Swedish television's Plus, October 2001 was one example) emerged when the P&G campaign to the supermarket chain retail outlets was revealed. A campaign that revealed a different story.

Liquid Ariel meant fewer washes, thus the customer would have to come back more often, resulting, according to P&G in an 11% increase in sales. Liquid Ariel was a less effective product at a higher price which meant more sales, thus more profit for the retailing outlet. The Swedish consumer programme test revealed that a powder wash cost 2.42 Swedish kronor compared to the liquid wash 3.05 Swedish kronor; nearly 25% more expensive per wash.

The Procter & Gamble story to the consumer told ease of use and increased effectivity. The reality was less washes at a higher price. The P&G message to the

retailer was higher price, less effective = more sales, thus more profit. A message which made negative impact on an ongoing 'consumer concern' narrative. Since the 1990s Ariel washing powder has been at the forefront of the ecological market, brandishing the Swan ecology emblem.

The P&G sales strategy relied on a tacit agreement between manufacturer and retailer; a duplicity aimed at fulfilling common objectives = increased sales, increased profit. The strategy fails of course once the duplicity is revealed resulting in P&G's loss of credibility, decreased sales, decreased profit, and the erosion of the ecology story that had been built up over the previous decade.

There are always two stories; the trick is getting them to match. For P&G their inside story directed to the retailer was at odds with an outside story manufactured by the consumer. Following the adverse publicity P&G withdrew the publicity campaign directed to the retailer, claiming it was 'ill-conceived' and poorly prepared.

The focus of corporate narrative is the 'inside story'. Stories that can inspire change within the organisation and the people within the organisation.

There are five basic story types that fulfil this objective:

*The Success Story*

History defines identity, inspires others; the 'How We Did It' Story: replicate success through example

*The Foundation Story*

'Why we are here', defines values, integrates newcomers (Corporate Soul)

*The Culture Bearing Story*

The glue that holds people together through common values

*The Communicating Story*

Arouses curiosity-> communicates values -> provides opportunity for learning -> inspires change

*The Vision Story*

'some see things as they are; others dream of things yet to come...'

There is another kind of story that the media, customers and competitors are quick to exploit. This is 'The False Story' - the communication bluff; hype. On the surface 'hype' seems a reasonable short-term

strategy to gain focus, or profile a company, product or service. Like many short-term strategies, however, it is the kind of story that lends itself to long-term damage, as we shall explore further under the subject of scandals.

## **Themes**

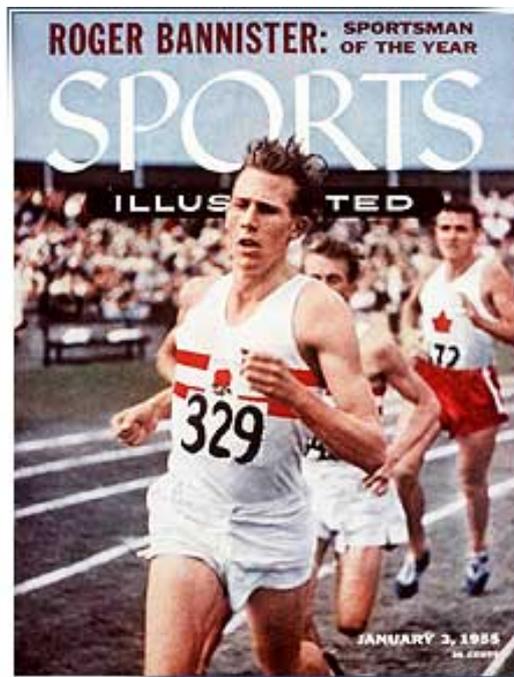
As well as story types (genres), there are story themes that enable a certain dramatisation of examples and events into moral or meaningful perspectives. As we noted earlier, a good story is about something – it has a theme, a premise, a moral point. The theme enables the storyteller to frame a lesson into a form that invites participation, rather than the dogma of instruction or pedagogics.

Here are two stories that illustrate the theme of triumph; the overcoming of hardship to win an impossible goal:

### *The Roger Bannister Story*

Until May 6<sup>th</sup> 1954 the accepted view was that no-one could run a mile in less than four minutes.

Medical experts, sports commentators, scientists agreed - that to run the distance in under four minutes was impossible for a human being. It could never be done. On May 6<sup>th</sup> 1954 Roger Bannister, a 25 year old Londoner, ran the mile at Oxford in three minutes 59.4 seconds.



He had been studying medicine at Oxford, devoting all his spare time to become an accomplished middle distance runner. Against the accepted view

Bannister was convinced it was possible to break the four minute mile. On May 6th 1954 he accomplished his goal. When he was asked to explain that first four-minute mile—and the art of record breaking—he answered: 'It's the ability to take more out of yourself than you've got.'

*"Nevertheless" or The Story of Rosie Sayer*

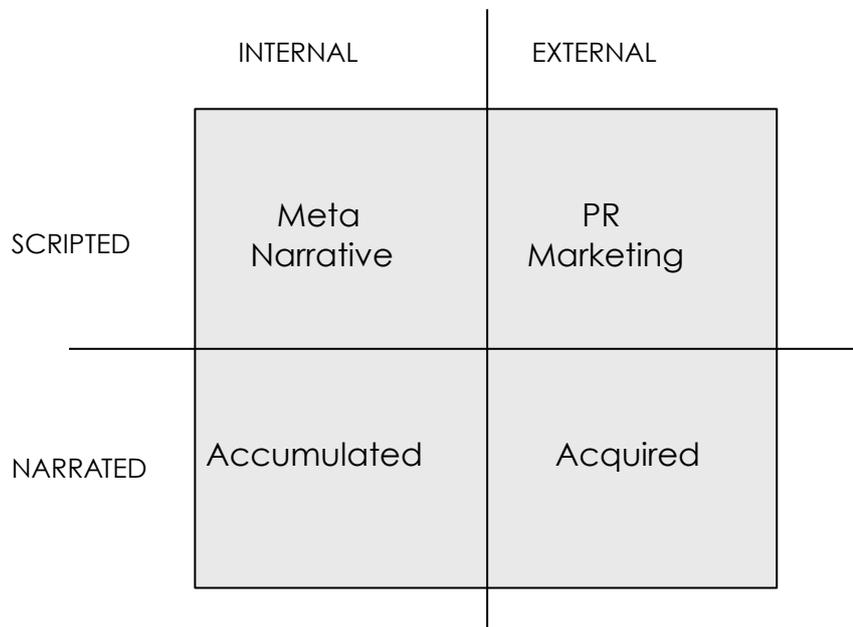
*The African Queen* is a classic adventure movie from 1951 – Charlie Nutall - a boat mechanic (Humphrey Bogart), and Rosie Sayer, the daughter of a missionary (Katherine Hepburn), are forced to take a hazardous river journey through tropical hazards, impenetrable jungle, treacherous waters, and ruthless German officers. When they finally reach the safe waters of the Ugandan lakes, they are taken prisoner by the Germans and interrogated. 'How did you get to the lake?' demands the German commander. 'We came down the Ulanga,' says Rosie Sayer. 'Impossible' says the officer. Everyone knows the river is unnavigable.' 'Nevertheless,' replies Rosie Sayer.

Here is a list of ten story themes I think that are readily accommodated into the world of business, management, marketing and leadership:

- |  |                         |
|--|-------------------------|
| 1. <i>Overcoming hardship to win impossible goal</i> | <i>[triumph]</i>        |
| 2. <i>Enduring hardship to win fortune</i>           | <i>[endurance]</i>      |
| 3. <i>Revenge against injustice</i>                  | <i>[vengeance]</i>      |
| 4. <i>Self sacrifice for the greater good</i>        | <i>[self-sacrifice]</i> |
| 5. <i>Determination to fulfil a dream</i>            | <i>[determination]</i>  |
| 6. <i>'We're a team; united we conquer'</i>          | <i>[loyalty]</i>        |
| 7. <i>Chance meeting transforms life</i>             | <i>[destiny]</i>        |
| 8. <i>Journey as voyage of self-discovery</i>        | <i>[journey]</i>        |
| 9. <i>Ties of friendship vanquish the enemy</i>      | <i>[friendship]</i>     |
| 10. <i>The big gamble pays off</i>                   | <i>[chance/faith]</i>   |

# Stories We Write; Stories We Get

By now it is apparent that corporate narrative requires neither a definite, nor indefinite article; corporate narrative is a generic term that covers a range of storytelling possibilities, from the company story to the stories told within the company; from the marketing and PR stories to the stories told by journalists, consumers and competitors.



Let us define more precisely the different approaches to storytelling inside and outside the company, under the general heading of *corporate narrative*. I suggest that there is a specific ‘corporate narrative’ – a meta-narrative, which is a ‘scripted’ story, and a platform for the internal communication of values, vision and history. ‘Branding’ is a part of this process but not all.

I further suggest that this is only one of four approaches to corporate narrative, best understood in terms of two axis; the internal and external, and the scripted and the narrated:

#### *Meta-narrative*

‘Meta’ means higher or beyond; in narrative terms it refers to the company story that begins at the top and filters down through the rank and file, to marketing and to the customer. The meta-narrative is the story behind the brand. The meta-narrative can incorporate different components or different stories around a single theme.

The Volvo meta-narrative emphasises the safe car, security, reliability, family values. IKEA’s meta-narrative is tied to founder Ingvar Kamprad – an

economically minded entrepreneur producing flat packaged furniture; a combination of design, DIY, and low-price. The meta-narrative is scripted by the founder, or leader, or leadership. Jorma Ollila re-wrote the Nokia meta-narrative – an ugly duckling story of positive change. Carl Henrik Svanberg re-wrote the Ericsson meta-narrative – from struggling second-best engineering steered workshop, to the ‘hero’ corporate archetype, through a combination of image, action and personal commitment – the buying up of Ericsson shares.

Meta-narrative serves two purposes – to inspire confidence within the organisation (‘this is a company I want to work for’), as well as inspiring confidence externally – to potential employees, investors, clients, analysts, and the complex apparatus of the market (‘this is company whose services or products I want to invest in’).

### *Marketing narrative*

Like the meta-narrative the marketing narrative is an internal story, whether or not the story is written by company publicists or outside agencies. The marketing narrative serves a specific function – to

seduce the customer. Thus storytelling strategies – whether in advertising or publicity and promotion – shift and change with market trends.

### *Accumulated Narrative*

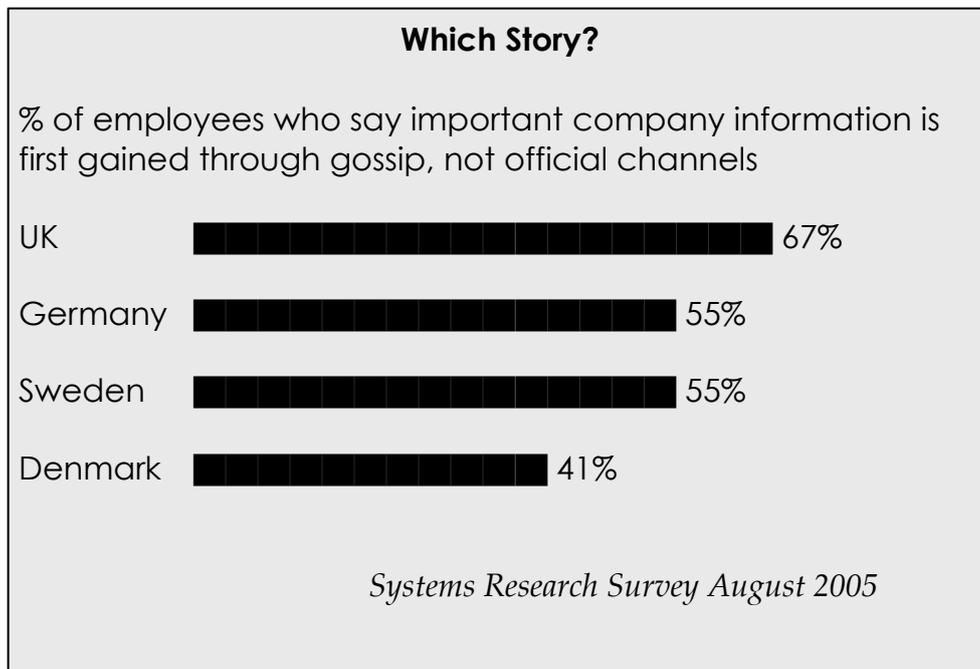
Marketing narratives are conceived and scripted; the accumulated narratives that are told within an organisation, or more like folk tales and legends; narrated by word of mouth, changing and reshaped with each telling. The accumulated narratives may be success stories about a particular product, or an individual or a division. Like folk tales they can also be stories with a cautionary moral – about company failures, poor leadership, disastrous decisions.

The accumulated narratives are the water-cooler stories that circulate from department to department, generation to generation, and can inflate moral as effectively as destroy it. Like folk-tales and legends the accumulated narratives are bent, twisted and exaggerated. Stories alleviate boredom; the bolder the better, and therein the risk. The snowball effect of the negative water-cooler narrative can sweep out of the HO entrance, and into the market place.

### *Acquired Narrative*

These are the folk tales told by customers and clients, analysts and journalists. Good or bad, the acquired narratives are beyond the control of either leadership or marketing; the buzz of acquired narrative are the make and break stories of a product, a service, a reputation.

Accumulated narratives tell a good deal about attitudes within an organisation – positive or negative; acquired narratives provide a company with perceptions; about how customers and clients relate to a company and its products, service, people and image.



# Values Into Stories

Successful business is based on three factors: profit, opportunity and performance. Without profit, there is no development; opportunity means development through entrepreneurship and competition; and performance means satisfied customers, satisfied investors and continuity.

Is there any collision between the foundations of business practice and upholding of moral and ethical values? If we answer to the negative why are ethical transgressions in intercultural business practice, more the norm than the exception? By transgressions we are referring to business practices that company leaders, employees and consumers would not accept in their own culture, but accept outside their own borders. The industrialised nations of Western Europe, North America, Japan and Australasia exploit low labour costs, absence of union protection and struggling economies; the industrialising nations of Latin America, the Far East and the India sub-continent, Eastern Europe and Africa persist with bribery and corruption at political and corporate levels. All for the sake of 'good business.'

Why are ethical and moral considerations overshadowed by the globalisation of international

business practice? Stereotyping of culture has resulted in certain expectations and anticipations from initial exploratory business analyses, to negotiations, to contracts and the execution of the terms agreed upon.

Corporate values, in many instances, are the tags by which a company proclaims some sort of ethical intent, yet judged by the actions of the company, such proclaimed values can be seen more as a marketing ploy by which to appease investors and assure consumers. 'No child labour exploitation' is more often the leadership dictum that implies insure that the public has no knowledge of child labour exploitation. Thus 'core values' and mission statements are often perceived, whether cynically or not, by market analysts, consumers and employees, more as marketing tags than corporate ideals.

The practice of 'good business' as morally suspect business is ultimately down to individual choice, from the highest echelons of leadership to managers, executives, bureaucrats and workers. Individual choice determines the practice and development of business opportunity at every level. What are the social and psychological forces at work that lead to a third-world government official accepting a bribe as 'OK', or a US clothing company outsourcing to an Asian child-labour sweat-shop at the expense of local

jobs and local community break-down, as 'good business strategy'?

The dilemma between the business demands of 'doing well' (profit), and the social responsibilities of 'doing good' (CSR) is the source of the narratives on either side of the ethical demarcation line. These are the cautionary tales of the morally reprehensible, and the success stories of corporate virtue. In other words, it is the corporate narrative that promotes a sound footing for global corporate ethics through example; that ultimately there is profit in virtue through long-term business relations.

A 2004 survey undertaken by the Corporate Social Responsibility Programme reveals that contributions to public good is the most influential factor for a company's public perception.

**What Influences a Company's Public Perception?**

Contributions to public good	56%
Brand quality	40%
Business fundamentals	34%

*CSR Programme Survey 2004*

There are dissidents of course. 'The New Ethics', argues David Henderson, of the Westminster Business College, 'are bad for business.' At the Conference on Ethics and Leadership, hosted by Stockholm University (June 2004), David Henderson provided a more critical view of the New Ethics. The New Ethics consist of five principles designed for the adoption by today's ethically committed organisation:

*Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)*

*People Before Profits*

*Corporate Citizenship*

*Social Expectations*

*Globalisation*

According to David Henderson, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a political issue, not corporate; when companies are involved with social responsibility for community economic well-being the result is disaster. People Before Profits contravenes the basic premise of the entrepreneurial enterprise and for the company translates as 'go broke'. Corporate Citizenship is a slogan – a 'communication bluff' – with little bearing on corporate reality. Social Expectations, he argued, were neither reasonable, nor

well-informed. As for globalisation; globalisation is not new, nor is it damaging; on the contrary, international trade is a basic component of social development.

Is it realistic to propose a set of ethical standards that are viable for corporate development? Are ethics are luxury for the company that can afford them, or abstract ideals devised by those far removed from the day to day running of corporate life?

David Batstone lists eight principles, designed, he argues 'for creating and preserving integrity without selling out.' (*Saving the Corporate Soul*, 2003)

#### Eight Principles

1. Leadership = personal responsibility
2. Transparency
3. The company is part of the community as well as the market
4. Obligations to consumer
5. Corporation is organic not mechanistic
6. Environmental accountability
7. Balance between responsibilities to workers, customers, suppliers
8. International trade based on cultural respect

These principles, suggests Batstone, do not put companies at a competitive disadvantage – just the

opposite; 'principled companies excel financially over the long haul.' Here's why:

- a principled company will fortify its reputation
- a principled company will be more likely to avoid costly law suits
- a principled company will manage its business network more effectively

The other advantage lies in narrative. The principled enterprise has good stories to tell, and least likely to collapse under the dark threat of negative storytelling; the scandal.

# Scandals

"Greed – for want of a better word – is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed in all its forms – greed for life, for money, for love, for knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed... will not only save Teldar Paper but that other malfunctioning corporation, called the USA." [Wall Street,1987]

My career began in journalism; first radio, then television. The first lesson for any journalist is that news deals with stories, not facts. Scandals make good stories. Apart from that, what value is there in scandals?

Scandals are good. Better a society with too many scandals than no scandals at all. The scandal is the means by which a society defines and tests its self-imposed parameters of morality.

The media is rarely concerned with good behaviour and upholding ethics and values; it is about bad behaviour and the failure to adhere to ethics. Scandals bring these values to the surface. Corporate scandals during 2005 dealt with:

*CEOs high wages and bonuses*

*Accounting inaccuracies and allegations of fraud*

*Environment and pollution*

*Lay-offs, 'downsizing', closures*  
*Corruption – pay-offs, bribes*  
*Insider speculation – selling information*  
*Customer abuse – overcharged, dissatisfied,*  
*manipulated*  
*Cartels – undermining competitiveness, securing*  
*profits*  
*Child labour, sweat-shops, minimizing margins*

As opposed to the public sector, where sex and power-abuse scandals figure, the common denominator in the private sector is greed. Why greed? For business purposes greed offers a range of short term solutions to ensure profitability, as well some 'justification schema's allied to the nature of enterprise. Like these:

*'Greed is good' - profitability is the underlying*  
*standard business practice*  
*Greed is abstract – the pursuit of numbers and staying*  
*ahead in the game*  
*Greed is unconscious– the tacit agenda of a power elite*  
*Greed means security – a need which is boundless*  
*What is greed? It is the shifting line – how much is*  
*enough?*  
*Why not greed? – who defines the moral boundaries?*

## *How Selfish? How Moral?*

The word dilemma means 'two horns', and the two horns of the dilemma of enterprise are represented by rationalist economic theory and social evolutionary theory. It is the divide between 'doing well' and 'doing good.'

### **Rationalist Economic theory**

self-interest  
opportunism  
egoism

### **Social Evolutionary theory**

social responsibility  
trustworthiness  
co-operation

Social evolutionary theory (some key texts include Matt Ridley, *Nature via Nurture*, 2002; Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Co-operation*, 1984; Robert Frank, *Passions within Reason*, 1988) suggests the following advantages of moral behaviour:

1. Society allows for division of labour and for people to specialize. The sums of our specialized efforts are greater than general efforts. Society is synergy between specialists.

2. A harmonious society necessitates interconnectedness. This requires us to be co-operative, social and trustworthy.

3. Being social, co-operative and trustworthy is an evolutionary advantage that ensures development for the individual and the community.

The other aspect to corporate morality is purely narratological – moral behaviour makes for positive stories, and positive public perception.

# Stories Inspire Change

'Truthfulness in statements which cannot be avoided is the formal duty of an individual to everyone, however great may be the disadvantage accruing to himself or to another.' Emanuel Kant

'We can't have moral obligations to every single person in this world. We have moral obligations to those who we come up against, who enter into our moral space...' McCall Smith, The Sunday Philosophy Club

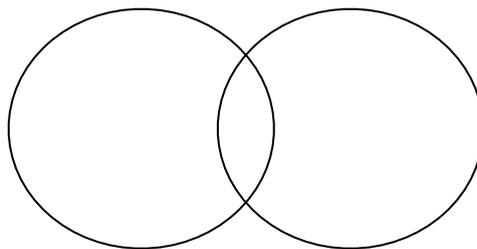
## *An Age of Inspiration*

'It is no longer the company with the best product that will succeed,' writes Rolf Jensen; 'it is the company with the best story.' In *The Dream Society*, Jensen, head of the Copenhagen Institute of Future Studies, says the industrial age has passed; so has the information age. In today's society we are overwhelmed with information – so much information that it has given rise to expressions such as 'information stress', and 'information saturation'. What people seek is inspiration; we are in what Rolf Jensen describes as 'an age of imagination.'

To illustrate this idea he takes up the example of the egg. We no longer simply go out and buy an egg; we buy the story of the egg. For many ecologically aware consumers the story of the egg means it may be worth paying extra for eggs that come from free-range

chickens and avoiding eggs that come from chickens locked up in cages. Regardless of our own individual purchase, the consumer now has options, with the story of the egg labelled on the package; we can buy according to our own preference.

The same applies to jeans, automobiles, TV sets - consumer goods of all kinds - what is the story behind the product, the logo, the name, the brand. For other consumers the inspiration behind consumption may lie in the counter narrative; Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2000) provides the inspiration behind purchase options; resisting the corporate message, and inspired by a non-corporate social responsibility. Once more we (the corporate 'we' or a consumer 'we') are confronted with the moral options that lay between 'doing well' and 'doing good.'



'doing well'  
profitable company

'doing good'  
responsible citizen

The collision zone in the middle is the realm of narrative – the stories we exchange to reconcile two positive yet challenging requirements of the successful enterprise.

### *Storytelling as Therapy*

In recent years some enlightened members of the medical profession began using storytelling as a therapeutic aid – an approach to healing the patient. In hospitals and clinics doctors and nurses meet people every day whose lives are changed through dramatic and often unforeseen events. Accidents, illness, family tragedies with long term or fatal consequences. How do people deal with such life-transforming catastrophes? Telling stories is a step in the right direction.

Stories can provide positive examples of recuperation or adaptation. Patients are invited to tell stories as an important part of the healing process. Doctors, nurses, counsellors have realised something that dramatists have propagated since antiquity. Namely, that stories are a knowledge form that defines

our understanding of the world. Stories empower us to deal with the challenges that we encounter.

In counselling three kinds of story are encouraged; the template story, the transformation story and the autobiography.

Template stories are present in any kind of social ritual; weddings, funerals, baptism are forms of template narrative. The wedding ritual is a social script that becomes a unique story when you become a main character within the narrative. That makes it personally relevant. If we become emotionally involved at weddings and funerals it is because it is easy for us identify ourselves in one of the scripted roles; as bride or groom, or grieving family, spouse etc

In Alcoholics Anonymous, and similar organisations set-up to help people with problems of addiction, gambling, eating disorders, the template story enables a person to come to terms with a dramatic situation 'I am an alcoholic and this is my story.' The template is the same but each story is different.

The autobiography, or reconstructed self-narrative, enables the patient to come to terms with what psychologists refer to as the 'broken narrative.' The traumatic accident which leaves the patient paralysed, unable to return to normal life. Whatever

expectations a person may have had about how their life will develop, is irrevocably 'broken.' Life will never be the same again. By telling the trauma as part of a life-story, the event takes on new significance – a new phase of the life-story, not the end of it; broken but not destroyed.

In therapy the transformation story enables patients to address a difficult childhood, a new life, a trauma. In work situations transformation stories address 'redundancy' 'bankruptcy' 'burn-out'. The transformation story can serve as an example to others (the stories of actors Christopher Reeve, Michael J Fox for instance, and how they dealt with the changes brought about by paralysis and Parkinson's disease respectively); or part of the 'autobiography'; how a person overcomes a dramatic change and deals with it in a positive way.

The resistance to stories in therapy can help us with resistance we meet in corporate life. For example:

The doctor visits a patient. The patient tries to tell a story. 'When I was a child I had this trouble...' Or 'last year a similar thing occurred...'. But the doctor responds with: 'Take these tablets' or 'we'll have a look when we operate.' The doctor may counter with the 'anti-story' – the wonders of modern technology, or new drugs with only minor side-effects, or the benefits of surgery. Now the benefits of the story become apparent. The story opens up a dialogue – a two-way communication between story-teller and listener.

In corporate life the anti-story takes many forms. The employee tells a story about the break-down of negotiations because of 'cultural problems.' Here is an opportunity for a story to learn by, and the enlightened manager will take the initiative. 'Tell me more!' The alternative is the manager who wants to assert authority, and counters with an anti-story. 'Get the account or you're off the team.'

### *Martin's Story*

Martin had worked for a UK manufacturing company for 28 years – a traditional company with a

history dating back to the late 1800s. During the downsizing of the early 1990s, the new lean company cut down staff by 20% – Martin was let go.

His colleagues felt bad. He was well-liked conscientious, hard working, knew the company better than anyone, but under the new ‘young’ management, did not ‘fit in’ with the new youthful aggressive corporate profile.

Martin was unemployed for 6 months (he was 52), decided to set up his own distribution agency and within a year had doubled his income. Colleagues met the new Martin at the annual trade fair – a vital optimistic figure with a new found positive enthusiasm for his work and for his life. ‘Losing my job was the best thing that ever happened’, he said.

Meanwhile, some of his colleagues had lapsed into guilt and remorse – needlessly as it turned out. A year later the new aggressive streamlined company was bought up by a US competitor – only 20% of the company staff were retained.

### *Company Story, My Story*

He was a young man, about 30. One of 30 or so participants at a management seminar. He seemed

confident and optimistic. He introduced himself as Chris, then stated the name of the company where he worked. 'I realise,' he said, 'this is the big problem in our company – we just don't have a story.' Then he paused and added; 'But more important, is *my* story. Maybe I'm with the wrong company?'

There is no underestimating how important stories are in our lives. Stories – call them myths, parables, legends, anecdotes, whatever – they are the means by which we measure our values, our morals, and all that is important in our lives. Through stories we communicate a sense of meaning, purpose, values.

There is no escaping that our company stories are interwoven with the stories that define our culture, and how stories define our own sense of identity. Our understanding of corporate culture and national identity are part of our moral space. When the stories no longer make any sense, we look for stories that do. Or we change. Or we create new stories. Thus Chris, about 30, looks at his company, and then himself, and considers just what kind of story he should be investing in.

### *The Consultant's Story*

During the 1980s SAS (Scandinavian Airlines) began implementing changes throughout the company: There were cultural challenges to deal with, as well as policy issues that come with a state-run enterprise in the case of SAS, the three states of Denmark, Sweden and Norway. In addition there were high levels of customer dissatisfaction over service and schedules. A UK management consultant agency was brought in to investigate areas for improvement, and after three months research in the respective countries the head of the agency was to meet with the SAS Board of Directors at the Stockholm Head Office.

The meeting was scheduled for 2 pm; the consultant arrived, took off his coat and immediately locked himself in the men's room. The Board of Directors became increasingly irritated; it was not until 20 minutes later that the consultant finally emerged, placed himself at the table, opened up his briefcase and addressed the Board of Directors. 'Let's begin,' he started, 'we have a lot to get through.' One of the Directors expressed his annoyance; 'Yes,' he said, 'and you have been keeping us waiting here for 20 minutes.' 'Yes', said the consultant; 'How do feel about that?' 'Annoyed and irritated,' came the reply.

'Yes', said the consultant, opening up his file. 'Apparently your passengers are as well. The average delay time for flight departures is 20 minutes. Now you know how they feel.'

# Right Story, Wrong Culture

"You are an old man who thinks in terms of nations and peoples. There are no nations. There are no Russians, no Arabs, no Americans. There is no third world. There is one holistic system of systems; one vast interwoven multinational dominion of dollars... You howl about America and democracy. There is no America; there is no democracy." Arthur Jersen in Network 1976

In the mid 1990s, in *The End of the Nation State*, Kenichi Ohmae argued that in the new global economy, national boundaries are redundant; corporations set the economic agenda and 'global logic defines how corporations operate.' Ohmae's arguments are articulate, enlightened and above all logical. However, it is not the logic of global economics we need to address, rather the emotions of national identity.

In March 2006, the French government declared nine areas of business that must be protected in the name of *patriotisme economique*. The Polish government has made similar moves; this from one of the most recent states to enter the European Union. The most frequently cited obstacle to successful intercultural co-operation and corporate mergers is 'cultural differences.' From a business perspective the emotions tied into national identity may not be logical, but they

are powerful. If economic theory is ill-equipped to deal with intercultural conflicts, storytelling is not. It is stories that help define our sense of cultural and national identity.

Here is a story I related in *How Swedes Manage*. For the Swedish managers of a large multicultural finance organisation, this story served well as a metaphor for the risks of jumping into new IT technology too soon, or too late. 'We have to be like the middle row of penguins,' said the IT manager in her conference presentation.

#### **The Story of the Penguins**

A group of penguins stand on a glacier. They have arranged themselves into three rows. They are hungry and want nothing more but to hop into the water and collect a fish dinner. But there is a problem. They are surrounded by even more hungry sharks.

The first row of penguins dive into the water first. Alas, they get eaten up by the sharks. The second row of penguins jump in. The sharks are no longer hungry so they are able to get themselves some fish. The third row of penguins dive into the water last. Alas, there is no fish left, so they go hungry. The second row of penguins – they are the winners - they don't get eaten and they don't go hungry.

'If we're first out, we'll get eaten up; if we wait too long, the market is gone.' In the IT business, if you're smart, you don't rush in, but you don't wait too long either. You have to be like the second row of penguins and get the timing right.

Three rows of penguins: First row – too foolish; last row – losers! Middle row – smart! In the IT business this is a compelling cautionary tale – too many companies, too soon have ended up as too many casualties. The sharks are still feeding.

For the majority of participants – from Sweden – the pragmatism of the story made immediate sense; for participants from the UK, Australia and Finland, a good deal more sympathy was expressed for the first row of penguins. In cultures where bravery and risk-taking are strong core values the pragmatism and logic of the story was less significant. In some cultures to be first in untested waters is to be foolhardy; in other cultures to be first is to be brave. The first row of penguins sacrifice themselves for the common good.

There is another way to read this story. Maybe there's a first row penguin that chances the odds and survives to tell the tale. The penguin that returns the hero. Even in the shark-infested waters of the IT industry there are a few fat penguins sitting on the ice,

happy with their fill of fish, and watching on the sidelines as their colleagues fight it out in the foamy brine.

*Amazon – the first on-line bookshop*

*Yahoo – the first internet search engine*

*CNN – the first cable news network*

*Intel – the first microprocessor*

*Sun microsystems – the first Unix work station*

*Apple – the first GUI (Graphical User Interface)*

*Real Player – the first streaming application*

*AOL – the first on-line service*

*Hotmail – the first free e.mail service*

### The Story of Lucy

Lucy is a young woman who lives in a house by the river. She is in love with Peter who lives on the other side of the river. She doesn't know what to do so she goes to her friend William and asks for advice.

'If you love him, go and tell him', says William.

'Yes' says Lucy, and goes to the river where she meets David, the boatman. 'Please take me across the river David.' 'Yes', says David, 'But what time do you need to return?' 'I'm not sure,' says Lucy. 'Why do you need to know?' 'I must be downriver at another port of call at six. If you want the ferry back you must be at the landing stage before then.'

They cross the river and Lucy goes to Peter's house. Peter opens the door. 'Peter, I love you', says Lucy. Peter cannot resist the temptation and makes love with Lucy. When she recovers from the occasion Lucy is upset at the thought that Peter has taken advantage of her.

She runs from the house and to the house where Michael lives. Michael is in love with Lucy. He opens the door and welcomes her in. Lucy tells him the whole story, whereupon Michael is filled with bitterness and asks Lucy to leave.

She arrives at the river landing stage just after six. David has cast off and is rowing away. Lucy calls out: 'David, please take me back.' David looks at his watch and calls back: 'Sorry Lucy - I did warn you.' And he rows off downstream.

Lucy decides to swim home. In midstream, she drowns.

*There are five characters to this story. Rank each character, one to five, in order of who is most responsible for the death of Lucy. For example, if Michael is most responsible, he is placed first, then the other characters accordingly:*

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_
- 4 \_\_\_\_\_
- 5 \_\_\_\_\_

The dilemma tale was a popular form of entertainment in late 19th century Europe – morality tale parlour games were occasion for stories for entertainment and moral guidance. *The Story of Lucy* is one such 'story game' - a dilemma tale where the listener is invited to 'interact' with the narrative. Who is responsible for Lucy's fate?

In *The New International Manager* Vincent Guy and John Mattock use this story to illustrate the diversity of cultural readings; how core values and cultural priorities influence the way we interpret the world around us.

According to Guy and Mattock, in northern Europe Lucy ranks high ('an individual should be responsible for their own life'); in Latin American countries, low ('poor Lucy – no-one to look after her!') And whereas in Latin America and Southern Europe, David might be held accountable ('couldn't he have waited two minutes?'), in countries like Germany and Switzerland he is often at the bottom of the list. ('He was just doing his job.')

For the Victorian parlour game players each character represents a moral value - Lucy (love), Peter (passion), William (wisdom), David (duty), Michael (morality) – the reader’s values will influence their reading of the characters. Women often place Peter high (‘he’s a selfish cad’), men low (‘a passionate guy’).

*The Story of Lucy* may seem an outmoded dilemma to the modern reader, but we are confronted with dilemma tales every day. In the evening news, the morning paper, in company negotiations, board meetings, politics, insurance claims, legal actions, you name it.

For example:

*September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001*. The pictures of cheering Palestinians - just hours after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, shocked television viewers around the world. What was behind the story? Why would Palestinians cheer? Who was behind the pictures?

As the pictures were screened without a reporter, or lacking apparent connection to the September 11th attack, rumours circulated as to where the film originated. The main rumours were; 1. it was ten year old Gulf War film; 2. material propagated by Israeli

television; 3. material propagated by Palestinian television.

An investigation carried out by Swedish Televisions' Media Magazine (*Mediemagasinet*) concluded that none of these rumours contained substance. The film was taken by TV teams from Reuters and Associated Press, of Palestinian people who were unaware of what they were being filmed for. In an interview a week following the terrorist attack, Fatma, 30 year old mother of five – who was the central figure cheering and shouting, said it wasn't till that evening, seeing herself on television, that she realised how she and her friends had been exploited.

The circulation of the 'true story' behind Fatma's cheering, was modest compared to the broad circulation of the media story on the evening of September 11th. Most television viewers that recollect the broadcast are still of the conviction that Fatma – a Palestinian mother of five out to do a day's shopping – was cheering in support of a terrorist action. Who is responsible for this deceit? How does a dilemma tale address the ambiguity of feelings provoked by the media deception?

## **The Story of Fatma**

Fatma is a 30 year old mother of five who lives on the Palestinian West Bank. She is asked by Peter, an AP photographer, to jump up and down and cheer for the TV camera. She doesn't know what to do so she goes to her friend Ali, who works in the shop next door, and asks for advice.

'Sure, why not?' says Ali, and joins Fatma and some young kids who get some sweets to jump up and down and cheer for the TV camera.

Peter says thanks and takes the film to his boss George, at AP, and says 'Here's the film you wanted. Do I keep my job now?'

'Sure' says George, and takes the film. 'Thanks,' he says.

George calls the TV news editor, Bill. 'Got some great film for you,' says George. 'But it will cost.'

'OK,' says Bill. 'Our viewers have the right to see this. We'll pay.'

It is September 11th 2001, and the film of Fatma and her friends jumping up and down and cheering, is broadcast on the six o'clock news.

The film is also broadcast on television news around the world, even Palestinian TV. Fatma sees herself jumping up and down and cheering, directly

after the TV pictures of 737 airplanes crashing into the NY WTC. 'This is dreadful,' says Fatma. 'I have been disgraced!'

\*

There are five characters to this story, Fatma, Ali, Peter, George, Bill. Rank each character, one to five, in order of who is most responsible for the disgrace of Fatma. For example, if Bill is most responsible, he is placed first, then the other characters accordingly...

Who is responsible for the 'disgrace' of Fatma? Is it Fatma herself for performing 'on-cue' for a television crew without getting more information about their motives? Or the TV crews that took the pictures? The agencies that commissioned the pictures? The television stations that screened the pictures without checking the sources? Or the television viewer's ingenuousness for believing they could be accurate?

Dilemma tales help us see alternative perspectives, and different sides to the same story. Dilemma means having to make a choice between two

options, neither of which are positive. The dilemma prompts an emotional response, while enabling us to reflect on those emotions. The open ending of the dilemma tale evokes a higher form of participation, than say, the closed ending of the rhetorical story with its clear message and hard sell. Thus the story is an effective approach in analysing situations of cultural conflict by inviting different perspectives. Here are some examples:

#### *Product Brand or Cultural Adaptation?*

Fazer is Finland's leading confectionary manufacturer. On the home market a popular product is Fazer's 'negro boy' licorice. The wrapper features the face of a red lipped 'negro boy'. It has done so for many decades. It is a distinctive product profile, according to Fazer's marketing department. Racial stereotyping, according to the critics.

In 1996, following Finland's entry into the European Union, a British member of parliament suggested that Fazer's 'negro boy' wrapper was not in keeping with the new spirit of a racially tolerant Europe.

In the late 1970s Britain's largest marmalade manufacturing company, Robertson's had withdrawn a similar 'Golliwog' logo from their marmalade and jam labels. It was a logo the company had been using since the 19th century. The company decided, however, that in accord with the recommendations of the UK Race Relations Board, it was time for a change.

Robertson's realised that here was an opportunity rather than a problem, and adapted their marketing strategy to launching a new company profile – without the racial stereotyping. Robertson's remain market leaders in the UK and many other world markets, including Scandinavia.

In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, the Fazer licorice wrapping is considered 'out of date', even offensive. Hence, a British MP who demanded that Fazer withdraw the logo. That was in 1996.

In December 1996, on a Finnish debate programme, *Mediapeli* (MTV), Fazer's then Managing Director, Christian Rammschmidt, revealed Fazer's new marketing profile. 'Fazer is an international company,' he said. Christian Rammschmidt presented a newly designed package on which there were no 'negro boy' logos.

Programme guest, Billy Carson, a well-known black American jazz musician resident in Finland,

opened the bag and revealed that the contents were wrapped with the same 'negro boy' wrappers. 'In other European countries this kind of racial stereotyping is considered offensive,' said Billy Carson. 'Why not in Finland?' In 2002, when Finland joined the European Monetary Union, the wrapper on 'negro boy' licorice remained unchanged.

When Robertson's marmalade faced a similar issue, they turned the problem into an advantage. What could have damaged the company's credibility became an opportunity to update the company profile. In Finland Fazer can tell the Finnish business community they are an international corporation – and no-one will disagree. To the outsider it appears that Fazer's solution to 21st century globalisation remains imbedded in 19th century values.

### *Ericsson and the Engineering Mentality?*

In the early 2000s the Swedish telephone giant, Ericsson, was in deep trouble. Shares plunged, sales dropped and company morale was at an all-time low. Swedish Prime Minister, Göran Persson, commented that one of the company's problems was the 'Ericsson engineering mentality.'

How did this engineering mentality manifest itself? In the 1980s Ericsson launched their 'Make yourself heard' campaign which failed at a global level because there were no telephones illustrated. In countries where the Ericsson name was unfamiliar, consumers were dumbfounded; what is the product?

In the 1990s Ericsson made a cross-cultural marketing blunder in Switzerland; the Ericsson T18 mobile telephone was photographed between two vibrators (presumably, to highlight the 'vibrate' function of the mobile), and advertised extensively in the conservative Swiss press. The protests by consumer groups brought the campaign to a halt.

For the T20 Ericsson took out a two page advertisement in the newspaper China Times, which showed 1. a teenage girl in a seductive pose holding a 'blurred' object, with the caption 'Not suitable for adults'; picture 2; teenage girl reveals T20 (unblurred) with the caption: 'T20 – designed to touch your senses.' 'For Chinese in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China,' said a translator, 'the sexual innuendo is both obvious and offensive.' Another campaign that was quickly brought to a halt. In 2000, women consumers protested Ericsson's marketing of mobile telephones with the aid of Tomb Raider

computer game figure, Lara Croft. 'Sexist and degrading,' read one protest letter.

What does 'engineering mentality' mean and how does it explain the marketing and cultural errors of judgement? 'Engineers think in terms of product, information and technical data,' said an Australian based Ericsson manager. 'Engineers do not think in terms of stories, fantasy and imagination.'

### *Different Cultures, Different Perspectives*

Maja is from Chile, grown up in Sweden, has a Pakistani boyfriend, who has grown up in England. She is attending a seminar on intercultural communication skills for medical officers. The participants deal with people from different cultural backgrounds either at home or abroad. Maja is the only non-Swedish participant.

After the seminar she is very grateful. 'At school I was always worst in the class – from an immigrant background with a foreign accent, a difficult name, dark skin. Today I was best in class. Swedish people see everything with Swedish eyes. I see things with eyes from Chile, from Sweden, from England, from Pakistan.'

### *Language is Power*

A Vietnamese woman migrates to Australia in the 1980s, with husband and two children. They are part of the post Vietnam war immigration wave. Like many Vietnamese women the only work she can find is as an 'outworker' – someone who works from home sewing clothes for the big fashion companies. Like her colleagues she gets paid per garment – a pitiful salary which means she sometimes she must work 18 hours a day, 6 – 7 days a week. This is in Melbourne Australia, and such conditions persist in 2000s. [*Sew For Your Life*, 2004, Film Australia].

Like her Vietnamese colleagues, she speaks very little English and this is the only work she can find. She starts to study part-time, and her few spare hours are spent learning English. Within five years she speaks well enough to organise a trade union, arrange meetings with members of the local government and explain the plight of Vietnamese outworkers. Through her efforts she brought about a system reform that ensured better pay and conditions for outworkers.

'Language is power,' she said in an interview. 'Without language I could not have achieved anything.'

*Visit Spain, and Experience England?*

In Sweden, early 1998, British Thomson attempted to sell package holidays to Swedes by advertising with rain-drenched British folk and boasting 'free English food' on trips to Mediterranean resorts. The all-inclusive package to foreign destinations, with English food and English beer, is a sales plus for many English vacationers. For the majority of Scandinavians the idea of visiting Spain and being served with an English fry-up and luke-warm beer, rates as a definite minus.

That the UK is such a popular destination for Scandinavian tourists is in spite of the food, not because of it. Their six month co-operation with Fritidsresor ended in August 1998. 'Too many blunders from Thomsons', read one newspaper headline, concluding, 'Thomson misjudged the new market; Swedes don't travel like Brits.'

### *Dilemma? What Dilemma?*

A lecturer in Ethics and International Business, presented a business dilemma to a class at the Stockholm School of Economics. It involved whether or not to accept a contract on behalf of a reputable company established in the Far East, that required a certain amount of 'facilitation funding' – money under the table. After 30 minutes of group discussion the quiet Chinese girl – an exchange student from Beijing, who had so far not said a word – asked her student colleague. 'Please, I am still not understanding. What is the dilemma?'

### *What is Success?*

What motivates us to success? How do we define success? And how does your company define success? We have our personal agendas – to make a life for our family; to prove our worth in the community; maybe live up to family expectations; earn more money and gain material success; maybe prestige. The American 'success story' works in the US, but there is no guarantee that it will work in other countries. Different cultures interpret success in different ways.

*USA* – the bottom line – money is good; earn more – succeed to get rich; wealth is a measure of success

*Italy* – playing a game and winning – maybe it means bending the rules now and again, but good business is like a game. A good player comes up with the most inventive solution to a problem – getting ahead of the competition, and finding creative solutions to problems.

*Australia* – ‘having a go’ battling against the odds, success in the face of adversity; riches to rags; being an individual – taking a risk and winning; success is the pay-off to the big gamble – going with an idea that no-one else believed in and making it work

*China* – ‘gaining face’ – getting respect – wealth means continuity for your family, respect from your ancestors, and a privileged life for your children; success is ‘face’ and failure is ‘losing face’. Money and wealth is good for ‘face’. One translation for ‘face’ is ‘the resonance of your own name’ – in other words, reputation. For success in business deals the Chinese consult *The 36 Strategies* – guidelines for business success that date back to 300AD.

*Sweden* – success has moral implications that requires humility and hard work. In the Nordic region it is the *Jantelagen* – the Law of Jante – that prevails. Jante is a fictitious place in Denmark where everyone looks and acts the same, and restrains from doing anything to attract attention or the envy of the neighbours.

Corporate narrative is an excellent long-term strategy for bringing many different cultures together on a common platform. It works best when the cultural diversity is not only understood, but retained and encouraged. The monocultural corporate culture has a single road to success; the multicultural corporate culture has many roads.

*The End of National Boundaries?*

200,000 US tax returns are outsourced to a Bombay accounting firm in 2003. The business is expanding on an unprecedented scale. The Bombay accountants process the returns at 1/10<sup>th</sup> the US rate.

*US rate: \$ 3,000 – 4,000 per month*

*Bombay rate: \$ 300 – 400 per month*

In addition they offer greater security – all processing is done on-screen. There is no paperwork, copying, printing, or downloading facilities.

‘Globalisation means the end of national boundaries,’ boasts the Bombay based IT entrepreneur. ‘And it provides our staff and company with an enormous sense of national pride!’

Globalisation is not the end of national identity – but a beginning for new perceptions of national identity.

# Storytelling & the Web

People tell each other stories at work, customers tell each other about products and services – we all tell stories and we are all the subjects of stories.

Applications of corporate narrative are wide and varied; I shall look at one hitherto neglected area; the company website.

There are many reasons, and many advantages in developing storytelling skills in any kind of organisation. Here are three:

- *if you don't tell the stories, someone will (and less favourably)*
- *facts inform - stories inspire*
- *stories give meaning to values*

How can we best use the Internet medium to tell stories? No-one knows for sure. Not yet. Internet is a new medium, and its uses, possibilities and limitations are becoming increasingly apparent.

When moving picture technology developed in the late 1800s it was not as a medium for telling stories. People went to the movies to see a spectacle. It was the novelty of seeing everyday life shown in a

new medium. The Hollywood movie (as we know it today) wouldn't develop till the early 1920s.

Television technology was first demonstrated in London in 1928. Early television broadcasts transmitted live events to 'televisor' receivers. Television gave pictures to radio. Not till the 1950s did television develop as a technology to 'tell stories.'

The new digital media is now in the middle of this experimental phase that the cinema and television technology developed in their respective eras. When computer games hit the market in 1980s, many researchers and writers forecast a new era of interactive narrative. Future viewers would no longer be content in just watching a story, they would want to participate as well. Yet now, some 20 years later, computer games have become quite a distinctive pastime, which has more in common with sporting activities than watching movies. Players develop skills, play in teams, play in competitions, and play for money and prizes. Meanwhile a whole new generation are watching films with the same enthusiasm as movies goers did in the early 1920s.

But when we compare the kind of stories we watch on film to the kind of stories we watch on TV, there are significant differences. A medium helps to shape the kind of stories best suited to that medium.

For example, film stories – in general (not all, but most commercial cinema) subscribe to these parameters: the perspective of character and characters, one main plot, a dramatic and classical structure in which a problem is presented, developed and resolved.

Television, on the other hand, works best with multiple characters – or more correctly stereotypes; multiple plots and multiple perspectives. This is as true for television drama (sitcoms, soap operas, drama series) as it is for reality TV, game shows, sport, news and documentary.

What about the new medium? What kind of stories work best in an interactive digital medium? The advantages of computer technology lie in the interaction between the medium and user. Film and television attracts audiences and viewers; computers transforms us into ‘users’. We can search, navigate and interact.

If we think about what makes a good website we can consider the advantages of the computer medium, but maybe we can also consider ways in which storytelling can be integrated into the digital medium:

### **What makes a good website?**

- define our purpose; do we want to inform? to educate? to persuade ? to entertain?
- navigability; it should be easy to find our way around a page, and easy to access other pages
- visual; more pictures, less words
- up-to-date, maintained and current
- readable; a typeface, size, and colouring for a screen, not the printed page
- quick; easy to move on – minimum delay and download time
- a strong start page – it is the carrot that enables a user to explore further
- a theme; what is it about?

A good website makes use of the medium and the technology without the technological overkill. A better website incorporates storytelling.

Some questions:

Does the company website convey the meta-narrative?

How are the marketing ploys of the company product or service utilised on the website? The logo, company or product slogan, the name?

Is there easy access that helps the user answer the question: 'what's your story?' Is it a foundation story, a success story, a culture bearing story?

Can the Internet succeed as a storytelling medium? We don't know for sure. When movies were first shown at the end of the last century, it was for the spectacle not for story. It took a generation of filmmakers before movies became a medium for stories. When television technology was introduced as a broadcasting medium in the 1930s it was for televising live events; sport, spectacles, processions – a kind of radio with pictures. The storytelling possibilities were not fully realised until a generation later. The possibilities of Internet technology are still being explored. Whether Internet will rival film or television as a storytelling medium, it is emerging as a medium for communicating values, as stories have always done.

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## *The Story as a Gift*

Applications of corporate narrative are wide and varied; the presentation, the pitch, the kick-off, negotiations, sales meetings. There is one final area of storytelling and the communicating of values that warrants special consideration. It is the most rewarding application of all, yet the one least analysed. How to listen. Listening to the stories that are told, the stories that people tell around the water cooler, over the coffee break, at conferences.

A story is like a gift – when someone tells a story it is like an offering; it might not always be what you want, but the receiving should be as gracious as the giving.

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