

Anchored in the story: The core of human understanding, branding, education, socialisation and the shaping of values

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Storytelling or the narrative approach is increasingly becoming a core element in influence processes such as education, teaching, leadership, culture, history, marketing and its facets and a whole range of other functionalities across the multitudes of human activities. By nature human processes are a story told for a purpose; be it, as fun, socialisation, education, business, and so forth. Storytelling, be it narrated consciously or otherwise, tends to have a huge impact on society. It is the contention of this paper that the story is the ultimate in shaping minds and behaviour, and creating perceptions for the clientele or the stakeholders in any human engagement. While some writers might question the authenticity of using the storytelling approach on the pretext that it is not scientific they cannot take away the influence that the story has in shaping the thought process. In any case the human heritage is a story that transcends through generations: evolution, creation, discoveries of places, scientific discoveries or inventions, obituaries, product profiles, organisational profiles, advertisements, etc. Anything that is current, past or future that is narrated encapsulates a story be it past, present or future and each has its own purpose. Marketing has taken on board this notion in most of its facets in communications and brand development though this element does not come out strongly in the marketing literature. A quick check on the marketing literature would not present the notion of storytelling or the narrative as a topic in marketing books other than in the form of case studies. Ultimately the paper emphasises the notion that every influence process involving people is down to a story and no one can deny that socialisation is a story of perpetuating humanity and its facets. Denning (2007a) suggests that there are eight types of stories that serve a range of business related purposes and other facets of life or man's desire to understand or explain the notion of the earth and its dynamics. Boje (2008) articulates how a story defines people, places, products, etc, pointing out that every entity is known by its story in a given context. In view

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of the pervasive nature of the story it would be appropriate to argue that the story reminds of the past, shapes the present and inspire for the future; hence the story is the life that was, is and will be.

Keywords Storytelling, Narrative, Human understanding, Branding, Socialisation, Education, Values

Introduction

Hendry (2007) makes a strong case about the central role of the story in people's lives:

Our narratives, be they life stories, autobiographies, histories, sciences, or literature are the tales through which we constitute our identities. We are our narratives. They are not something that can be outside ourselves because they are what give shape to us, what gives meaning.

Hendry (2007, p. 495)

The author poses a question that is key to this article "If the story is central to human meaning why, in the research world, is there not more storytelling?" as Lewis (2011, p. 505) asks. This paper starts from the premise that humanity is a phenomenon told in multitudes of stories to meet a range of purposes. From the philosophical threshold of humanity, through the beginning of time, be it conceived in the origins of creation as per the biblical teachings and parables or through evolution and down to the narrations about discoveries and processes, the story anchors those phenomena. It is therefore the contention of this paper that the story is at the core of understanding, branding and shaping of human values. Even when an employee joins an organisation or a club, part of the orientation is the story behind the formation, the heroes and the successes or failures of the entity which will galvanise commitment and usher in an ethos that propagates the good of the past or lessons enmeshed in the ugly scenes of the past. This paper therefore looks into the story and its dynamics as a tool for learning, motivation, branding and leadership that influence both the thinking and values of societies. The contention of this paper is that the storytelling or the narrative approach is central to humanity, that is, it informs, nurtures and helps develop humanity, and propagates it by socialisation and also helps extend the boundaries of understanding.

The storytelling approach needs to be inspiring to have a positive impact on a given phenomenon (Denning, 2006). Therefore the art of storytelling necessitates a systematic approach that can persuade or convince, to have an impact as an effective approach to communication. Lapp and Carr (2008) observed that storytelling and creating an image is not enough; instead it is imperative that it encapsulates the storyselling and it revolves around the storyteller's perspective. This paper further postulates that the story is the source of understanding in view of the impact of the story on our understanding and educating people. Examples are a critical part of learning

in both the classroom and the training lounge which essentially shape the broad concepts and the specifics of understanding a given phenomenon. Plans and reports are stories where one narrates the desired future and the lived story respectively. Langer and Thorup (2006) observed that:

... storytelling seeks to communicate a uniform impression of a company's identity in a 'super-story' addressed to interested parties both inside and outside the organisation.

Langer and Thorup (2006, p. 374)

Therefore the storytelling/narrative approach presents a broad picture of the phenomenon of the organisation thus influencing perceptions of the listener to the story. Ultimately the dynamics of the story or stories mirror the perspectives of the listener. Ultimately the story is the life we live, hence Lewis (2011, p. 505) points out that "Consequently, humans are drawn to story through our residence in narrative life". Hendry (2007, p. 490) puts it as "Lives were ultimately described as products of discourse or narrative".

Objectives of the study

This paper seeks to delve into issues relating to the role of storytelling in human understanding of different issues and concepts. The discussion will consider the literature on the same and weigh both the pros and cons of using the storytelling approach or the narrative as a tool for developing understanding of a given phenomenon. This would seek to explore the extent to which the story can withstand academic scrutiny as a robust approach in conceptualising human understanding, branding, education, socialisation and the shaping of value systems. The story may or may not be ideal to management and marketing; consideration will therefore be given to the implications of using the story as a tool for business or any other functionalities of humanity. Ultimately the paper would suggest appropriate ways of using stories, be it, they are found authentic or not for business purposes.

Defining the story and its effects on understanding

Denning (2007b) defines a story and the narrative as:

A story is something told or recounted in the form of a causally-linked set of events; account; tale: the telling of a happening or connected series of happenings, whether true or fictitious. Narrative meaning is created by establishing that something is a part of a whole and usually that something is the cause of something else. It is usually combined with human actions or events that affect human beings. The meaning of each event is produced by the part it plays in the whole episode.

Therefore in the main the story is meant to capture the ethos about something that has happened or is meant to happen or imagined and help gravitate towards a desired position. In that respect a story can help fulfil the

need for identity, like in the case of culture, motivate by demonstrating the organisation's past or inspire by the story of the future, that is, dramatising the vision. The core of humanity is an accumulation of stories; be it in the clan profile, education system, national heritages, inventions, product development, business processes, histories of persons, places, nations, sports and any other entity. Denning (2007b) further asserts that stories fill our lives like water to fish, that is, they are so pervasive. The story can be narrated on any entity, process, place, etc., and hence the suitability. Solutions (2008) argues that:

Since the development of speech it seems human beings have communicated through telling stories. In oral traditions storytellers were held in high esteem, they entertained, touched the emotions and passed on knowledge. They also made people feel part of something.

Solutions (2008, p. 27)

Newman (as cited in Burke, 2006) :

True leaders are really CSOs - Chief Storytelling Officers. ... And the stories they tell become the stuff of dreams. This is where real emotional capital originates. It's the energy generated by the story of what you and your business are capable of achieving. It's this energy that provides the focus, inspiration and meaning that ordinary people as well as organizations need to move forwards.

Burke, 2006, pp. 22-23

Therefore, the story provides the basis for understanding the past, capturing the present and projecting the future. Some authors suggest history is short for his story and our understanding is a web of stories structured in a certain way as any situation we are bound to understand has a mirror image in the past as captured in the subconscious or recorded in some form of story, history, report, account, design, process or invention. At the same time our imagination of tomorrow uses the past and the present to create a new image as part of planning or design or to inspire people. The story is the ultimate in human understanding to which Chung (2007) concurs by articulating that:

As an intrinsic form of human communication, storytelling is prevalent in all aspects of human interaction. It connects generations of the past with the present and future to form, pass on, or reformulate wisdom, values, and beliefs.

Chung (2007, p. 17)

The story and education

Solutions (2008) suggests that training sessions come alive when people start telling their own stories and that stories are memorable and that they facilitate the transmission of knowledge. Our knowledge is complemented by anecdotes, case studies or examples that are largely relevant stories of a certain nature in order to drive home the conceptual understanding

for a given phenomenon. This is the core of humanity as much of human understanding is a product of socialisation over generations that have passed on practices, languages and culture well before formal learning came into existence by utilising the oldest known conduit of knowledge transfer, that is, the story or the narrative approach. In a dynamic article on student generated digital storytelling Kearney (2011) demonstrates the linkages between oral storytelling and use of modern technology to facilitate pedagogy that is flexible, permanent and helps in reflection, but also cautions on the problems this presents to learners who are more inclined towards conventional methods. Chung (2007) in concluding his research on digital storytelling further asserts that:

The application of digital storytelling to art education is an interdisciplinary, inquiry based, hands-on project that integrates the arts, education, local communities, technology, and storytelling. Through digital storytelling, students develop and apply multi-literacy skills, aesthetic sensitivities, and critical faculties to address greater issues of importance to a larger audience.

Chung (2007, p. 22)

Therefore a lot of learner development is encapsulated in the story and helps the learner gain understanding of the phenomena in the respective context. In a consultative paper on Early Education Support, Learning and Teaching Scotland (2003) points out that a story is powerful and children enjoy stories and do a range of interactive and engaging activities that support learning with a range of people; and they are a good starting point for learning as the interest and motivation are imbedded in storytelling. They further assert that stories encourage children to be imaginative and help them understand but would require a rich storytelling environment to begin with and would require adults who encourage it through creative tasks, questioning and narrating to other children.

There are many situations where our teaching utilises a historical story of some kind, be it a case study, an example, a scenario, etc., and to that end Welsch (1998, p. 116) argues that:

We are drawn to history because its story is our story - by gazing backwards we learn the past as well as something of the present and possibly even something of our future. It allows us to place ourselves as participants in an historical tradition, parts of which we wish to claim and others which we would prefer to distance ourselves from.

Welsch (1998, p. 116)

Therefore in the main the learner can relate to a mirror of life by looking at the past which helps understand the present and also project the future. It is therefore logical to see the stories as the basis of our interpretation and development of life. Theories emanate from past discoveries which are modelled in a certain way and education is shaped around knowledge acquired from the past.

There are many case studies that are used in management teaching and in many other disciplines. In management systems the Toyota story that led

to the development of the Just in time (Jit) systems remains a big lesson for management teaching and development. Many entrepreneurs, among them Bill Gates, Richard Branson, Lee Iacocca, Steve Jobs, etc., associated with expansive corporations are stories many entrepreneurs want to know about as a source of inspiration and make an impact in the shaping of entrepreneurial approaches.

The story and the development of a brand

Baker and Boyle (2009, p. 80) state that *"A brand story, however, delivers an all-too-rare and refreshingly consistent message. ...people love... to hear a great story and pass it on to others"*. It would appear that the brand is a consolidation of stories in the shaping of images which create favourable or unfavourable attitudes towards a given entity, be it goods, a service or an organisation. Papadatos (2006) argues that the product characteristics need an approach that would enhance distinction through the use of the storytelling approach which essentially brings the phenomenon to life, thus the brands become storytelling brands. There are eight dimensions of storytelling that Denning (2006, p. 43) identifies as follows:

- Sparking action (springboard stories)
- Communicating who you are
- Transmitting values
- Communicating who the firm is - branding
- Fostering collaboration
- Taming the grapevine
- Sharing knowledge
- Leading people into the future

The overall perspective about the different types of stories identified by Denning (2006) is that they are all meant to influence the listener to the story which leaves an impression of a positive or negative image depending on the impact the story would have on the listener. While the communication of who the firm actually is, is attributed to the brand, the same can be done with other forms of stories to communicate who you are, transmitting values, sharing knowledge and leading people into the future.

Kostera and Obloj (2010, p. 264) state that *"Strategists can be seen as storytellers, spinning their tales around central themes, ideas, and protagonists"*. Therefore given the strategic importance of branding it would necessitate a concrete story to enhance the standing of given brands. However, it would be difficult to be concrete as Kostera and Obloj (2010) further assert that the story is relative to the storyteller who uses his/her perspective which would be different from another storyteller who would differ while narrating the same issue(s) and ultimately the strategist is more about leading the storytelling. An advertisement presents a live story of a product that in turn impacts on people's understanding and perception of a given organisation, product or idea which in turn would influence action.

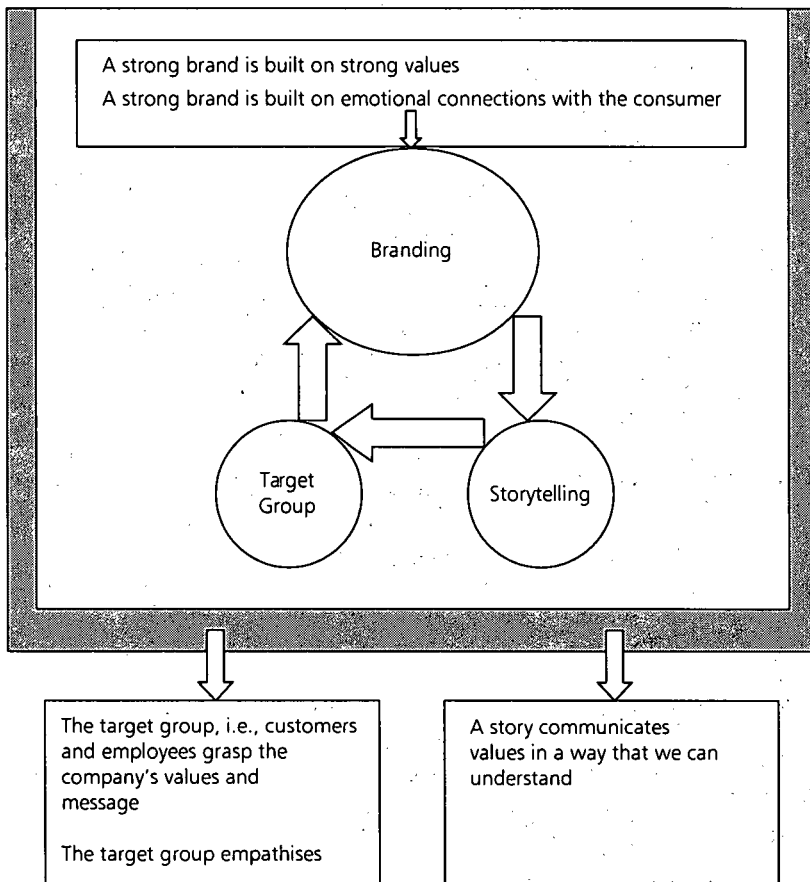
The notion of branding is underpinned in the story as illustrated in the model by Fog, Budtz and Yakaboylu (2005).

The branding and storytelling framework

Langer and Thorup (2006, p. 374) urge caution in the use of storytelling as a tool of marketing in stating that "... *storytelling can be applied instrumentally in marketing and branding, in relation to processes of organisational change this is a reduced and misplaced way to use storytelling*". Despite some misgivings expressed about the storytelling approach in marketing or any other phenomenon, it remains a fact that our interpretations and tastes are harboured and shaped in the stories of our lives, whether, through experience, hearing, observing or narration in learning at school, induction at work or socialisation.

There are many advertisements that narrate a story in creating an identity of the organisation. The BMW advertisement projecting luxurious

Figure 1



Adapted from Fog et al., 2005, p. 22.

life narrates a range of activities that demonstrate how to enjoy life driving the all new BMW 3 series sedan and that is bound to be easy to remember and very persuasive. The common story about the secrecy of the Coca-Cola formula remains a key tenet of the Coke brand. It is my view that stories are the strands by which the web of life is constructed. Many of our interpretations are based on relating to images already stored in our minds. This phenomenon is consistent with the notion of communication which only takes place within the context of overlapping perceptual fields, that is, where sender and receiver share common experiences. Dinnie (2003) narrates how different countries shape their brands through their respective stories.

The role of the story in socialisation: The shaping of value systems

Wilson (2008, p. 133) states that *"We are moved by stories more powerfully than we are moved by instructions"*. The story connects people to other people and listening to a story is tantamount to living that story and thereby makes the listeners actors in the respective story. Wilson (2008) looks into what he calls the Jesus brand spirituality which is one of the most powerful brands spanning more than 2000 years and shapes part of humanity's value system. Christianity spans the globe and has perpetuated with little commercial appeal for many generations except in the modern times. The story of a man who was born supernaturally by a virgin, died and rose after three days and subsequently ascended into heaven has many admirers and detractors but it remains core for much of humanity. That story is part of the biblical teachings which explain human creation and salvation from one set of beliefs. While this is one religion with a strong pull, there are many religions that have their own stories and make an impact on humanity as well. These are not values sponsored or promoted for commercial benefit but driven by human values and principles in the quest for higher moral ground.

Therefore listening to stories about a town or a place would see one experiencing the life of the respective town or place. The appeal of the town depends on the effect of the storytelling approach. Major cities like New York, London, Amsterdam, Dublin, Frankfurt, Sydney, among others, have a lot to offer but equally their heritage speaks a lot about their identity and their personality. Hendry (2007, p. 494) points out that *"Faith in the story is a political act in which we acknowledge our participants, not as incomplete, but as meaning makers and central to our own meaning making"*. Folklore and other related community stories perpetuate social practices, values and the heritage of society through stories often not even documented. Those stories are dynamic in approach as they are blended by developments through periods as situations unfold over time. Welsch (1998) puts it across as:

Each period defines the cultural, societal, and historical context for a set of practices, materials, theories, and figures that have frequently been viewed within a limited academic context.

(Welsch, 1998, p. 119)

Adamson, Pine, Van Steenhoven & Kroupa, (2006) makes a persuasive argument in stating a position regarding the power of storytelling in stating that:

Stories invite people to bring the 'whole person' to work (both heart and head), and therefore elicit much more thorough perspectives and meaningful commitments. They create a context for work aspirations and thus make each employee feel more valued. In short, stories have the potential to revitalize the way we do business.

(Adamson et al., 2006, p. 37)

Conclusion

In the beginning there is a human story of creation or evolution depending on the inclination of the storyteller. In understanding that story mankind finds meaning and basis for existence. The story of creation prompts our value systems that span through time and would stretch into the future. Welsch (1998, p. 121) points out that "An effective storyteller - a historian - should leave us with something to ponder...". We will always ask questions and ponder about a good story and even a poor story will give us something to query.

So what human phenomena can develop without seeds of a story or stories? The socialisation processes which nurtures social values and principles are perpetuated in stories and practices that are passed on through generations. Teaching in virtually every sphere of learning is complemented in a story by way of case studies, examples, role play, and so forth. Whether these stories are real or fiction, they still serve the same phenomenon of understanding, be it conveying a message, to entertain, to test comprehension through critical analysis of literature, and so forth.

The legal profession is known for basing court decisions in both criminal and civil cases on evidence from witnesses or they use reconstruction to obtain a picture which forms the basis of the jury's verdict. In the main these are all stories being weighed for their credibility, hence the legal profession is anchored in stories of those that saw. Equally the same story could be captured in motion and the story could be watched on screen as a basis of the evidence.

Science often seeks irrefutable proof of a given phenomenon based on given laws or principles. Whether it is the discovery of the sun being a number of light years away from the earth or the earth being round or the experiments conducted in a laboratory or in the field there is a report that presents the process and the findings which is tantamount to a story of the procedures and results. Every human invention is captured in some form of a story and hence the story is a core element of what has been done. Even the future is put in a futuristic plan projecting how the situation should unfold.

The identity of goods and services is encapsulated in the brand which is the expression of what the goods or service as an entity or an offering stands for. While to the common people a brand is restricted to goods and services there is a broader perspective of the brand which extends to people, places,

events, governments, countries, etc. This essentially is a matter of a story or stories which shape our perception of the phenomenon often complemented by marketing communications in the form of advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, direct marketing, e-marketing, public relations/publicity, and so forth.

In arguing that the story is the ultimate vehicle in deriving meaning and understanding, the author is convinced that in all circumstances of human engagement the story is always a factor. The author would argue that the story perpetuates as well as prompts the search for new knowledge. The challenge to every human being is how storytelling or narrating a story should be done to yield the best results in any given situation. A story is for a purpose and should always relate to a given audience, hence the storyteller has a responsibility to understand the audience and clarify the purpose of the story before narrating the story. Therefore the right story for the right audience and the right time transforms.

The author concurs with Lewis (2011, p. 505) who states "*Story is central to human understanding - it makes life liveable, because without a story, there is no identity, no self, no other*". The human thought process and understanding can be reduced to reflective mirroring based on stories (Perrow, 2007; Young & Saver, 2001) to make sense or create meaning by tapping into the subconscious. Welsch puts the notion of storytelling in a historical context and links it to the past and the present in stating "*History is about storytelling. And like any good narrative invested in re-counting tales of forebearers, its aim is not only to create an image of the past but a way of understanding what we see*". (Welsch, 1998, p. 116). Ultimately history (his story) provides a reference and a heritage to understand the past which informs the present and guides the future direction. Governments mirror experiences and philosophies from past eras and help in shaping current and future policies, behaviours and characterisation.

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