

Jaws in Space: Why Storytelling is important and what managers can learn from bestsellers and movies

By Veit Etzold



In an over-communicated world, companies must remain audible, visible and consequently differentiable. This article considers how the dramatic elements that make good stories can be applied at the corporate level. Good companies, like good stories, need heroes, villains and a heroic tale to inspire their employees and customers.

How can it be that people stay up till 3 o'clock in the morning of their own free will, even if they have to get up early the next day, in order to read some bestseller which they paid good money for, while expensive, glossy, multi-coloured annual reports distributed free of charge by Corporate Communications to customers or shareholders normally end up, unread, in the trash? And why do cinemagoers sit patiently for nearly three hours to watch *The Dark Knight*, after forking out 10 euros for the privilege, then buy the DVD and dutifully recommend the film to their friends, while after five minutes of a company presentation nearly everybody is checking their mails, scrolling through Facebook, or simply nodding off? Does it have to be this way or can something be done about it?

This essay investigates the dramatic elements that make good stories function and shows how these findings and best practices can also be applied at the corporate level.

Differ or die - Differentiation via the story

If you're not different, you'd better have a low price!

-- Jack Trout

In an over-communicated world, companies must remain audible, visible and consequently differentiable. "No two species can coexist, if they share the same biotope", said Bruce D. Henderson, founder of the Boston Consulting Group, referring to Charles Darwin.² The question is, whether one is the first or the greatest, the leader or a copycat, the future or history, living or dead. And this question is not decided by any multi-coloured PowerPoint presentations or cryptic mission statements, concocted on some company off-sites amidst the swirl of red wine in glasses to accompany team building climbing exercises. How the company is perceived in the mind of the customer is decided solely by the customer alone; even more so in the age of social networks, where users can create their own version of a brand, a version which can easily predominate the original brand set up by the company.

In fact, communication has to take place with everybody. Boards of directors have to communicate with their staff, often competing with rumours and gossip, which normally circulate faster than any mail from corporate communications. And Investor relations have to serve up a tasty *equity story* to investment bankers and investors.

The first impression: The magic of the beginning

'You never get a second chance to make a first impression' is a popular saying with business executives, especially those in personnel management. But somehow this does not seem to apply to communication. Often, the very first sentence of an information brochure or a mission statement is so dull, stereotyped and vacuous that these sorry efforts can confidently be described as non-prescription yawn-inducing sleeping pills. In contrast, for the authors of thrillers, who have to earn a living writing and who cannot afford to give everything away free of charge, the very first sentence has to hit home:

'Physicist Leonardo Vitra smelt burning flesh'.

That is the start of a world-famous bestseller. And while the reader may be wondering if the afore-mentioned Signor Vitra is at a barbecue, the second sentence brings clarification, making it crystal clear that the reader is in for some strong meat indeed:

'And he knew it was his own'.

If you compare the beginning of *Angels&Demons*³ by Dan

Brown, for that is where the quote is taken from, with the first sentences of typical company reports or the first slide of a PowerPoint presentation, it will surely strike you that the whole story by Dan Brown is more gripping than the said company report. You might also see that with just two sentences consisting of a few words, Dan Brown succeeds in defining the whole genre and just how strong the 'meat' is going to be. The reader wants more of it. He wants to read on, to find out what is happening.

A second example: how to combine human existence with the drama of death, again in just two sentences? Cody McFadyen pulls it off brilliantly in *The Darker Side*⁴

'Dying is a lonely thing'.

Probably nobody would have thought otherwise. But then the second sentence proves that for all the violence and horror of his works, Cody McFadyen does not neglect the philosophical side:

'Then again, so is living'.

These first sentences are important because they are meant to define the genre and the theme of the book and also make the reader want to carry on reading with great enthusiasm. Such enthusiasm unfortunately fails to make its presence felt at presentations by your company or with management reports. The opening sentence of the Commerzbank's half-yearly report 2011 runs:

'The first half of 2011 was marked by very different developments'.⁵

Ah, what a good thing they said that! Otherwise we might have got the idea that in 2011 the same thing happened every day all over the world, just like in 2010.

The fact that it is possible to write very graphically and impressively about apparently dry-as-dust subjects like banks is demonstrated by the Lex column of the British *Financial Times*, whose authors seem to have served their apprenticeship with H.P.Lovecraft. Here is what we read at the start of 2009:

'The ghost of Dresdner Bank has reached out in Germany from beyond the grave, almost dragging its buyer Commerzbank into the afterlife with it. Instead it has thrust Commerzbank into the chill embrace of Angela Merkel's government'.⁶

What reader could resist thinking of Gothic horror stories? But the author has even a little extra dose of 'Financial Gothic':

'Commerzbank recapitalization, or rather that of the rotting corpse of Dresdner within it, adds to the recent stream of dire economic German news'. (Financial Times. P.12)

Describing Dresdner Bank as a 'rotting corpse' is not nice, and whether it is accurate is more a matter for the auditors and armies of consultants who presided over the merger. But it certainly sticks in the memory.

In a nutshell: Incisive communication

Time is a resource which is becoming ever more precious. If you wish to get your message across to the recipient, it is better not to take too much time about it.

Pope John Paul II was once asked if he could express in a single sentence what the Church is. In view of the two-thousand-year history of the Church and what surely must be millions

of volumes written about this institution, it might have seemed almost impossible to sum up something so vast and so ancient in a single sentence. But JP II did it in one word: *salvation*.

Depending on which god one believes in, if any, one can agree or disagree. But the mission statement was as crisp as it could be.⁷

Unfortunately, not all mission statements and value propositions share these features. For example, while Dow Chemical comes up with nothing better than 'To constantly improve what is essential to human progress by mastering science and technology', words which could be applied to any company from Siemens and Daimler to Microsoft, the Disney Corporation makes it far clearer and easily understood: 'To make people happy'.

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When John F. Kennedy talked about the budget he wanted allocated for the moon landing, he did not talk about 'the opportunities of interplanetary space travel and the strategic long-term dimensions of this investment'. He simply spoke of 'the goal of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth'.

When Dan O'Bannon together with director Ridley Scott was trying to sell his script for *Alien* to various producers, he did not talk about an 'extremely dangerous creature, hostile to all forms of life'. Instead, referring to the great white shark movie, he simply described the *Alien* as 'Jaws in space'.

Good and Evil – Heroes and villains

It is not just children who like stories. Anyone capable of telling a story excitingly and entertainingly can be sure of finding plenty of listeners, even if some of them have already heard the story several times.

Moreover, stories are immediately categorised by the brain as important. From the earliest times back in the cave in the Stone Age man has told stories; stories about how he killed the mammoth, how he escaped from the sabre toothed tiger or found shelter. And because man has learned from stories, they have helped him to survive and thus are considered by the brain to be of high importance. So a good story is sticky in a natural way. Arid PowerPoint logic without a storyline unfortunately does not appear in this collective memory, now a hundred thousand years old, and the bouncer at the door to the brain delights in pushing it to one side as irrelevant. And, likewise, people fall asleep during such presentations.⁸

In addition, nature abhors a vacuum. And where nothing is said, then something is thought up. And if that story sounds better than reality, it has excellent chances of being taken seriously, even if it does not fit the facts. So every reader knows

from his or her own experience in the company that gossip, tittle-tattle and rumours spread far faster than any official statement or denial by the board. The main reason this happens is that gossip and tittle-tattle are often unconsciously structured in the same way as good stories, whereas official corporate emails mostly are not.


Features that appear in every good story, but are almost always absent in corporate communications, are the hero and villain. Every story needs a hero. And every hero needs a villain. No Adam and Eve without the Devil, no Luke Skywalker without Darth Vader, no Superman without Lex Luthor.⁹ Sometime the bad guy is so strong and original that he almost turns into a hero himself, like Fritz Lang's notorious Dr. Mabuse.

Good stories, like good companies, need a protagonist and, sad to say, a team or a complex structure such as a firm usually is not much good as a protagonist. Heroes must be individuals. Clarice Starling, not the FBI, has to do a psychological strip in front of Hannibal Lecter in order to hunt down the serial ripper Buffalo Bill in 'The Silence of the Lambs'. And successful companies also have their heroes. Microsoft has Bill Gates, Apple had Steve Jobs, Google has Larry Page, and Facebook has Mark Zuckerberg. Of course, companies run by their owners have an easier time of it than big concerns run by salaried managers. Yet the challenge is the same. The hero has to face up to a danger, a challenge and that is the antagonist, the opponent, the villain, who might be anything: the surroundings, the competition, pressure of time or the regulatory authority.

This tactic works especially well when the firm can present itself as the little underdog fighting the big nasty competitor. It was a problem recognised by David Glass, CEO of the super-market giant Wal-Mart from 1988 to 2000. 'When we were smaller, we were the underdog, the challenger. When you're number one, you are a target. You are no longer the hero'.¹⁰

David and Goliath is the classic story of 'small versus big' and David Glass of Wal-Mart would himself clearly like to be 'only' David. So if your company is small compared with the competition, be sure to play the David and Goliath card, it nearly always works.

Apple practised this strategy for years. With the 'phoenix from the ashes' story of the late Steve Jobs who in 1997 rescued Apple from ruin, Jobs succeeded in presenting the company as the underdog battling the IT establishment, a trick that Apple had already pulled off in the eighties, when he said: 'If we do not succeed, IBM will be the master of the world'.¹¹ The customers thus saw it almost as their moral obligation to buy Apple's high-priced products, thus becoming rebels and dandies themselves. And they keep on doing so even though the iPhone has taken over from the BlackBerry in the business world and the market capitalisation of the supposed *underdog* is still, even after the fall of the Apple stock in early 2013, almost 80 % of the size of that of Microsoft and IBM added together.¹²

A good story is simply stronger than the facts. Because stories are how we remember. CEOs should remember this fact as well. 

Storytelling Checklist

- Does what I am doing make me unique or at least differentiable in the market? What story has my business got to tell that the competition hasn't got?
- How do my stories begin? Do I succeed in winning the listeners over thanks to a strong introduction or do I get bogged down in meaningless generalisations before I finally get to the point?
- Is my communication incisive enough? Can I sum up my story in one sentence or even in a single word? What is my 'Jaws in Space'?
- Are there heroes in my firm and are there competitors I can turn into villains? What heroic tale about my company must I tell in order to inspire my staff and customers?

About the Author

Veit Etzold is consultant and lecturer on corporate storytelling. He is the author of several bestselling thriller novels; his latest novel *'Final Cut'* was on the German bestseller list for 14 weeks and translated into six European languages. He has worked in media and banking, as a consultant at the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and as program director at ESMT (European School of Management and Technology). Veit Etzold holds a PhD in Media Science and an MBA from IESE Business School. His latest book on storytelling *'Der Weiße Hai im Weltraum – Jaws in Space: Storytelling for Managers'* will be issued by Wiley Publishing in September. You can find more information on www.veit-etzold.de or contact the author via info@veit-etzold.de.

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6. *Financial Times*, January 9, 2009, p. 12
7. Based on an interview of the author in March 2009 with Joaquin Navarro-Valls, formerly press spokesman of Pope John Paul II.
8. See also Fulford, Robert 'Stories survive partly because they remind us of what we know and partly because they call us back to what we consider significant', 1999, in *The Triumph of Narrative – Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture*, Toronto 1999, p. 7
9. See McKee, Robert, 'The energy of live comes from the dark side. It comes from everything that makes us suffer. As we struggle against these negative powers, we're forced to live more deeply, more fully', June 2003, in, 'Storytelling that moves people', *Harvard Business Review*, June 2003, p. 53
10. According to a study of top management and staff, 71 percent have more sympathy for people who had to overcome obstacles than for straight winners. This is known as the „underdog effect", in Wang, Jennifer, 'What's your Story?', in *Entrepreneur*, January 2012, p. 72
11. Based on Roche and Sadowski, quoted in Denning, Stephen, *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, San Francisco, 2011, p. 42
12. On May 29 2013, Apple's market capitalization was € 322bn., Microsoft had € 227bn., and IBM € 179bn. Source: Finanzen.net, www.finanzen.net; it is to be noted, that in the creative industry, Apple is no longer really considered cool and some people even say, '...Apple is as lousy as Microsoft with the difference, that with Microsoft you are warned before'.