

Brand Performances in Social Media

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Abstract

The branding literature has long recognized the power of storytelling to provide meaning to the brand and practitioners have used storytelling to enhance consumers' connections with brands. The premise of brand storytelling has been that the story and its content, production, and distribution are the brand owner's realm and the consumer primarily a listener. The emergence of social media has changed the consumers' role in storytelling from that of a passive listener to a more active participant. Our paper uses the metaphor of improvisation (improv) theater to show that in social media brand owners do not tell brand stories alone but co-create brand performances in collaboration with the consumers. The first and foremost contribution of such a conceptualization is that it offers a semantic framework that resolves issues in storytelling, demonstrates the necessity of co-creation in storytelling, and identifies the core of an inspiring story. The improv theater metaphor also helps identify the following three propositions relevant for branding in social media: (i) the process of improvisation is more important than the output, (ii) managing brands is about keeping the brand performance alive, and (iii) understanding the audience and its roles is the prerequisite for a successful brand performance.

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Prologue: Storytelling

Stories contain indices such as locations, actions, attitudes, problems, characters, etc. that cause both empathy in the listener (Woodside 2010) and help the story being recalled (Schank 1999). Story indices create empathy by providing a meaning and the more indices a story has, the more places the story can reside in memory and consequently be better recalled. For example, Marlboro successfully used the story of the Marlboro cowboy that conjured up rugged cowboy country with the masculine cowboy. The visuals used in Marlboro's television advertising, dusty canyon terrain (which later represented the quintessential *Marlboro Country*), reflected the idea of freedom in wide-open spaces. These visuals were reinforced with the recognizable theme music from the popular movie of the time, *The Magnificent Seven*, a Western drama with seven tough gunfighters. The story

of the Marlboro man had several indices that helped it achieve this goal: the location of cowboy country, the character of the cowboy as a hero and a protagonist, the attitude of independence, and the recognizable music from the film *The Magnificent Seven*. The story of the Marlboro man was so convincing that even when tobacco advertising was banned on television in 1971, the Marlboro man did not ride off into the proverbial sunset but instead successfully moved to print ads and billboards.

Stories also create or enhance connections with the brand by providing a theme to create conversations between consumers and brands and among consumers themselves that allow the consumers to fit in their own experiences into the brand story (Escalas 2004). Successful brands such as Harley Davidson nurture these consumer connections and provide opportunities for storytelling by creating events that bring the brand closer to the customer such as *Harley Owners' Group (H.O.G.) Rallies* and the *Harley Posse Ride*, where riders share their brand related stories with other riders. Thus, stories can help build awareness, comprehension, empathy, recognition, recall, and provide meaning to the brand.

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While the branding literature recognizes the importance of stories for brands (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Escalas 2004; Woodside, Sood, and Miller 2008), the story content, production, and distribution have been dominated by the brand owner (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003), but this is changing due to the emergence of social media that enables user-generated brand content. Social media include discussion forums, blogs, social platforms, and video-, photo-, and news-sharing sites that provide networks, relations, and interactions — the three ingredients central to co-creation (Vargo and Lusch 2004). Thus, it is inevitable that the social media, with their opportunities for networks, relations, and interactions between brands and consumers, result in co-creation (Deighton and Kornfeld 2009). When brands and consumers co-create brand stories, owners do not have complete control of their brands (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010) as consumer-generated brand stories can spread as rapidly as those created by companies (Muñiz and Schau 2007). This consumer-generated content provides compelling evidence of brand perceptions and attributes that may or may not be endorsed by the brand owner. The brand owner, therefore, has to navigate its brand content through the consumer-generated content to ensure that consumers' brand stories remain as close as possible to the brand owner's desired story.

The goal of our paper is to offer a semantic framework for navigating brands in social media. This is done by conceptualizing brands in social media settings using the metaphor of improvisation (improv) theater performances. The metaphorical approach compares the abstract phenomenon with a (more) concrete one — identifying equivalent relationships based on knowledge transfer from a source domain (the concrete phenomenon, improv theater) onto the target domain (the abstract phenomenon, brands in social media), using the learning from the concrete phenomenon to help understand the abstract one.

In our case, the improv theater serves as an insightful metaphor for understanding brands in the social media arena because brand owners and users in social media interact with one another in the same impromptu and uncontrolled fashion that characterizes improv theater. Researchers in marketing and branding have already drawn parallels with classical theater using many expressions from the world of theater such as drama (Moisio and Arnould 2005), performance (Deighton 1992), front and back stage (Grove and Fisk 1992), hero (Mark and Pearson 2001), role (Kozinets et al. 2010), props (Baron, Harris, and Harris 2001), and storytelling (Woodside 2010). We extend this existing terminology to improv theater as it better describes brands in the era of social media; the social media environment is closer to the uncontrolled and unpredictable nature of an improvisational performance than to a classical theater performance.

Improvisation is a theatrical genre that varies from short scenes to longer one-act plays consisting of several scenes tied together by one common theme (for a historical overview see Frost and Yarrow 2007) where a moderator (one of the actors or the director) introduces the story and asks members of the audience to articulate wishes for the performance and/or participate in it. The actors use the audience's suggestions to create an improvised performance. However, this does not mean that anything goes. Improv theater performances have an overall

predetermined structure like a topic, a basic script, and a set of rules that navigate the improvisational process. The performance emerges from the collaboration between the actors and the audience where the audience may be passive (views the show) and/or active (suggests from off stage or acts on stage) (Frost and Yarrow 2007).

Using improv theater as a metaphor contributes to the understanding of brands in social media in three ways. First, the improv theater-based semantic framework helps resolve issues in storytelling. Second, it extends the conceptualization of brand stories told by brand owners to brand stories co-created by brand owners and consumers. However, a crucial part in the co-creation is the consumers' continued engagement in the storytelling. Thus, the third contribution of this paper is identifying the nucleus that keeps the brand story alive in social media.

The core of this paper is presented in three scenes. Scene 1 introduces the star (the brand) and supporting players (brand owner and consumers) in a story about the main character's entry into a whole new world (social media). Scene 2 presents the plot twist that keeps the performance interesting, and Scene 3 resolves the performance to be more suitable to social media. The epilogue discusses implications of improvisation for theory and practice to raise pertinent issues for future research.

Scene 1: Introducing the Main Characters and Story

The star of this performance is the brand but one cannot have a performance without a story and without a supporting cast. In classical theater, storytelling is the sole responsibility of the brand's owner and consumers are at best bit players, but much more likely to be listeners. Social media have turned the classical theater into an improvisational version because they allow much more role diversity for all the players involved in the production. Social media have not just helped people make zillions of connections (via the social media website Facebook) and inspire Hollywood (as evidenced by the movie *The Social Network*) but also transformed the way consumers interact with brands. Consumers can read or provide reviews and information of brands, watch or upload their favorite advertisement of the brand, make an advertisement of their own, 'Tweet' or blog about the brand in social media. Technology, Internet, and social media have made it possible to share consumer-generated brand content with friends, other users, or a virtual community.

Consumers are motivated to generate and broadcast online content primarily for intrinsic reasons such as the enjoyment that the act of creating something provides, promoting themselves to attract attention and initiate conversation, or to influence others (Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell 2008). In social media settings, a brand can encourage consumers' participation by initiating conversation through seeding (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009), provoking (Deighton and Kornfeld 2009), engaging, and providing a platform for conversations, which is well exemplified by Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign.

Dove evolved from a product-focused brand (a beauty soap bar) to a brand that told a story (real beauty) to a brand that co-created a story with consumers (campaign for *Real Beauty*). The initiation of Dove's co-created performance in social media was

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