

Mastering the Art of Brand Storytelling

Summary

This assignment serves as an introduction to brand storytelling. Research suggests that storytelling is an essential tool for public relations professionals as stories can entertain, emotionally arouse, inform, and persuade audiences (Kent, 2015; McKee, & Gerace, 2018). However, students' experiences with storytelling are often personal rather than strategic. For this assignment, I ask students to interview the leader or founder of a local nonprofit organization, business, or school club and use the information they gather to develop a compelling story. Students are instructed that the story should be written in a concise and accessible format that could easily be added to the client's "about us" website or used in a backgrounder or other client communications.

Rationale

Nonprofit, small, or local organizations often lack the budget for professional communication services. When teaching service-learning classes, my students frequently identify opportunities for our community partners to have an improved web presence and share organizational stories with the public in meaningful and engaging formats. In our media-saturated environment, it is important for a brand to authentically communicate its unique points of difference (Pereira, 2019). Storytelling allows a brand to communicate its mission, vision, and values in ways that resonate with target audiences.

This assignment is innovative because it provides students with the opportunity to establish their voices as strategic writers, develop their storytelling skills, and build their confidence speaking with business leaders. Additionally, the work that students produce for this assignment can be shared with the client and can also be added to the student's professional portfolio. The 2017 USC Annenberg Global Communication Report identified digital storytelling as one of the most important future skills for marketing and public relations professionals. As such, this project is a unique way for students to enhance their career readiness and hone essential skills.

Student Learning Goals:

1. Develop an understanding of effective brand storytelling and its potential to persuade, inform, entertain, and engage audiences.
2. Build confidence communicating with professionals in the field and practicing in-depth interview techniques.
3. Practice summarizing information and writing strategically for a public audience.
4. Demonstrate the ability to write a compelling brand story based on interview data.
5. Create a professional work sample that highlights mastery of brand storytelling.

Assessment:

Students are assessed based on creativity, convention and style, clarity, organization, and grammar. In addition to turning in a written assignment, I often ask students to create a five-minute presentation for the class to share their stories. These presentations also include experiential-learning reflection prompts in which students discuss their interview experiences.

Supplementary Materials

Assignment Description

Every organization has a story to tell, and learning how to tell that story effectively is an essential skill for public relations professionals. In this assignment, you will interview the leader or founder of a local nonprofit organization, business, or school club and use the information you gather to develop a compelling story. By conducting this interview, you will gain a deeper understanding of the organization's culture, mission, and values, and learn how to translate that information to a broader public.

Please conduct this interview via phone, Zoom, or in person. The interview should last at least thirty minutes. Please ask for the interviewee's permission to record the interview and use the attached questionnaire as a guide. Once you have conducted the interview, create a profile of the organization, as if you were writing an "about us" page for its website. Consider what answers stood out to you as interesting or unexpected, and how this story is unique or interesting. Your profile should be well-organized, grammatically correct, and visually engaging, with photos and quotes as appropriate to tell the organization's story.

Interview script: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I am excited to learn more about your organization and its history. Before we begin, I just wanted to confirm, is it okay if I record our conversation so that I can refer to it later? Thanks again for meeting with me. Could you please introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your role within the organization?

- Can you tell me about how you first became involved with the organization?
- What are you most proud of about your work with this organization?
- From your perspective, how has the organization changed over time, and what events have shaped its development?
- Do you know where your organization's name came from? Is there a story there?
- What values or guiding principles have been important to the organization, and how have these been reflected in its actions and decisions?
- How has the organization responded to changes in its industry?
- In your experience, what have been some of the biggest challenges the organization has faced?
- Can you describe the organization's culture and working environment?
- How has the organization contributed to the broader community?
- What are the organization's current goals, and how are these being pursued?
- What do you believe sets the organization apart from others in its industry, and what has contributed to its success?
- What are some of your favorite memories or experiences with the organization, and what do you hope its future will hold?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share about the organization?

Thank the interviewee for meeting with you and provide them with follow-up information.

References

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McKee, R., & Gerace, T. (2018). *Storynomics: Story-driven marketing in the post-advertising world*. Hachette UK.

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Vanguard Ranch

Nestled in the rolling hills of Gordonsville, Virginia, Vanguard Ranch tells a unique tale of self-sufficiency and sustainability. It's the story of Renard and Chinette Turner, a couple who met in Washington, D.C., while studying at Howard University. After years of paying high rent and living expenses in the city, the Turners decided to make a drastic change.

In pursuit of a more organic lifestyle, Renard and Chinette Turner packed their bags and moved to the outskirts of Charlottesville, Virginia in the 1970s. They were determined to live in a way that was kinder to the planet and more self-sufficient. They built their own house, installed their own running water, and cleared their own land, embarking on a new life where they relied on no one but themselves.

It's worth noting that in the United States only 2% of farmers of color own their own land. Despite this, Black farmers are drawing on their long history of agricultural production to address food insecurity and improve the health of local communities. The Turners are leading the way in promoting the importance of supporting an agrarian way of life for Black farmers.

Their 94-acre farm, Vanguard Ranch, is a testament to their dedication to sustainable farming practices and cultural pride. They raise free-range, Spanish-Kiko, and Valero range goats, free of hormones and antibiotics, with nurturing care on a farm where they can run free. Goat meat is the most popular red meat outside of the United States, and for good reason, given its health benefits. It's over 50% lower in fat than beef and over 40% lower in saturated fat than skinned chicken.

Today, in their 60s, Renard and Chinette continue to sustain their farm with their fresh and organic foods, including their delicious farm-fresh goat meat. They sell their goat meats to local restaurants and in the form of goat burgers, kabobs, and curry through their food truck.

Over the years, the Turners have expanded their brand to include something truly unique. As they've gotten older, they've wanted to bring people to their farm instead of traveling on the road in their food truck. Thus, the Crossroads Music & Food Festivals were born. Held annually on their farm, the festivals provide a platform for the Turners to sell their food, promote local music, and encourage a lifestyle of self-sufficiency and sustainability.

Vanguard Ranch and the story of Renard and Chinette Turner is truly one-of-a-kind. You won't find another self-sufficient, African American-owned goat farm in America that hosts annual music festivals. Their story is an inspiration to us all, showing us what can be accomplished when we take a leap of faith and pursue our dreams with passion and dedication.

