

Chapter 4

Customer Engagement: Storytelling and the UK's Leading Retailers

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ABSTRACT

Stories are probably as old as the human race, but in recent years, businesses have increasingly come to recognise the importance of storytelling. This chapter offers an exploratory review of how leading UK retailers are using stories as part of their approach to customer engagement on the Internet and to offer some reflections on the role of storytelling in customer engagement by retailers. The chapter provides an outline of the characteristics of storytelling within the corporate world and reviews the ways storytelling is employed by the UK's top ten retailers to improve customer engagement. This review suggests that while the selected retailers posted stories on the internet to promote and publicise a wide range of topics, customer engagement was the fundamental underlying theme. The authors suggest that the retailers' use of storytelling in customer engagement raises a number of issues, including the ways stories can be used to enhance customer engagement and brand loyalty and challenges to the positive images of retailers look to portray in the stories they post on the internet.

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling – simply defined as conveying and interpreting events and experiences through the use of words and images - is as old as the human race and is certainly much older than recorded history. Stories can be told in a variety of ways including pictures and photographs, messages, conversations, presentations, letters, audio and visual recordings and increasingly social media, and their power is widely recognised. Storytelling is embedded in people's everyday lives, and in recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the role of storytelling in the business world. Gill (2015, p. 663) defined 'corporate storytelling' as "the process of developing and delivering an organisation's message by using

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-8270-0.ch004

narration about people, the organisation, the past, visions for the future, social bonding and work itself, in order to create new point-of-view or reinforce an opinion or behaviour” (p. 663). In making the case for “storytelling in business” Cumbie (2015) argued “if a business wants to expand its brand’s reach, it has to do so through relationship-building, organizational leadership and strategic thinking. Being good at defining who you are, and why what you do matters to current and prospective customers, enhances all three of these company objectives”. At the same time stories and storytelling offer a novel approach to customer engagement in that while many large businesses know a great deal about their customers via quantitative market research and the collection of data at the point of sale, the voice of customers can be lost in such large scale data collection processes (Gorry and Westbrook 2011)

Within the retail sector of the economy Insider Trends (2018), “the trend based consultancy that helps global brands create world leading and profitable retail ecosystems” and whose clients include Tesco, Marks and Spencer, Carrefour, Walmart and Ikea, argued that “storytelling is a great way of conveying what your brand is all about’ and ‘for retailers to focus on forging strong bonds with their customers”. At the same time, Bulbeck (2017) suggested that “in this increasingly customer-driven era, storytelling has become an integral part of connecting with customers” while Wheeler (2017) argued that “it is no exaggeration to say that customer engagement, the vital pull factor that keeps customers coming back for more, is what can make or break a retailer”. That said, how large retailers employ storytelling to build and enhance customer engagement has received only limited attention in the academic literature. With these thoughts in mind this chapter offers an exploratory review of how leading UK retailers are using stories as part of their approach to customer engagement on the Internet and offers some reflections on the role of storytelling in customer engagement by retailers.

Storytelling and Retailing

Storytelling has its roots in the origins of human civilisation and has traditionally been used to share, and pass on, knowledge, values, myths, legends, fables and religious beliefs, from one generation to another and across geographical space. Initially, storytelling was conducted through drawings and word of mouth communication, though over time the written, and then the printed, word became an increasingly important storytelling medium. More recently, developments in information and communication technologies, particularly social media, have seen storytelling become an increasingly all pervasive and all-embracing experience. Osman (2014), for example, argued “transcending barriers of language and culture, storytelling is one of the oldest art forms in history, utilised to transmit cultural, moral and complex information in a simple, engaging and meaningful manner”. PricewaterhouseCoopers (2017) suggested that “storytelling is one of the most powerful tools available to effective communicators” and Gupta (2015) argued that “stories are an effective tool in the strategy process and for communicating and achieving strategic objectives”.

Within the retail industry, storytelling has traditionally been used to enable retailers to initiate and develop relationships with their customers. As such, storytelling is seen to be important in that it enables retailers to forge strong bonds with their customers and for customers to feel connected to the retail brand. As such, storytelling is seen to be vitally important in conveying what the retail brand stands for, and the provenance of that brand and its goods and services. While storytelling is a traditional method of communication it has found new and evolving expression with the dynamic retail marketplace. Jones et al. (2010) outlined “the emergence and development of experience stores” (p.241) and almost a decade later VisualRetailing (2018) suggested “we’re living – and shopping – in the new customer experience”

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