Starting small and going global: lessons that brand storytelling can teach SMEs.

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Today's consumers have at their disposal a plethora of information to access about any given product or service, typically they are well informed, individualistic and demanding. Because their buying habits are frequently difficult to isolate and are not limited to one market, predicting customer-purchasing habits, switching habits or brand preferences is becoming more like a lottery than a science. All too frequently, small businesses rather than engaging in customised market research to address the changing consumer will use a seat-of-the-pants approach in which to segment their market and target the customer (Boyle 2003). Another related area in which small businesses frequently have trouble addressing is that of attracting suppliers and investors – as many entrepreneurs find that part of their job entails telling the brand story – a short story that 'sums it up' and attracts prospective customers, suppliers and investors (http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/203748). The brand story is the history about the brand and an explanation of what the brand is about, stands for, and its meaning which may be different for each of the brand stakeholders (Holt, 2004). The brand story is built on reputation, should be clear, consistent and have a touch of character exuding a personality, which matches the SME's preferred prospective client, supplier and investor (Boyle 2003; Matthiesen & Phau 2010).

The idea of creating a brand story for many entrepreneurs and small business owners may seem daunting (Berthon, Ewing & Napoli 2008). Typically, as many entrepreneurs are also the HR manager, the investment manager, the financial controller, the sales person, the administration person, the channel manager and the family breadwinner – charged with building a family business that can sustain employment for the next few generations of the family. With high uncertainty and shortness of time and the plethora of roles that many entrepreneurs face, often means that the task of building the brand story typically takes a back seat to other task-oriented roles (Berthon et al 2008; Inskip 2004). This is because, usually building a brand story involves finding a quiet place to sit and think about the business in a longer-term overarching way and then to develop a way in which to articulate this notion that 'sells'. Too often, the day-to-day activities of the business take precedence over strategy development and the building of a brand story (Boyle 2003; Inskip 2004).

Brand storytelling is used by researchers as a way of investigating the role the brand plays in the life of a consumer (Koll, von Wallpach & Kreuzer 2010; Schembri, Merrilees, & Kristiansen 2010). Fournier's (1998) brand relationship research discovered that people and brands have relationships much like the relationships between humans, as people can fall in and out of love with brands or show an interest or disinterest in brands – and the role that a brand plays in the life of an individual consumer typically changes as the consumer changes (Brown & Patterson 2010). The art of brand storytelling involves people sharing tales about the role a brand plays in their life, and entails details of shared experiences, the relationships and interactions that have occurred between the individual, the individual's reference groups and the brand (Brown & Patterson 2010; Schembri et al 2010). In the consumer's life story, a brand maybe a line, a page, or a chapter in the ongoing life story of the consumer (Shankar, Elliott and Goulding, 2001). Most of the research into brand storytelling revolves around the consumer perspective of the brand, as consumers relay their interactions, experiences, and researchers endeavour to make sense of it all, articulate consumer meaning and interpret consumer experiences into a coherent dialogue that represents the consumer perspective of the brand (Escalas & Bettman, 2000; Schembri et al. 2010; Woodside, Sood & Miller 2008). The unfolding consumer stories provide brand managers with thick descriptions of the brand

often told by brand enthusiasts, brimming with pride and excitement as they recount their many positive and rewarding encounters (Koll et al 2010).

If there is a growing recognition that the art of brand storytelling is a real driver of marketing activity (Brown & Patterson 2010), and consumers are already onboard sharing their tales, then how do entrepreneurs control the stories told and ensure that the story they want to be told is being shared? Is there an art to storytelling? Is it possible to share a format specifically designed for SMEs that enables the busy entrepreneur to tell quickly and concisely the tale of the brand, a tale that sells, to share among stakeholders. Why is this important to the busy entrepreneur running the family business when there is already a plethora of competing duties to take care of in the day-to-day running of the business one might ask? Is it because a person's first exposure to the brand is likely to come from word-of-mouth recommendation, either from other suppliers, close friends and family or enthusiastic customers sharing their stories and a ringing endorsement for the brand (Brown & Patterson 2010). What happens when the story being told is not brimming with excitement and anticipation or a ringing endorsement, and provides tales of woe or delusion and there is discord in the consumer narrative (see Boje 2009). How does the entrepreneur deal with the changes in the relationship between the consumer and the brand, when the gap between the brand and the self widens? Should the entrepreneur care, as the length of time a brand stays relevant for the customer will depend on the brand's lifetime value proposition and the relevance of the brand in the customer's life at any given point in time.

This paper investigates the art of brand storytelling in SMEs and looks at brands that started in the garage and are now global and other SMEs to see if there is an art to brand storytelling specifically designed for SMEs to help the entrepreneur share the right story at the right time to the right people.

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