

Mastering the Art of Brand Storytelling
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Overview of the Assignment

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.

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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.

Student Learning Goals:

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

Connection to Public Relations Practice

The USC Annenberg Global Communication Report (2017) identified digital storytelling as one of the most important future skills for marketing and public relations professionals. Furthermore, research suggests that authentic narratives drive brand perceptions and stakeholder engagement (Li & Feng, 2021). As such, this project is a unique way for students to enhance their career readiness and hone essential skills.

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.

Assessment:

Students are assessed based on creativity, narrative structure, organization, convention and style, and mechanics. In addition to turning in a written assignment, I 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.

Appendix

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 around 20 minutes. Please ask for the interviewee's permission to record the interview and use the attached email script and questionnaire as guides. Once you've 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 innovative. Your profile should be well-organized, grammatically correct, and visually engaging, with photos and quotes as appropriate to tell the organization's story.

Additional Logistics:

Before scheduling your interview, please inform your professor about the individual you intend to interview within a week's time. This step is crucial to ensure there are no duplicates and to respect the interviewee's time. If you are contacting a business that you do not have a personal connection with, please consider using a version of the attached email script.

Example Email:

Dear [Business Leader's Name],

My name is [Your Name], and I am a student at [X university]. I am currently working on a school project that aims to capture the unique stories of local organizations, exploring their history, culture, values, and visions for

the future. Your organization has always stood out to me as one that embodies the spirit and innovation of our community.

Given your role in shaping [Organization's Name], I am interested in conducting a 20-minute phone or in-person interview with you for this assignment. I will use the attached questionnaire as a guide during our conversation. Following the interview, I will craft an "about us" page for a website based on your responses. Your organization can use this if you choose to share your story.

If you're willing to participate, please let me know a date and time that works best for you in the coming weeks. I will also be notifying my professor about the potential interview to ensure no duplicate efforts from my peers. Any resulting story I write will not be published or shared publicly without your explicit consent. Additionally, once the story is written, I will share a copy with you.

Thank you for considering this request. Your insights and experiences would be invaluable to my project and my understanding of the work [Organization's Name] is doing.

Interview Script:

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I'm 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 back 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?

History

- Can you tell me about how you first became involved with the organization?
- Do you know where your organization's name came from? Is there a story there?
- What was the organization's first product or service?
- What inspired the founders to start the organization?
- What gaps or needs in the market did they seek to address?
- From your perspective, how has the organization changed over time, and what events have shaped its development?

Values

- Can you describe the organization's culture and working environment?
- What values or guiding principles have been important to the organization, and how have these been reflected in its actions and decisions?
- Are there any traditions or rituals that the organization holds dear?
- How does the organization view its relationship with its customers?

Challenges & Accomplishments

- What have been some of the biggest challenges the organization has faced, and how were they overcome?
- Were there any pivotal moments or turning points in the organization's history?
- What has been the organization's proudest achievement to date?
- How has the organization contributed to the broader community and industry?

Future Aspirations

- Where do you see the organization in the next 10 years?
- What are the organization's current goals, and how are these being pursued?
- What long-term impact does the organization hope to have on its industry or the world?
- What do you hope the future will hold for the organization?

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

References

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