



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

The Untold Story

-Storytelling in External Employer Branding

Christofer Nilsson and Josefin Nordgren

Graduate School

Master of Science in Marketing and Consumption

Master Degree Project No. 2012:111

Supervisor: Eva Ossiansson



The Untold Story

- *Storytelling in External Employer Branding*

28th of May 2012

CHRISTOFER NILSSON

MsC student in Marketing and Consumption at School of Business, Economics, and Law at University of Gothenburg, including exchange studies at Harvard University in Boston, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and Ecole Supérieure de Commerce Extérieure in Paris.

JOSEFIN NORDGREN

MsC student in Marketing and Consumption at School of Business, Economics, and Law at University of Gothenburg.

ABSTRACT

In a cluttered landscape of brands storytelling could be a mean to get the message across. 80 percent of employers find it difficult to attract the right and talented people. Therefore, the aim of this study is to study how and why storytelling is used in organizations' work with communicating their employer brand externally. We conduct a multiple case study of two successful employer brands: IKEA and SCA, together with a theoretical discussion, and interviews with two experts within the area of storytelling and employer branding. Further, we compiled a model, based on the theoretical framework and our findings, that consists of the storyteller, the stories, and the telling, and how these components relates to external employer branding. Our results show that the storytelling is a suitable tool in external employer branding since external stakeholders get the chance to feel the company; it is a way to verify that an organization lives its culture and values. A corporate story in this context can be everything from a small anecdote to a strategically harvested story but should come from the inside of the organization and always be true. Companies can thereby use storytelling to attract likeminded future employees and increase the chance of recruiting a perfect match.

Keywords:

Employer Branding,
Storytelling,
Employer Brand
Image, Employer
Value Proposition,
Symbolic Attributes

There's no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you - (Maya Angelou)

INTRODUCTION

Our modern society is becoming more and more communicative (storytellers.se, 2012) but at the same time, companies have found it increasingly difficult to get their message across. In a cluttered landscape of brands, companies need to differentiate (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Could storytelling be the way to do so? Storytelling has become one of the trendiest marketing tools (storytellers.se), and there is a strong belief in the academic literature on the benefits of storytelling in branding (e.g. Heijbel, 2011; Marzec, 2007; Fog, K., Budtz, C. & Yakaboylu, B., 2005). According to Love (2008), the usage of stories can increase memory capacity by 60% in comparison with traditional communication tools. It is a unique and powerful tool for companies to use in their

communication (Fog et al., 2005), and to share their knowledge (Mossberg & Johansen, 2006). Through corporate stories, companies can spread their knowledge in an effective way, but also emotions, experiences, and their core values (Heijbel, 2011; Salzer-Mörling, 2004). Further, Fog et al. (2005) argue that there is a natural link between storytelling and building brands since they both have their base in emotional attributes and values. 58 percent of student respondents state that they would accept a pay cut of 15 percent if they can work for a company where the values are like their own (Net Impact, 2012). Therefore it is useful for companies to attract people with similar values. Could telling corporate stories be a way to convey symbolic values? Although stories have long been



told, it is not until the recently it has been used as a marketing tool in the industry but *“just as every person has a story to tell, so do companies”* (Marzec, 2007, p. 26).

Until the end of the 20th century, brands were associated with consumer products and services. Today, brands are associated with as good as anything that carries an identity and a reputation associated with that identity (Barrow & Mosley, 2006). This is also true for companies as they are more aware of the need to improve their employer brand (Sullivan, 2004). A study of 632 global employers show that 82 percent of companies invest in talent attraction activities and 80 percent find it difficult to attract the right and talented people. Also, the survey showed that 73 percent of employed talents rank the employer image as main factor for choosing the employer (Universum, 2011).

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004, p. 502) define employer branding as *“the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the employer brand as a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors”*. Through the employer brand, companies can communicate career opportunities, job characteristics, specific benefits, and its corporate culture as a part of the employer brand. By communicating these areas in an effective way, the employer may attract the right employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). According to Daniel Wägerth (2011), employer brand strategist at Universum, many believe that it is Google's products and services that make their employer brand so attractive, but that is just partly true.

Further, he states that Google is very good at spreading stories about what it is like to work there. Can storytelling be a useful tool to win the war of talent? Colton and Ward (2004) explain how storytelling has become an important part of the culture at 3M. Innovation is 3M's driving force and a cornerstone of the company; all the company stories are told to define what the company stands for towards the employees and other stakeholders. 3M is actively looking for new stories that expose their core value of innovation and their motivated employees. An immortal story of the company is how an employee by accident invented the yellow post-it note. This is, according to Colton and Ward

(2004), a good example of how storytelling helps to strengthen the organizational culture, but how do this relate to the external associations of the employer brand among potential applicants? Further, even if storytelling is a trendy marketing tool, there are several managers in today's companies that do not know what it is and how it can be implemented as an effective communication strategy (Heijbel, 2011).

Storytelling has in previous research mainly been investigated either from an external branding perspective or from an internal organizational perspective (Fog et al., 2005). It is a suitable internal organizational tool to communicate added value to employees, which contributes to making them more loyal and engaged in the company (Denning, 2005). At the same time, storytelling can add greater value to the external brand and make the customers more willing to pay extra for the products or services (ibid.) When it comes to employer branding, the internal organizational culture and identity consociate with the external image of the employer brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Still, both contemporary research and industry analysis seem to be limited in acknowledgement of how storytelling can form a link between the organizational culture and the external employer brand image (Gill, 2011; Heijbel, 2011; Hatch and Schultz, 1997). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to contribute with knowledge about why and how companies communicate their external employer brand by using storytelling. Our starting point is the research field of employer branding and storytelling, seen from an external perspective, i.e. our focus is storytelling when communicating an employer brand to an external audience. We will not put emphasis on storytelling within the organization. The aim with this study is also to create a model, which helps companies understand how storytelling can be used in their work with communicating their employer brand identity to an external audience. The purpose of this study leads to the following research question.

How and why is storytelling used in external employer branding?

By answering this research question, our study will contribute with relevant and important knowledge within both the research field of storytelling and employer branding. It aims to provide a new



approach to external employer branding by studying it from a storytelling perspective and vice versa. Hopefully, it will also inspire companies that are interested in using storytelling to convey their employer brand image to attract the right employees. To be able to answer our research question and fulfill this study's purpose, we will in the next section start by discussing relevant theoretical concepts within employer branding and storytelling.

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

In order to study why and how companies use storytelling as a tool in external employer branding we start by looking into the theoretical research field of employer branding where focus is put on *the employer brand image and employer value proposition*, and *what could create an attractive employer brand image*. We continue with reviewing earlier research within storytelling including: *the usage of storytelling when conveying symbolic attributes, types of stories, and communication channels*. We end our theoretical discussion by presenting an own model (see Figure 1.), which is based on our theoretical framework and will help answering our research question.

EMPLOYER BRANDING

If an organization wants to ensure that they recruit the right people in the first instance, employer branding offers a way to do that (Foster et al., 2010). It allows the firm to differentiate itself from other employers competing for talent (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The employer brand conveys an image that includes the employer value proposition, which presents the reasons for why an organization is a good place to work (Sullivan, 2004). Since this study partly aims to study why companies use storytelling in external employer branding we will discuss theories regarding the employer brand image and the employer value proposition as storytelling could be a way to affect and communicate these in an effective way.

Employer Brand Image and Employer Value Proposition

When it comes to attracting future employees with employer branding, researchers often talk about the concept of *employer brand image*, which is the

external stakeholders' perception of a company as an employer, i.e. their perception of the functional and symbolic benefits of working at a certain company (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) further argue that it is the associations external stakeholders have of an employer brand that shape the employer brand image. This image in turn affects the attractiveness of the organization among potential employees. However, it is not enough for organizations to simply create a strong employer brand and an attractive image; they must also communicate the *employer value proposition* in the best possible way (Parment & Dyhre, 2009). If the employer brand image is the perceptions among potential employees, a company's employer value proposition is the central message that convey why current and future employees should work for a specific company. The most important criteria of a successful employer value propositions are: that they are true, attractive, and different (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Furthermore, definitions of employer brand image offered by the marketing literature differ from the organizational perspective. Marketing literature stresses the external perspective of the image concept whereas organizational literature emphasizes the internal issues related to image (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). However, Hatch and Schultz (1997) argue that organizational identity, organizational culture, and organizational image form a circular process. Organizational identity is reflected by the organizational culture, and the organizational image has received its symbolic material from the organizational identity. The image can then be absorbed back into the culture. This reasoning implies that the image is deliberately adjustable within the organization, to later be consumed externally. We see that management as storytellers could play an important role since the external communication is dependent on internal identity. Also, the employers could be vital communication tools when spreading stories (Minchington, 2006) to strengthen the external image since Hatch and Schultz (1997) argue that the image is also influenced by the interactions between organizational members and external audiences. A positive organizational image has a strong correlation with attracting quality applicants (Cable & Graham, 2000; Greening & Turban, 2000), which shows that messages used internally can lead to the



external image of an employer brand. We see a difference in perspective when previous research have investigated brand image by the extent of how much the inside of the organization is considered. This difference could play an important role in the context of employer branding, as there are different views on the role of management decision and organizational members' experiences. It is useful to take in what Allen et al, (2002, p. 186) cited in Marshall & Adamic, (2010), conclude when stating: “*nearly everyone can be, and should be, a storyteller*”, but to be able to answer our research question we find it important to study from whom the stories should come from, and if the stories could be an effective mean to reflect organizational identity.

An Attractive Employer Brand Image

Research has found that potential applicants try to identify themselves with the company and the people working there (Byrne & Neuman, 1992; Cable & Judge, 1996; 1997). They compare their own needs, personalities, and values with the employer brand image. The employer value proposition should therefore be established to ensure that the emotional and rational benefits are congruent with potential employees' expectations (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Mosley, 2007). If they match and they have a good impression of the company as an employer, it is more likely that the candidates want to apply for a job there (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

Furthermore, candidates consider both functional benefits and symbolic benefits when evaluating the employer brand (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Functional or instrumental benefits refer to specific and objective characters of an organization, such as salary, work hours and location, but symbolic attributes, e.g. culture or teamwork, play a more important role in employer branding. The reason is that it relates to subjective and more abstract attributes in the form of images and beliefs that applicants receive of an organization's character as well as it is hard to replicate (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Backhouse & Tikoo, 2004). The attraction of an employer brand image is mainly due to symbolic attributes and they are more difficult for other companies to emulate. The job seekers mainly separate companies from one another through symbolic attributes rather than instrumental

attributes (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Despite this, we see that organizations still communicate their functional benefits to a larger extent when trying to attract potential employees. Since storytelling is an emotional communication tool and useful when conveying symbolic attributes of a brand this could be a natural link in external employer branding as well (Denning, 2005; Heijbel, 2011).

Finally, in many firms developing an attractive employer brand image is now a crucial part of their work to stay competitive, and the difference no longer lies in the physical product but rather in the story (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Fog et al., 2005). The associations dealing with the perceptions and thoughts people have about a company as an employer contribute to how the company's employer brand is perceived. It is of great importance that these thoughts and associations are beneficial for an organization since they are considered difficult to change (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Since the difference among companies competing for talents lies in the symbolic values, storytelling could play an important part in conveying these values.

STORYTELLING

Fog et al. (2005) argue that storytelling can be used to communicate a brand in an efficient way in order for the target group to understand the company. Fog et al. (2005) mention that as storytelling is the mean, branding is the goal. When looking at storytelling from a general branding perspective, many researchers see a natural link between conveying the brand and storytelling (Denning, 2005; Fog et al, 2005; Wachtman & Johnson, 2009), and we want to study if storytelling also is useful in external employer branding.

Conveying the symbolic attributes of a brand

Denning (2005), considered by many to be one of the foremost writers and practitioners within the area of storytelling (Ramzy, 2007), argues that a brand essentially is about relationships with various stakeholders, including potential employees. Strong brands establish relationships through their brand stories. The stories contain a brand promise of what values the company is providing and communicate a company identity. Core values in it selves are only words without any real content. When a company



reports its core values in annual reports or brochures as bullet points they are often perceived as anonymous and difficult to understand (Denning, 2005). Instead, Fog et al. (2005) argue that by telling stories that relate to a company's core values, they are vitalized and made more relevant to the recipient.

Furthermore, the importance of symbolic attributes is in line with research in the area of neurologic science which concludes that the majority of rational decisions a person makes is motivated by his feelings rather than rational arguments (Wachtman & Johnson, 2009). Thus, it can be concluded that storytelling is an effective way to reach the audience since it is an efficient way to communicate symbolic values; it is useful as people are more motivated by feelings than rational arguments. Still, we see a risk of companies only convey the positive symbolic aspect of the organization, which might be somewhat misleading. Companies need to be careful not to be too one-sided in the communication. Klein (1999) explains that as organizations try to be "*the chief communicators of all that is good and cherished in our culture*" (Klein, 1999, p.335), they likewise become more exposed to public criticism. Further, it is unlikely that the company only consists out of one reality; instead, there are several realities to be exposed, told, heard and understood in order to create a holistic image of the organizational culture (Boyce, 1996). Dennisdotter and Axelbrant (2008) stress that the corporate message must permeate storytelling as it guides the employees how to act. The risk with management dictating storytelling is that they have a dominant voice (or story) because of the dynamics of powers, while other voices (and stories) are heard less frequently if at all (Boyce, 1996).

Finally, storytelling is far more convincing to an audience than rational arguments, facts, or statistics. If companies can find their truthful corporate stories, they will inhabit the brand with emotions and images from reality (Kaufman, 2003; Heijbel, 2011). In its simplest sense, a corporate story is a narrative tool that tells the tale of "*who we are*" and "*where we're headed*". The story evokes a common vision of the future and sketches the journey to achieve that vision. It also creates a clear route for employees to follow and defines success in

observable terms (Marzec, 2007). Moreover, according to Colton and Ward (2004), there are some general points about why stories can work so well. Essentially, working with stories is about knowing the value that is gained by shifting from general to a specific and unique moment, from abstract to concrete, from complex to simple, from theory to practice, and from models to meaningful experiences and examples. Looking into the research area of storytelling we see that researchers from both the marketing field and organizational field agree that storytelling is more useful than regular text. Still, with all these arguments of how storytelling is advantageous in branding and communication we question why it is not more commonly used. To be able to answer how storytelling is used in external employer branding we also have to study what types of stories are beneficial for an organization to communicate.

Types of stories to tell

So what makes a good corporate story? Stories can be about almost anything and the content of a corporate story somewhat differs among researchers within the fields of storytelling. However, we have noticed five emerging types of stories in previous research; epic myths, company core values, experience-, and customer- and product stories (Mitroff & Kilmann, 2001; Andersson, 2004; Kaye & Jacobson 1999; Fog et al, 2005; Simmons, 2003). The primary objective of the epic myths is to define the organization's unique qualities and to perpetuate the organization's traditions. These stories focus on the company's history where heroes and heroines often are included (Wilkins, 1983; Cited in Mitroff & Kilmann, 2001). Stories of a company's core values use the business concept, the vision and the overall strategic objectives for creating the corporate identity (Andersson, 2004). Kaye and Jacobson (1999) argue that experience stories are valuable since they arrive from personal experience, ideas and personal visions of the future and engage in an intellectual level. Also, product stories about how the product was invented or is produced can create added value (Fog et al., 2005). Last, customer stories can create word of mouth regarding the experience of consumption experience of a product or service (Fog et al, 2005).

Although there are different types of stories, the emphasis should be put on having an unambiguous



purpose since corporate narratives become part of a culture over which the original storyteller has little control (Marshall & Adamic, 2010). Thus, for the story to survive subsequent edits it needs a purpose that is unmistakable. Still, we observe that there are various types of stories that companies can use in storytelling. Each kind of story got its own advantages, which implies that the choice of story should be made in relation to the aim of the message.

Regarding the question of whether the story has to be true or not brings up conflicting views. The dimension of authenticity versus fiction could be described as two directions dividing the idea about storytelling, into those who believe that the stories always have to be true and those who do not (Dennisdotter & Axenbrant, 2008). Denning (2005) argues that stories do not have to be true to be effective in storytelling but the importance rather lies in the emotional connection, i.e. the meaning it creates for the audience and that they can see the meaning in a more personal context. Furthermore, Denning (2005) states that as long as a story rings true, it helps the listener to receive the main part of the story. In contrary, Dennisdotter and Axenbrant (2008) say that since all companies have to compose stories from their own realities there is no reason for companies to tell stories that are not true. Still, organizations consist of multiple realities (Boyce, 1996). According to Fog et al. (2005) inventing new stories sometimes better serves the company in their external communication but it is not always credible. Job seekers mainly separate future employers by their symbolic values, which they can identify with (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003) and Fog et al. (2005) further argue that genuine stories add credibility to a company's message. Authentic stories are often stronger than fictive stories or myths (ibid.).

Furthermore, most company stories about values and culture spring from the employees but it could be difficult to spot these stories. If they can be found, it could be the smallest anecdote that clarifies why a company is special. The importance lies in knowing where to look and it is vital that the stories are being communicated in the right way and in the right context (Fog et al., 2005). In conclusion, truthfulness brings an interesting dimension to storytelling, as it is hard to determine what is true.

Since Boyce (1996) states that there are multiple realities, we question that there are completely true stories that are applicable for the whole organization. Thus, multiple stories from different perspectives of the organization could be inferred as a measure of authenticity, as it would increase the likelihood for multiple realities to be seen. Consequently, the company could respond to the employer value proposition criteria of truth.

Communication channels

Even if a company has a good story that is supposed to strengthen their employer brand, it is useless if it does not reach the audience. To analyze how companies use storytelling in their external employer branding, we review what channels are appropriate when conveying an employer brand and if storytelling can be used in that communication arena. Attracting the right candidates and building employer brand awareness in the minds of a large audience requires communication towards a broad group of potential employees (Parment & Dyhre, 2009). Today, every company has its own website that offers the possibility to display its products and stories. The concept of telling corporate stories online is called "digital storytelling" and even though communicating your message through online media has global reach, it has its downfalls (Denning, 2005). Denning (2005), criticizes digital media as a communication channel for storytelling since it could be seen as unreliable when the listener cannot know for sure who the sender is. Further, he argues that the lack of "face-to-face-relationship" makes it difficult to adjust the story according to the audience's reactions.

According to Marzec (2007) storytelling does not limit the tool's application to traditional verbal and written communication channels. Rather, best practice organizations manage to identify the need to tell their story in various ways. In our opinion, except for the employees, the most appropriate communication channel for storytelling is through digital media. If a company wants to reach a large audience (Parment & Dyhre, 2009), online communication is better suited than offline communication. According to Rosethorn (2009), companies have to adjust to our digitalized world and today, people trust someone on Facebook that tells a story about what it is like to work at a certain company more than the company's own career site.



We find the “truth” in what someone that we have never met says online, and “brand transparency” has received new meaning. This digital development pushes organizational storytelling in a new context and the employer brand on to the corporate reputation agenda (Rosethorn, 2009). Our theoretical focus regarding communication channels is therefore digital communication.

Furthermore, many companies use their webpages as a communication channel when conveying their employer brand. We have come to the conclusion that it could be a suitable channel for telling corporate stories since the audience will know the information comes directly from the company. A good strategy could also be to provide interaction instead of just information since that could create engagement and use supporting channels to build loyalty (Dou & Krishnamurthy, 2007). A disadvantage with using the webpage to communicate corporate stories is, according to De Pelsmacker, P., Geuens, M. & Van Den Bergh, J. (2010) that it demands resources and continuously updating. De Pelsmacker et al. (2010) also argue that social networks as for example Facebook and LinkedIn are growing rapidly and are important communication channels. Social media could be a somewhat risky communication tool when telling corporate stories since stories told by for example employees might not be cohesive and rooted in the company culture. If the companies do not “live” their core values, or if an employee does not enjoy working there it is a risk of them spreading negative “word-of-mouth”, or more correctly “word-of-mouse”. However, based on our review of theoretical contributions we can conclude social media could be a useful communication channel in this context since it reaches a wider target group and companies can update stories continuously.

STORYTELLING IN EXTERNAL EMPLOYER BRANDING

With the insights gained from our theoretical discussion and with our research question in mind we created a model for how storytelling can be a mean in creating an attractive external employer

brand (Figure 1). The model is developed from an employer branding perspective with the aim of guiding us as researchers when studying why and how storytelling in external employer branding is used in the case companies chosen for this study. Moreover, even if this model is our own, it is based on previous research within employer branding and storytelling. Our analysis will be based on the different parts included in the model.

The first step in the model is the organizational identity. It is the heart of the organizational culture, which consists of the core values and the symbolic attributes that make an employer brand attractive (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Further, the identity is built on the management vision and leadership together with organization members’ experiences (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Previous research in employer branding conclude that the organizational identity affects the organizational image and the attractiveness of an employer brand externally (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). It implies that the stories must come from the inside, and reflect the organizational identity and culture in order to create a truthful image among external stakeholders. We use this part of the model in order to look into how the organizational identity affects the usage of storytelling in external employer branding. This can answer the part of our research question that considers *why* companies use storytelling in external employer branding. This part of our model also includes the storyteller, i.e. who in the organization should be telling the stories to an external audience? Therefore, this can also contribute to the discussing regarding *how* storytelling is used in this context.

We observed when doing the literature review there are two main dimensions of storytelling as a communicative mean in employer branding: the story itself and how it is communicated. Therefore, we divide storytelling into two areas, the story and how it is communicated. The second step in our model called stories includes types of stories as well as characteristics of stories that are told. In previous research the opinions regarding what makes a good story or if it has to be true somewhat differs

Figure 1. Storytelling in External Employer Branding (Nilsson & Nordgren, 2012)





(Dennisdotter & Axenbrant, 2008; Denning, 2005; Fog et al., 2005). In order to answer our research question we believe studying what types of stories that are communicated is important, and we will therefore look into how theoretically discussed stories relate to the stories actually used by the case companies in this study.

The third step is communication channels, which refers to the communication arena where stories that aim to strengthen an employer brand image should be spread. Since our modern society includes a fast moving digital development, which pushes organizational storytelling in to a new context (Rosethorn, 2009), we believe it is of interest to study if online media channels are important when companies are telling stories in this context. We can thereby clarify the answer on our research question with focus on *how* companies use it.

The last step is the audience, the external target group in employer branding. It is beneficial for an organization to look at what they seek and value (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). The goal with using storytelling in external employer branding must be to reach an audience and thereby attract potential talents. When using the model to study our case companies we will explore how their thoughts regarding their audience but it will not be a focal point in our analysis.

METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

As this study aims to increase the understanding of *why* and *how* companies use storytelling in their work with external employer branding, a qualitative research method was adopted for this study. A qualitative study is appropriate when searching for a nuanced view of a phenomenon, and we want to gain both a detailed understanding as well as an overall picture of our research problem (Jacobsen, 2002). To be able to receive a deeper understanding, a multiple case study approach was chosen. Yin (2003; 1994) argues that a multiple case study enables comparisons, strengthens the result, avoids misinterpretations and thus gives a more vigorous result. Additionally, multiple case studies are advantageous when the problem includes questions of *how* and *why*, and are applicable when focusing on contemporary subjects (Yin, 2003; 1994), which

further stresses the usefulness of this method in this study. Moreover, we conducted interviews since it is one of the most important information sources in a case study. Interviews are also beneficial since our subject is a new area of research and as it helps us to get a better understanding of how the phenomenon is manifested (Yin, 1994; Esaiasson, P., Gilljam, M., Oscarsson, H. & Wägerud, L., 2007).

For this study, the corporate brands of IKEA and SCA were chosen as our case companies (see Table. 2). To be able to make comparisons and draw significant conclusions we have chosen corporate brands that are similar and both use storytelling to communicate their employer brand. IKEA and SCA are operating in different industries, which means that we cannot draw intra-industry conclusions. However, we perceive this as a minor limitation since our aim is not to investigate a specific industry and according to Dennisdotter and Axenbrant (2008), storytelling can be used in all kinds of companies. Despite different industries, IKEA and SCA are both large Swedish companies with well-know corporate brands and are perceived as attractive employers (see Table 2.), (Dahlén, 2012; Universumglobal, 2012; Hammer & Hanborg, 2004). The European Commission criteria for a large company with over 250 employees (SCADplus, 2007) were used together with the company being active in at least 2 national markets. We believe that by choosing well-established brands as cases in our study there will be more information, opinions and feelings towards the brands, which will lead to a more nuanced study. Also, we chose large and well-established organizations because they have been in business a long time, have resources to communicate with the right audiences, and has insight into the phenomenon studied (Erlandsson, 2005).

The case companies were identified in a pilot study where we visited career fairs (CHARM, 2012 and Handelsdagarna, 2012), read industry reports within employer branding (Universum Quarterly, 2011-04; 2012-01), and did an informal mail interview with the storytelling expert Matts Heijbel. Matts Heijbel is a storytelling expert and the founder of storytellers.se. Based on his definition of storytelling, we managed to judge whether a company uses storytelling in their employer



branding or not, and both IKEA and SCA were good examples. We also scanned blogs and forums about employer branding and storytelling (e.g. storytellers.se, 2012; HR-bloggen.se, 2012). The reasons for selecting two case companies are that it was a suitable time frame for conducting interviews, to be able to compare the companies, and to gain a somewhat deeper understanding of their work with storytelling in external employer branding.

To include another perspective in this study, and to gain more knowledge about the subject of this study we also conducted interviews with two experts that work with employer branding, storytelling, and communication. We interviewed the Storytelling Expert Matts Heijbel and Kalle Malmstedt who is a PR- and Social Media Strategist that has worked a lot with employer branding, (see Table 1.). We chose to talk to these specialists in order to have an expert opinion and to gain knowledge and predictions about on-going trends within employer branding and storytelling. We also wanted to receive explanations of different terms and gain a deeper understanding of why and how storytelling is used in this context. This knowledge helped us developing the interview guides for SCA and IKEA further. Interviewing two experts within the subject of our research problem increases the validity of our study since we knew better what questions to ask to be able to answer our research question (Bryman, 2002).

RESPONDENTS CASE COMPANIES	POSITION
Therese Green, IKEA <i>Telephone Interview</i>	Recruitment responsible towards Swedish students
Angelica Stebrant, SCA <i>Telephone Interview</i>	Corporate branding manager
RESPONDENTS EXPERTS	POSITION
Matts Heijbel <i>Telephone Interview</i>	Storytelling consultant and founder of www.storytellers.se
Kalle Malmstedt <i>Personal Interview</i>	Worked with employer branding at Universum and is now PR and Social media strategist at Cordovan Communications Agency

Table 1. Interview Respondents

Our multiple case study has been conducted using three sequential sources of empirical data. A three-phase study is adopted in order to get insights about why and how companies use storytelling in their external employer branding and as it verifies the authenticity better (Yin, 1994). As a *first phase* we used compiled online secondary data by scanning the companies' official webpages, forums and blogs with the intention to see how storytelling is used among the companies and what opinions users expressed. We used this data to build knowledge about what stories that circulates around our case companies. The results from our scanning combined with our theoretical framework were used as a basis when creating all of our interview guides.

In the *second phase*, in-depth interviews were chosen and conducted with employer branding and storytelling experts in a semi-structured way, see Table 1. Examples of reasons for choosing to interview Matts Heijbel are that he is the founder of www.storytellers.se, lecturer in storytelling, and perceived as Sweden's leading profile within storytelling (storytellers.se). Kalle Malmstedt was interviewed since he has worked with employer branding at Universum, which is a large and well-known employer-branding agency. We also found it interesting to gain insights about what communication channels are the most appropriate for external employer branding and storytelling. Since Kalle Malmstedt is a PR- and Social Media Strategist at a communications agency we believed he could contribute with valuable knowledge about that.

The *third phase* includes semi-structured interviews with the responsible person for employer branding or corporate branding at IKEA and SCA. The main criteria for choosing the person to interview were centrality that the interviewee was well informed about how the company works with external employer branding and storytelling (Esaiasson et al., 2007). The aim with these interviews was to develop an understanding of why and how IKEA and SCA use storytelling in their work with external employer branding. Since all four interviews were built on semi-structured interview guides, it made it easier to receive in-depth responses and let the respondents talk freely about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings (Eriksson & Kovalainen,



2008). The background of IKEA and SCA is presented in Table 2.

CASE COMPANY	BACKGROUND
IKEA	IKEA is a Swedish furniture retailer and has one of the strongest employer brands in Sweden (Dahlén, 2012; Universum, 2012; Hammer & Hanborg, 2004). IKEA's company culture is very strong with well-established values and the stories, sometimes myths, about their founder Ingvar Kamprad are well known in Sweden. IKEA is working actively with employer branding where examples of activities are: ads in student newspapers, participation in career fairs and student events, a "co-worker blog" etc.
SCA	SCA is a global hygiene- and paper-company, that develops, produces and markets personal care products, tissue, forest products and packaging solutions, with sales in more than 100 countries under many strong brands (sca.se). According to Universum's (2011) ranking survey SCA is the most attractive employer in the forest industry amongst students in engineering and young professionals in the engineering field (Universum, 2011). SCA have conducted a project where they collected storytelling from employees who had stories to tell as a strategic process where they tried to find stories that relate to what the company stands for. (Angelica Stebrant, SCA)

Table 2. Background, IKEA & SCA

To strengthen the internal validity, we sent our findings and analysis to the respondents to ensure that there have not been any misinterpretations. Regarding the external validity of this study, our aim is not to generalize to a specific industry as a whole, but rather to describe a phenomenon and inspire other companies that are interested in working with storytelling in their external employer branding. Moreover, the interviews were recorded, transcribed and divided into different themes. We compared the respondents' answers to find similarities and differences. Our findings and results are combined in the next section to avoid repetition, and structured on the basis of our own model (see Figure 1.).

FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

The structure of our findings and analysis is based on the model (Figure 1.) we created after reviewing relevant literature and with our research question in mind. The analysis emphasizes the following dimensions: *storyteller*, *stories*, *telling*. The storyteller represents the organizational identity and is based on the first step in Figure 1., which we named organizational identity. In this section we discuss management and employees as storytellers. Stories are the second step and stresses what types of stories that are useful in external employer branding, their characteristics, and what they convey. The last part is telling, which includes to the most appropriate communication channels for storytelling in this context. The audience will be included in our analysis but it is not a focal point since it differs among companies. We end this chapter with a summary of our empirical material and analysis that is presented in a modified model (see Figure 2.).

STORYTELLER

We use the term *Storyteller* to refer to the ones who communicate and spread the messages about the organizational identity and culture. Our findings show that the management and the employees are both storytellers but we will analyze the two groups separately in order to see why and how they are used as corporate storytellers external employer branding.

Management as a storyteller

The first group of storytellers within an organization is the management. Management vision and leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the organizational culture and identity (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Looking at our case companies, IKEA chooses to work with storytelling as a communication tool to both preserve and pass on their culture (Therese Green, IKEA), while SCA wants to make their employer brand well-known and more attractive by filling it with emotional values (Angelica Stebrant, SCA). Hence, both IKEA and SCA work with storytelling internally first, to later be consumed externally (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Angelica Stebrant, SCA, explains how they searched for stories among their co-workers in order to find the strongest that reflected their core values in the best way. The management



was responsible for selecting and distributing the most valuable stories. Angelica Stebrant states; *“When we executed this storytelling project last year, we really tried to link the stories to three main areas; that SCA is strong within sustainability and environment, that we have a strong position within innovation and that we are a company that cares about both about customers and employees”*

We can thereby see that the role of management is not only to be a storyteller but that the management also can play a crucial part in open up for storytelling, collecting stories and selecting the ones that already exist within the organization. According to Matts Heijbel good stories should, in a strategic way, be searched, found, harvested, and gathered within the organization by the management before communicating them externally. Matts Heijbel's view and SCA's method for gathering stories could be in line with Fog et al. (2005) when they argue that it is important to know where to look for stories and communicate them in the right context. On the contrary, Kalle Malmstedt believe storytelling could be when an employee is updating something about his or her workday on Twitter or Facebook. This is showed in the following quotes; *“...you can develop all kinds of communication platforms and establish key words but if the stories aren't established among the employees... they do not exist”* (Kalle, Malmstedt). He also states; *“From my point of view, storytelling doesn't have to be a finished story about a tension or conflict that was solved... It doesn't have to be a story from the past. It could be something that is happening right now”* (Kalle Malmstedt).

Further, SCAs aim is to chose the stories that match their core values in order to tell a story that can strengthen the employer brand image that are in line with their mission (Angelica Stebrant, SCA). Still, by doing so we believe a risk could be that the company becomes too one-sided and only communicates the things that are cherished about the culture (Klein, 1999). It is unlikely that a company only consists out of one reality; instead, there are several realities to be exposed, told, heard and understood in order to create a holistic image of the organizational culture (Boyce, 1996). However, we see advantages with both Matts Heijbel and Kalle Malmstedt's views on how to find the stories and who the storyteller should be. If the purpose is to

clarify an organizational culture or core values, as with SCA, we believe it could be appropriate to involve the management when selecting stories. It could contribute to a cohesive message and purify their employer brand. When Angelica Stebrant at SCA talks about their storytelling project she explains how *“there could exist other stories that we did not harvested but we wanted to focus to some extent”*. This shows that SCA's goal was to communicate a cohesive employer brand image. IKEA on the other hand has a very strong and well-known organizational culture and their need to clarify their values might be smaller compared to SCA. Therese Green, IKEA, explains; *“a common factor among IKEA employees is that they all have the same values or appreciate that IKEA talk a lot about values and finds it important”*. This shows that it could be easier for IKEA to use everyone in the organization as storytellers since they are aware of the essence in company culture.

Furthermore, the management as a storyteller needs to reflect over the power dynamics in the organization. Therese Green at IKEA explains how IKEA Retail is often the most visible section even if IKEA is much more than just retail. She wishes that people could get a more nuanced view of the company; *“We need to show the whole IKEA, otherwise people will think that you can only work at the department stores. It's great to attract people there, but think about all the other positions [we have]”* (Therese Green, IKEA). Boyce (1996) sees a risk that some stakeholders in an organization have a dominant voice (or story), because of the dynamics of powers, while other voices (and stories) are heard less. Therese Green explains how IKEA Retail has a larger budget when comes to employer branding, and thus have more power in the organization than other IKEA companies. Therefore, companies need to be aware of the power dynamics in the organization and work in order to portray a holistic view of the company.

Employees as storytellers

Our study shows that the employees are a vital communication tool when telling stories in employer branding. Their organizational experiences affect the organizational culture (Hatch & Schlytz, 1997). Therese Green at IKEA emphasizes employees as the organization's ambassadors and stresses therefore the importance



of stories told from the employee perspective. Further, she explains how the employer brand is built from within the company; that the brand is in how employees perceive the company; "*We may think we are great, but if the employees don't think so, it may be the worst marketing in the world. Our employees talk with their friends and family. If they like their job it becomes good storytelling*" (Therese Green, IKEA). Angelica Stebrant at SCA describes how they have a similar approach as "*there is a wish that, from SCA's viewpoint, to see the people behind the brand*" (Angelica Stebrant, SCA). This is also something that is supported by Kalle Malmstedt and Matts Heijbel. Kalle Malmstedt agrees by stating "*it's the employees who represent the company brand. They are the ones that shape it*". Hatch and Schultz (1997) describe how the employer brand image is affected by the interaction between organizational members and external stakeholders. Employees can be used as storytellers in order to tell their experiences to potential employees with the aim of conveying the organizational culture. We therefore believe it is of great importance to consider how current employees perceive the company and its culture. If they do not recognize the company culture told by the management, we see a risk of communicating a somewhat misleading employer value proposition.

Therese Green, IKEA, further thinks storytelling is a great way to show the people behind the brand and that it will provide a more trustworthy image to external stakeholders. This is useful in employer branding as research shows that potential applicants try to identify themselves with the company and the people working there (Byrne & Neuman, 1992; Cable & Judge, 1996; 1997). If the company's values are established among the employees, Kalle Malmstedt believes that they will "*spread the wishful employer brand image during dinners, on twitter or Facebook*". As applicants want to compare their needs, personalities, and values with the employer brand image (Byrne & Neuman, 1992; Cable & Judge, 1996; 1997), this will help them to do so. Moreover, Therese Green explains how IKEA make use of stories from "*different people from different positions that are entirely free to tell stories about their work. Both when it is stressful, when it's fun, when it is serious and so on*" (Therese Green, IKEA). Angelica Stebrant also states how SCA has worked actively to find stories from

various employees in the organization. This could as we see it, decrease the risk of focusing on just one reality (Boyce, 1996). It could instead increase the chance of many employees recognizing the employer value proposition in the stories. Still, SCA selects stories more strategically and we believe it could be somewhat risky if the stories are chosen and communicated by the management.

STORIES

By analyzing what types of stories are used in external branding and what purpose they have, we can answer the research question about how and why storytelling is used in external employer branding.

Conveying symbolic attributes

Therese Green at IKEA says that stories are advantageous compared to traditional means of communication. She states that stories are an educational tool for conveying knowledge and culture, which brings the IKEA spirit to come alive. Thus, telling stories that relate to a company's core values make them more relevant to the recipient (Fog et al., 2005). It can also be seen in employer branding as the job seekers mainly separate companies from one another through symbolic attributes rather than instrumental attributes (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Therese Green, IKEA, says; "*when it comes to our corporate brand IKEA we get a lot for free; everyone knows IKEA and our products but as a place to work it is fantastic to be able to expose the people [the employers]*". Communicating traditional attributes does not contribute to an increased understanding of the organization and its culture since it does not appeal to the emotional feelings in the same way that a story does (Love, 2008). This is also something that Angelica Stebrant, SCA, stated. She explains that SCA wants to increase the awareness of their employer brand among students, and their aim is to emphasize symbolic values as for example that SCA has extremely talented co-workers and the possibility to grow is great.

Furthermore, Kalle Malmstedt explains how stories can make the message alive, and says that a common phrase in journalism is "*Show, don't tell*". He explains this further; "*Sure you can read about company X on their website and find out what their*



core values are, but if you have a friend who tells stories on Facebook what it is like to work there it is more credible” (Kalle Malmstedt, Cordovan). According to Rosethorn (2009), we find the “truth” in what other people say rather than on a career site. A majority of rational decisions a person makes is motivated by his feelings rather than rational arguments (Wachtman & Johnson, 2009), which implies that storytelling is a good way for companies to convey their message in an explainable and truthful way. It is easier to use stories to explain the symbolic values an organization hold since as Kalle Malmstedt argues; “Storytelling is even a way to really SHOW good working conditions... I believe storytelling is the best way to do employer branding... there are people engaged in storytelling. That’s trustworthiness”.

Portraying organizational culture

Our study shows how the right stories can help applicants to see if the organizational culture is a good match for them. Therese Green, IKEA, explains that IKEA’s “Co-worker blog” was launched in January 2011 and lets IKEA’s employees communicate their stories in an informal way. It is a storytelling-channel that “conveys a cozy image with lots of pictures and humor of what it’s like working at IKEA but at the same time it might scare off people who are interested in another working environment”. Still, Therese Green doesn’t necessarily see this as a disadvantage as it helps IKEA to attract applicants that fits with IKEA’s culture. Matts Heijbel supports this viewpoint by explaining how a company can “sort out the prospective applicants who do not fit with or can identify with the company’s culture and values”. Thus, the aim with storytelling in employer branding does not have to be to make the firm’s external employer brand attractive, but rather to be attractive to the right people in order to facilitate the recruitment, and to find people with the best fit with the company (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Matts Heijbel explains how storytelling helps the applicant know if the organizational culture is a good fit already at the door. Consequently, stories, as a part of communicating the employer brand image, help applicants acknowledge decisive factors in time as well as helping companies avoid recruiting people that quit because they cannot identify with the

organizational culture and values. If companies can use stories to tell the “truth” about who they are it decreases the risk of a backlash.

Authentic versus fiction

Our results show that corporate stories, which reflect a company’s core values, are used in external employer branding (Andersson, 2004). SCA uses stories that have been collected among their employees; stories that are based on real experiences and reflect SCA’s core values. In the interview with Angelica Stebrant at SCA she presents an example of a story about when a current co-worker at SCA applied for his job there. It was tough competition for this position and SCA needed to recruit someone immediately. Right before his last interview he had to call the manager and cancel because his wife was having a baby. He got the job anyway and Angelica Stebrant says; “...he was amazed by the understanding from SCA’s side since it was okay to change the time even if it was tight. We [SCA] love children”. Moreover, Angelica Stebrant explains that it was his first contact with SCA and he thought SCA really showed that they care about people. Respect is one of SCA’s core values and Angelica Stebrant believes that this story reflects their aim to respect people both within and outside their organization.

Furthermore, according to Andersson (2004) stories linked to companies’ core values, are important to differentiate themselves on the market and together with their business idea, vision and strategic goals, they form a company’s identity. One could argue that the story Angelica Stebrant, SCA, told is easy to imitate by a competitor but according to Matts Heijbel, real stories about real people that are connected to the organization give potential employees an opportunity to feel the organization. The most valuable corporate stories are based on real experiences (Colton & Ward, 2004; Keye & Jacobsson, 1999). One could argue that there is a difference between SCA’s and IKEA’s corporate stories used in their external employer branding. As SCA tries to tell stories that clarify their core values, whereas IKEA communicates stories that are supposed to reveal the employees and personalities behind their brand. In our opinion, this might be the case because IKEA has a well-known brand and does not have to focus on conveying their core values. Stories have always been a part of



IKEA's company culture (Therese Green, IKEA) whereas SCA need to communicate their core values to potential employees that are not aware of what their organization stands for.

Our study also conveys a risk in not telling authentic corporate stories when communicating an employer brand. Even if the opinions among researchers regarding true stories or not somewhat differs (Dennisdotter & Axenbrant, 2008; Denning, 2005; Fog et al., 2005), all our interviews show that true corporate stories in employer branding are vital. Both SCA and IKEA only use truthful stories in their work with employer branding. Matts Heijbel states that companies have to be very careful when they chose which corporate stories to communicate since there is a risk of backlashing if the stories are not true. Especially when it comes to employer branding since the employers will not spread stories about a company culture that they do not recognize. Matts Heijbel also stresses that if the stories are embellished or wishful thinking, a consequence will be negative word-of-mouth. Fog et al. (2005) argue that genuine stories add credibility to a company's message and are often stronger than fictive stories or myths. Most company stories about values and culture spring from the employees. However, according to Matts Heijbel, corporate stories with the purpose of strengthen an external employer brand can be about almost anything as long as they are genuine. Examples are CSR-stories, stories about satisfied customers, or that it is okay to get pregnant.

Kalle Malmstedt also believe that all communications have to be true and our findings show that if companies can find their true corporate stories, they can communicate "who they are" and inhabit the brand with emotions and images from the reality (Kaufman, 2003; Heijbel, 2011; Fog et al., 2005). Kalle Malmstedt further states that the reason for why authenticity is vital is that in today's society, companies cannot say one thing to the employee, a second thing to the shareholders and a third thing to the customers. He points out; *"...people are critical and even if the outline of a fictive story is nice, one status update on Facebook or a tweet that spread fast could tear it all apart. That damage is really difficult to repair and we do not like companies that lie anymore..."*

Therese Green believes their "Co-worker blog" is an honest and authentic communication tool and not made up like other advertising. She states; *"Storytelling is simple, cheap, and honest"*. Therese Green also hopes the target group sees it as a way to read about true stories directly from the employees. Fog et al. (2005) argue that it could be difficult to spot employee stories but if they can be found, it could be a small "everyday-anecdote" that expresses the company culture. For IKEA, their "co-worker blog" could be an effective way to communicate these small authentic anecdotes and since IKEA is a very strong and well-known brand it might be easier for them to let go of the control of what is being told in their stories. Therese Green states, as mentioned earlier, that the stories from different employees communicated through the blog are about both stressful situations to fun happenings. Our results show that storytelling is not a mean with fixed components. Even if authenticity is vital, corporate stories can be everything from a small employee anecdote to a strategically produced story that has been approved by the branding department and distributed by the organizational management. However, even if the form and content differs, it is always of great importance to use suitable communication channels when using storytelling en external employer branding (Fog et al., 2005).

TELLING

A vital part in answering how companies use storytelling in external employer branding is to provide knowledge about how to communicate the stories. This part of our analysis aims to clarify what communication channels are suitable when telling stories.

Communication channels

Today, with the development of social media, we have full transparency in how companies do business and how they act while doing it (Wilms, 2011). According to all our interviewees, social media is one of the most useful tools when companies want to communicate their stories. It is also another reason for why storytelling in employer branding require total transparency and true stories. Matts Heijbel points out that social media as a communication tool could be compared with a



campfire and is an excellent way for companies to join the conversation and tell their own stories.

Therese Green, IKEA, and Angelica Stebrant, SCA, both explain that they use their webpage to a large extent in their work with external employer branding and social networks as for example Facebook. Both webpages includes in-depth interviews with employees, which communicate different stories. Therese Green, IKEA, further states that their “Co-worker blog”, is an effective communication tool for storytelling and external employer branding. Both internally and externally since it aims to inspire both current and potential employees. IKEA’s employees can read their co-workers’ every-day stories and potential candidates can feel the organization (Heijbel, 2011). By using their own webpage for employee stories IKEA and SCA decreases the risk of people doubting whom the sender is, which Denning (2005) points out as a weakness with using digital media. Also, since their websites have high traffic, they are able to reach a large audience (Parment & Dyhre, 2009).

Further, IKEA hopes the “Co-worker blog” can develop a dialogue with people who are interested in working at IKEA since more and more people search for information via social media (Johansson, 2010; De Pelsmacker et al. 2010). According to Dou and Krishnamurthy (2007), it is important to aim for interaction if a company uses social media as a communication tool to reach its target group. By using social media, SCA and IKEA can create interaction since current and future employees can post comments, ask questions and so forth. Even if it might be time- and resource consuming (De Pelsmacker et al., 2010), IKEA and SCA are both large companies with a present social media strategy, and have the needed resources.

Moreover, Kalle Malmstedt confirms that companies should encourage their employees in telling their stories about the company in social media. It is important to show that an organization consists of human beings. He states; *”To tell the company’s stories through social media all the time. That is also storytelling. It is a deliberate project and it has to have certain frameworks”*. Kalle Malmstedt also points out that companies have

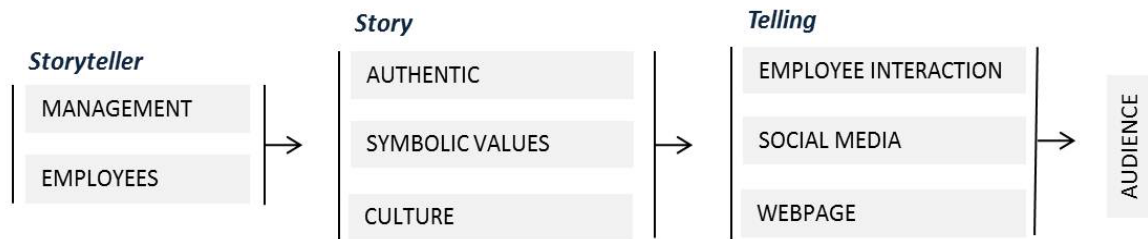
more to win but are afraid to lose control over what their employees says. Storytelling is not just employees who communicate their career path; it is the every-day conversation. Matts Heijbel believes employers should give their personnel the freedom of using social media and trust them with that. However, he explains that this is only effective if the employer has managed to see the employees, and if the employees enjoy their work.

Even if digital communication channels are important to use when trying to reach potential employees (Rosethorn, 2009), Kalle Malmstedt believes traditional media as for example newspapers or TV-commercials are difficult but useful in to communicate an employer brand through storytelling. He argues that if the ads include an employee who shares his or her story, it is a trustworthy communication channel. Therese Green, IKEA, points out that they participate in career fairs to reach their target group with employer branding but according to her, it is not the best channel for storytelling due to limited time with the students. However, since employees is an important communication tool (Minchington, 2006), our opinion is that every interaction between current and potential employees could be an opportunity to tell corporate stories that affect the employer brand image positively. Angelica at SCA explains the benefits of storytelling in this quote; *“...these stories can be used in different contexts. You can use storytelling in all kinds of channels. You can use them on the intranet, externally or in workshops to exemplify what you mean; you can use it on the webpage...”*. This statement somewhat concludes this part since storytelling in employer branding can be used in different communication channels but it all depends on what the goal is, and of course where a company’s target group is.

STORYTELLING IN EXTERNAL EMPLOYER BRANDING

In conclusion, with the addition of our findings we have modified the model presented in our theoretical discussion (see Figure 1.). This model (Figure 2.) is based on both the theoretical framework and the analysis; it is a summary of how and why companies use storytelling to communicate their employer brand externally.

Figure 2. Modified model for Storytelling in External Employer Branding (Nilsson & Nordgren, 2012)



When looking into the organizational identity in our case companies from a storytelling perspective, we discovered that the organizational identity could be seen as a *storyteller*. Confirming the view of how organizational identity consists of management vision and leadership together with organization members' (Hatch & Schultz, 1997), our case companies describe the main *Storytellers* in the company. On one part, it is the management or the employer-branding department that selects what its communicated and where. On the other hand, storytelling in external employer branding is also when the employees speak freely about their experiences. Thus, the starting point in using storytelling to create an attractive employer brand image is to look at the *storytellers*, management and employees, and see that their values are in line with the stories, and that storytelling is rooted in the organization.

The *Story* goes hand in hand with the *Storytellers* and can be defined as the message that is to be communicated. We found that the message is a direct result of the experiences organizational members have and come from the inside of the organization. Thus it is a result of, and often portrays, organizational culture. At the same time, management often influences the communicated stories. We discovered that an important aspect of a story is that it needs to be authentic and reflect how the employees view the company. Further, common characteristics include an emphasis on symbolic attributes as well as describing the corporate culture. This can be told in a variety of types of stories. However, the focus for our case companies is to spread employee experiences rather than stories about the company.

While we in the theoretical model (see Figure 1.) talk about the communication channels we here refer to them as the *Telling*: how and where the

stories are told. We found that the most common channels for stories to be communicated are employee interaction with potential applicants, social media, and the company webpage. Those are used and seen as the most suitable communication channels to reach the external employer brand target group. It opens up for interaction and dialogue can increase the engagement among current and future employees. A company webpage also adds security and control over stories spread since the company can affect which stories to portray.

CONCLUSION

We created a model (Figure 1.) based on previous research within the field of storytelling and employer branding as a tool to investigate why and how the case companies work with storytelling in creating an attractive external employer brand. The interviews with two case companies and two experts within storytelling and employer branding, show that storytelling is used because it is seen as an efficient tool when communicating an employer brand externally.

By analyzing the empirical data with the theoretical model in mind we developed a new model (Figure 2.) of how companies work with storytelling as a mean in communication their employer brand. This model includes the storyteller, the stories, and the telling, as they are vital parts in this context. In order to strengthen the external employer brand, stories are used as a communication tool to make facts about the company more vivid and portray the organizational culture. The messages conveyed in stories come from the inside of the organization and are often based on experiences of the employees. Still, management in often influence what stories are being harvested and communicated.

Furthermore, it is seen as a way to attract the right employees rather than many employees as the



potential applicant early in the recruitment process can identify if the company's culture and values fit with their own personality. This affects what is portrayed and limits to what extent organizations give a holistic view of the company. Consequently, both management and employees play a vital part in storytelling. Moreover, authenticity is fundamental in stories since the opposite increases the risk of a backlash, rumors and bad publicity. Stories are mainly communicated through employee interaction with potential applicants, social media and the company webpage. Employee interaction and social media is seen as suitable as it opens up for interaction and dialogue, which increases engagement. Communication through the company webpage adds security and control over stories spread since the company can affect which stories to portray. In conclusion, this multiple case study contributes to increased knowledge about why and how companies use storytelling in external employer branding. The findings can be illustrated by the following quote:

"Don't tell me that you're funny, make me laugh".
(Kalle Malmstedt, Cordovan)

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Everyone in an organization can be, and should be, a storyteller. Even if the opinions of what a good story is differ, it can be everything from a small anecdote from an employee to a corporate story that has been harvested strategically and communicated by the branding department. The story rather depends on the goal. If to clarify the employer value proposition, involving the management and gathering stories strategically could be more successful since it increases the chance of communicating a cohesive employer brand. However, even if the content and form vary, authenticity is fundamental since fictive and untrue stories might increase the risk of a backlash. If the employees cannot identify with the employer value proposition in the stories, they will not become ambassadors and spread them. The messages conveyed in the story should always come from the organizational identity and are often based on real experiences. If the stories reflect an organization's values and culture in a good way, external

stakeholders get the chance to feel the company through the stories instead of static facts and numbers. It is a way to verify that an organization lives its culture and values. If the management can let go of the control and let the employees use for example a "company blog", Facebook, or Twitter, stories that will strengthen the external employer brand can be told frequently. Moreover, to spread real stories that exemplify an organizational culture or values could be a differentiation factor when all companies are expressing the same things. Storytelling in external employer branding is a way to really show the audience that the words are being lived.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Focus in this study has been on how and why storytelling is used in external employer branding. Still, we have put little effort in evaluating the effectiveness of storytelling in creating an attractive external employer brand. Therefore, it could be interesting to look into how the audience responds to storytelling in this context, e.g. if job searchers are more attracted to companies that use stories to communicate their employer value proposition. Another interesting approach could be to study how new recruits in an organization, which works with storytelling in employer branding, are influenced by the stories. If storytelling is a natural mean in the work with employer branding a question is how the new employees adapt to that.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude towards our supervisor Eva Ossiansson at the School of Business, Economics, and Law for her insightful comments and engagement in the process of writing this thesis. Also, we would like to thank our interview respondents, Therese Green, IKEA, Angelica Stebrant, SCA, Matts Heijbel, Storytelling Expert, and Kalle Malmstedt, PR- and Social Media Strategist at Cordovan Communications Agency. Finally, a special thanks to Clarion Hotel Post in Gothenburg for providing us with a great study place.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andersson, N. (2004). Företagets värderingar differentierar varumärket. *Soul Reflections*, vol. 9, pp. 4-5.
- Backhaus, K. & Tikoo, S. (2004). Conceptualizing and researching employer branding. *Career Development International*, vol. 9: 5, pp. 501-517.
- Barrow, S. & Mosley, R. (2006). *The Employer Brand: Bringing the Best of Brand Management to People at Work*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Boyce, M. E. (1996). Organizational story and story telling: a critical review. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, vol. 9: 5, pp. 5-26.
- Bryman, A. (2002). *Samhällsvetenskapliga metoder*. Malmö: Liber.
- Byrne, D. & Neuman, J. (1992). The implications of attraction research for organizational issues, in Kelly, K. (Ed.). *Theory and Research in Industrial/Organizational Psychology*. NY: Elsevier Science, pp. 29-70.
- Cable, D. M. & Judge, T. A. (1996). Person-Organization Fit, Job Choice Decisions and Organizational Entry. *Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes*, vol. 97: 3, pp. 294-311.
- Cable, D. M. & Judge, T. A. (1997). Applicant personality, organizational culture, and organization attraction. *Personnel Psychology*, vol. 50: 2, pp. 359-394.
- Colton, S., & Ward, V., with contributions from Arnold, C., Corney, P. & Russell, C. (2004). Story as a Tool to Capitalize on Knowledge Assets. *Business Information Review*, vol. 21: 3, pp. 172-181.
- Dahlén, Stina (2012). IKEA svårslagen mästare på att locka studenter. [Electronic] *Svenskt Näringsliv*. Available at: http://www.svensktnaringsliv.se/skola/hogskola/n/ikea-svarslagen-mastare-pa-att-locka-studenter_155883.html [2012-04-30]
- Denning, S. (2005). *The Leader's Guide To Storytelling*. USA: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Dennisdotter, E., & Agenbrant, E. (2008). *Storytelling – Ett effektivt marknadsföringsbegrepp*. Sweden: Liber.
- De Pelsmacker, P., Geuens, M. & Van Den Bergh, J. (2010). *Marketing Communications: A European Perspective*. 3rd edition. Financial Times/Prentice Hall.
- Dou, W. & Krishnamurthy, S. (2007). Using Brand Websites to Build Brands Online: A Product versus Service Brand Comparison. *Journal of Advertising Research*, vol. 47: 2, pp. 193-206.
- Dybre, A. & Parment, A. (2009). *Sustainable Employer Branding – Guidelines, Worktools and Best Practices*. Liber AB.
- Eriksson, P. & Kovalainen, A. (2008). *Qualitative Methods in Business Research*. London: Sage.
- Erlandsson, A. (2005). *Det följdriktiga flockbeteendet: en studie om profilering på arbetsmarknaden*. Växjö: Växjö Universitet
- Esaiasson, P., Gilljam, M., Oscarsson, H. & Wägerud, L. (2007). *Metodpraktikan. Konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad*. 3rd edition. Stockholm: Norstedts Juridik AB.
- Europeiska kommissionen, SCADPlus (2007). [Electronic] *European Commission*. Available at: http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/enterprise/business_environment/n26026_sv.htm [2012-03-01]
- Fog, K., Budtz, C. & Yakaboylu, B. (2005). *Storytelling- Branding in practice*. Denmark: Springer.
- Foster, C., Punjaisri, K. & Cheng, R. (2010). Exploring the relationship between corporate, internal and employer branding. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, vol. 19: 6, pp. 401-409.
- Gill, R. (2011). An integrative review of storytelling: Using corporate stories to strengthen employee engagement and internal and external reputation. [Electronic] *PRism*, vol. 8: 1, Available at: <http://www.prismjournal.org/homepage.html>
- Greening, D. W. & Turban, D. B. (2000). Corporate social performance as a competitive advantage in attracting a quality workforce. *Business and Society*, vol. 39, pp. 254-280.
- Hammer & Hanborg (2004). IKEA-bäst på kommunikation och attraktivaste arbetsgivaren. [Electronic] *Hammer & Hanborg*. Available at: <http://www.hammerhanborg.com/sv/Aktuellt--press/Nyhetsarkiv/IKEA---bast-pa-kommunikation-och-attraktivaste-arbetsgivaren/> [2012-04-30]
- Hatch, M.J. & Schultz, M. (2003). Bringing the corporation into corporate branding. *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 37: 7, pp. 1041-1064
- Heijbel, M. (2011). *Storytelling befolkar varumärket*. 2nd edition. Riga: Blue Publishing.
- HR-bloggen (2012). [Blog] Available at: <http://www.hrbloggen.se> [2012-02-15]
- Kaufman, B. (2003). Stories That Sell, Stories That Tell. *The Journal of Business Strategy*, vol. 24: 2, pp. 11-15.



- Kaye, B. & Jacobson, B. (1999). True Tales And Tall Tales: The Power Of Organizational Storytelling. *Training & Development*, vol. 53: 3, p. 45-50.
- Klein, N. (2000). *No Logo*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Lievens, F. & Highhouse, S. (2003). The relation of instrumental and symbolic attributes to a company's attractiveness as an employer. *Personnel Psychology*, vol. 56: 1, pp. 75-102.
- Love, H. (2008). Unraveling the technique of storytelling. *Strategic Communication Management*, vol. 12: 4, pp. 24-27.
- Marshall J. & Adamic, M. (2010). The story is the message: shaping corporate culture. *Journal of Business Strategy*, vol. 31: 2, pp. 18 – 23.
- Marzec, M. (2007). Telling the corporate story: vision to action. *Journal of Business Strategy*, vol. 28: 1, pp. 26-36.
- Minchington, B (2006). *Your Employer Brand – attract, engage, retain*. Australia: Collective Learning.
- Mitroff, I. I. & Kilmann, H. R. (2001). Stories Managers Tell: A New Tool for Organizational Problem Solving. *Management Review*, vol. 64: 7, pp. 18-28.
- Mosley, R.W. (2007). Customer experience, organisational culture and the employer brand. *Brand Management*, vol. 15: 2, pp. 123-134.
- Mossberg, L. & Johansen, E. (2006). *Storytelling - Marknadsföring i upplevelseindustrin*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Net Impact (2012). *Talent Report: What Workers Want in 2012*. New York: Net Impact
- Ramzy, A. (2007). The Leader's Guide to Storytelling. Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative. *Corporate Reputation Review*, vol. 10: 2, pp. 154-157.
- Rosethorn, H. (2009). *The Employer Brand: Keeping Faith With the Deal*. Farnham: Gower Publishing Ltd.
- Salzer-Mörling, M. (2004) Storytelling & Varumärken. In Christensen, L., & Kempinsky, P. (red.) *Att mobilisera för regional tillväxt*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Simmons, A. (2003). Story, Poetry and Metaphor: Subjective Solutions for Subjective Problems. *Reflections*, vol. 4: 3, pp. 41-48.
- Storytellers.se (2012). *Storytellers - Storytelling I organisationer*. [Blog] Available at: <http://www.storytellers.se/txt/index.php> [2012-02-15]
- Sullivan, John (2004). *The 8 elements of a successful employment brand*. [Electronic] Available at: <http://www.ere.net/2004/02/23/the-8-elements-of-a-successful-employment-brand/> [2012-03-22]
- Universum (2011). EB Insights 2011. [Electronic] *Universum Communications Sweden AB*. Spring edition. Available at: <http://www.indiaprwire.com/downloads/document/201102/19539.pdf> [2012-03-22]
- Universum (2012). IKEA ekonomstudenternas favoritarbetsgivare för tionde året i rad. [Electronic] www.employerbrandingtoday.com. Available at: <http://www.employerbrandingtoday.com/se/2012/03/14/ikea-ekonomstudenternas-favoritarbetsgivare-for-tionde-aret-i-rad/> [2012-04-30]
- Universum Global (2011). *Universum Quarterly*. Issue 2011-4. Stockholm: Universum Global.
- Universum Global (2012). *Universum Quarterly*. Issue 2012-1. Stockholm: Universum Global.
- Universumglobal (2012). Press release FöretagsBarometern 2012. [Electronic] *Universum Global*. Available at: <http://www.universumglobal.com/stored-images/ee/ee13baf3-9b0c-42bc-ae27-7bc8b63b6381.pdf> [2012-03-22]
- Wachtman, E. & Johnson, L. S. (2009). The Persuasive Power of Story. *Marketing Management*, vol. 18: 1, pp. 28-34.
- Wilms, Todd (2011). Social Media Means Transparency into Corporate Social Responsibility. [Electronic] www.forbes.com. Available at: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/sap/2011/10/31/social-media-means-transparency-into-corporate-social-responsibility/> [2012-04-30]
- Wägerth, Daniel (2011). Google och IKEA i topp bland talangerna. [Electronic] *Universum Global*. Available at: <http://www.universumglobal.com/Newsroom/News/Pan-European/Google-och-IKEA-i-topp-bland-talangerna> [2012-02-15]
- Yin R., K. (1994). *Case study research: design and methods*. 2nd edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: design and methods*. 3rd edition. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.