The Rise of Storytelling as a Marketing Strategy for “Made in Italy” Products

Federico de Andreis¹
Davide Marchisio²
Federico Sottoriva³

Abstract: Storytelling is the process of using fact and narrative to communicate something to the audience. The first approach to storytelling takes place as children, with the dual purpose of imagining a space-time different from reality, and secondly that of establishing contact with one’s parents, who are required to commit themselves daily, to transmit values and teachings. Popular myths and legends perform four functions that allow human beings to understand themselves, others, the mysteries of life and the universe that surrounds them (Atkinson, 2002). These functions are:

- the psychological function: it helps the person to define himself more clearly thanks to the possibility of reordering and deciphering experiences;
- the social function: allows the person to understand what he has in common with others and what distinguishes him;
- the cosmological-philosophical function: it supports the person in having a clearer vision of her role in the world,
- the mystical-religious function: it allows the person to feel awe, wonder, humility and gratitude towards the mysteries that surround them.

More and more small and large companies are engaging in a marketing activity called content marketing, considering the idea that storytelling is the key to attracting and retaining customers, especially in culturally far-away markets.

Storytelling marketing is a description where the company combines the company’s identity with the company’s philosophy to create a product or service activity (Salzer-Morling & Stannegard, 2004).

In fact, with the global financial crisis of 2009, investors reduced their investments in communication, especially the budget allocated to television (-3.1% in 2011). Conversely, the internet grew (+12.3%) (Nielsen, 2012).

But how to communicate a product to a different culture not sharing the same ideas, symbols, actions and dispositions of the company?

This study aims to analyze which strategies have been applied in the storytelling of typically “Made in Italy” food products and representative of the Italian gastronomic heritage towards Asia.

Briefly, the research aims to answer the following questions:

RQ 1: Which strategies have been adopted by small-medium-large enterprises in order to promote Italian products into culturally distant markets?

RQ 2: Which strategies are effective, in order to be considered also for future business?

The research is therefore based on an analysis of the literature on storytelling as a marketing strategy and then goes on to observe some case studies.

¹ Università Giustino Fortunato, Benevento – Italy
² Freelance - Italy
³ Freelance - Italy
1. INTRODUCTION

Telling a story through emotional involvement is much more powerful than explaining it analytically. Storytelling, therefore, represents an effective communication tool of value for both online and offline promotional campaigns.

In particular, this technique focuses on the company telling its story, expressing its vision of the world and its target market, and finally communicating how it proposes itself to the public.

The paper, therefore, aims to analyze how storytelling can be used in culturally distant markets, through the case study of some Italian companies that have used it in China. In the first part, a review of the literature on storytelling is conducted, analyzing its meaning, purpose and structure. Following this, the Chinese market and its relationship with Italian-made products are highlighted, showing, through study examples, how storytelling has offered communication possibilities in the promotion of Italian products and brands in the agri-food sector.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1. What Is Storytelling?

A story represents an oral or written performance involving two or more people interpreting past or anticipated experiences. Literature has highlighted the existence of several factors as prerequisites of a story; three necessary elements of a story have been identified: chronology, causality, and character development (Stern, 1994).

Human culture and language learning enable people naturally to think and extract meaning from narratives, and the narrative theory can inform the development of the proposition of storytelling behaviors (Woodside, 2010).

A common human experience constitutes a story prototype that has similar characteristics in a group (Loebbert, 2003). Chronology means that a stimulus with a story content (e.g., advertisement) has an internal temporality, defined as a set of events in a specific order, with a beginning, a middle and an end (Bennet & Royle, 2004). Casualty highlights the temporal relationship between events; an initial event, in fact, results in a response by a character, actions are undertaken to achieve goals, and these actions result in an outcome. Finally, character development pertains to viewers/readers being made aware of the psychological state of the protagonist, that is, what he or she is thinking and feeling.

The chronological sequence and central characters are essential in order to label something a story (Deighton et al., 1989). People are exposed to stories throughout their lives from the moment of birth (Van Laer et al., 2014), because stories are informally told all the time. From parents to children, from grandparents to grandchildren, from teachers to students, at bars, around campfires, and so on (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010).

Storytelling is a fundamental human activity because through it people can better understand their world and organize their experiences to communicate them to others (Cooper et al., 2010). With the advent of the digital age, images and oral expressions are commonly used, which brings forth the reappearance of ‘story’ and ‘storytelling’.
In the field of marketing and communication, stories and narratives are often used as synonyms. Thus storytelling (narrating) is defined as the vivid description of ideas, beliefs, personal experiences and life-lessons through stories or narratives that evoke powerful emotions and insights (Serrat, 2010). Storytelling emphasizes the act of telling a story and the storyteller can deliver a story through media. According to Fisher (1984), storytelling is such a powerful communication tool because human beings are inherently storytellers and symbol makers, that is, we are homo narrans. Since ancestral times, human beings create symbols and communicate them through stories, thus organizing their experiences and promoting a communal way of life.

Storytelling became a fundamental marketing tool, consisting of “using a narrative to connect your brand to customers, with a focus on linking what you stand for to the values you share with your customers” (Loyal, 2018). This instrument is essential to marketing for 5 reasons: (1) people naturally think narratively; (2) stories reinforce memorization; (3) stories afford pleasurable experiences; (4) brands and products can appeal to psychological archetypes, thus reaching a strong identification with consumers; and (5) stories afford clarity (Woodside et al., 2008).

In the field of marketing, related research discusses persuasion in narrative advertising. For example, a narrative advertisement is one presented in the form of a story; this presentation has a different effect from other types of advertisements.

2.2. Storytelling Structure

A story can arouse the audience’s emotions. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we often review experiences that have aroused our feelings (McGaugh, 2003). People’s affective response to advertising affects their attitudes towards the advertising and consequently their attitudes toward brands (Batra & Ray, 1986).

This modified model regards a story as a kind of stimulus (figure 1), and the effect of storytelling in marketing is demonstrated as consumers’ purchase decisions. Consumers’ responses to story information constitute the main way to assess the benefits of storytelling in marketing. The link between story and information processing can be viewed through the five steps when consumers receive and process the information.

![Figure 1. “A modified model of story stimuli on consumer behavior” Source: Adopted from Engel et al., 1978](image-url)
In the narrative process, stories about brands or product information can bring pleasure to consumers and lead consumers to relate to one or many story prototypes to achieve a high degree of understanding and acceptance (Holt, 2003). Affection is a specific construct involving emotions, moods, or attitude, among which emotions has the most significant intensity. Emotion is a dynamic process between an organism and the environment (Lazarus, 1982).

The mood has a lower intensity and longer duration. According to Batra and Ray (1986), affective responses are the moods and feelings caused by advertising. In the three phases of communication effects, the affected phase includes the willingness to look for additional information, generate interest in product attributes, and favorably evaluate the product or brand (Guiltinan et al., 1997).

### 2.3 Advertising Communication

First of all, we need to make a distinction between communicating and knowing how to communicate. Communication is often considered a spontaneous and natural skill; on the contrary, it must be considered as a process permeated with effort and reflection, necessary elements in all types of exchange, especially in intercultural ones. Secondly, we must not underestimate the dependence of the contents of the communicative message on how they are transmitted, on the means that convey them, and on the relationship between the interlocutors (Coppola, 2014).

Four different types of advertising ideologies can be identified:

1. **Referential**: the advertising language performs a representative function, i.e. the simple representation of a reality that already has a meaning (that of the product). Adherents of this type of advertising philosophy, starting with Ogilvy (1989), argue that advertising should simply reflect the reality of the product (often through the mechanism of demonstration). Floch has rightly underlined, however, that referential advertising appears as such because it uses certain discursive strategies which produce an internal referent to the discourse and which aim to present it as true. To this end, the making-seems-true of referential advertising relies on 1) narrative, 2) figurative (and not abstract) and 3) descriptive (and not normative) discourses, or, translated into Ogilvy’s language: 1) of before/after articulations, 2) of concrete information or anecdotes and 3) absence of adjectives or slogans (Floch, 1992).

2. **Mythic**: the language performs a constructive function in that the sense is not already present in the reality of the product but is constructed exclusively through the advertising discourse. It often resorts to legends, heroes, symbols, or mythical referents that are already known and structured and strongly associates the product with them. The French advertiser Séguéla (1985), with his philosophy of the star product, is undoubtedly its most significant representative, but Leo Burnett should also be mentioned together with it, who created the historic Marlboro campaign based on the cowboy figure.

3. **Substantial**: it is the negotiation of mythical advertising, considered in this case a form of advertising that uses the product in a specious way. It fights to bring the product to life in advertising, attributing to it, with its virtues, a clear centrality. The creative act is conceived as a purification that allows the public to explore and highlight the profound nature of the product. However, the goal is to obtain an emotion of an aesthetic type, or rather a sudden – and short-lived – inability of the subject to master the sensible world, an inability that shakes him (Floch, 1992). As Floch always maintains, in France Jean Feldman (of the FCA agency) has in recent years been the most representative figure of this advertising philosophy, which has illustrious antecedents in many historic ads created by (Reeves, 1985).
4. **Oblique**: it is the denial of referential advertising, as it argues that the meaning is not already given and uses irony and paradox to activate the cognitive capacity of the user and to stimulate the latter to co-produce the meaning through a strategy of displacement, of distance concerning the discourse concerning the aims of the product; Philippe Michel (of the Clm/Bdbo agency) was, according to Floch, the most representative character in the use of this type of language in France and he too denounces the "falsehood" of realism with his work. (Floch, 1992)

3. **DISCUSSION**

3.1. **Made in Italy in China**

After analyzing the development and structure of storytelling, let's see how it can be applied in the promotion of products. Specifically, using a market that is culturally distant from Italian habits and tastes, such as China, we will analyze how Italian products can benefit from promotion through the use of this tool.

Chinese consumers recognize Italian products as a high added value and, in some cases, consider them preferable to other products. The success around the world of items “Made in Italy” is mostly due to the Italian brand’s ability to transfer a certain sense of product quality in concert with values and experiences of beauty, elegance, tradition, luxury, and life quality (Snaiderbaur, 2010).

The Made in Italy industry comprises a galaxy of small and medium-sized enterprises that interpret and communicate the Italian style idea through quality and those who do not care about quality but promote themselves simply by applying the Made in Italy label to the product.

The definition and awareness of the Italian brand’s intangible values are mandatory to penetrate new markets, especially in China, and to maintain a high competitive advantage and higher levels of premium pricing.

The Chinese consumer finds himself or herself immersed in a fast-growing market with the widespread availability of new brands and new products from known and well-established brands. Researchers have found that Chinese consumers have a high intention to buy international brands, although the price of goods is often the decisive factor. In this regard, in 2004 the Leonardo Committee a consortium of private and public institutions, developed a study aimed at understanding the perception of Italian products. From the study emerged a picture in which Italy is considered the country of fashion, in particular concerning leather products (surprising when compared with the same survey conducted in Russia, Sweden and the US, where the gourmet culinary products ranked highest). In this regard, Italian pasta was appreciated almost by all of the participants, while the pizza was considered exotic and expensive.

Despite the interesting data, the differences between the Chinese and Italian cultures are significant; therefore, communication of the brand’s intangible values has to be developed without disregarding a necessary and in-depth knowledge of Chinese culture. Using the differences elaborated by Hofstede (figure 2), significant differences emerge that must be taken into consideration in the creation of advertising messages for the Chinese market.

De Mooij (2005), using the categories of Hofstede culture, has provided a comparative analysis of consumers behavior that offers important information about the differences between China
and Italy; because of Chinese cultural characteristics (high power distance, masculinity and collectivism), Chinese consumers are driven to purchase luxury goods by their need for conformity, social status, and group enhancement, as opposed to Italian consumers (high power distance, masculinity, and individualism).

Note: PDI: Power Distance Index; IDV: Individualism; MAS: Masculinity; UAI: Uncertainty Avoidance Index; LTO: Long-Term Orientation.

Figure 2. – The model of Professor Geert Hofstede

3.2. An Empirical Example of Asian Market Analysis

Understanding the evolutionary dynamics of the Chinese market requires a mix of several kinds of information (market, laws, and even culture) (De Pin, 2019). Chinese food habits have experienced rapid changes in both quantity and quality of diet due to the increased power of consumers and their new lifestyle (Zhou et al., 2014). The Chinese food sector has become, the largest worldwide, with an average annual growth rate near 30% (World Bank, 2013).

In this context, the import of agro-food products explodes and involves an increasingly diversified range of supply. This development affects consumption growth rates, which become very high for meat, dairy products, fish, oil, pasta, confectionery and convenience food. The bigger share is the prerogative of those of first-stage processing (wine, olive oil, cheese) that concentrate 42% of sales (16.1 billion euros).

The incidence of Made in Italy of second-stage processing (pasta, baked goods, coffee, chocolate) exceeds one-fifth of exports, while agricultural Made in Italy is worth over 4.3 billion euros (11% of exports). Primacy goes to wine, with a weight of 13.8% and an increase of 5.6% compared to 2015. The share of fresh fruits is very close at 7% (2.65 billion euros). Other important sectors are pasta (6%), baked goods (4.7%), cheese (4.3%), processed tomatoes (4.1%), cocoa products (4.0%), and cold cuts (3.8%). Among the first sectors, there is also coffee, which abroad sales in 2017 exceeded 1.2 billion euros (+10% compared to 2015). (De Pin, 2019).

Italy occupies the 25th place among countries exporting to China, with a 446 million USD supply in 2017, but features a substantial annual growth rate (about 25%). The agro-food commercial balance highlights a negative value, albeit in contraction, for Italy, which is a net importer of 130.5 million USD. Currently, the main exported product from Italy is wine, followed by chocolate, pasta and bakery products (De Pin, 2019).
3.2. Made in Italy Samples Advertising Analysis

How do Italian companies who decide to export their products to China behave from a marketing point of view?

If it is true that storytelling as a marketing strategy is often more suitable for video advertising and in any case in media format, it is however necessary to analyze which channels have become more effective in terms of transmission, expansion and sharing of the product.

China has one of the largest populations of Internet users in the world, and as such the use of social media, although significantly different from the structures we are used to in the West, is huge to the extent that it projects and converges the greatest attention of domestic and international companies. The presence on channels such as WeChat and Bilibili should be considered essential, as the presence on any street in the application on the map: the presence on social media channels or more generally on the web defines the existence of the business and knowledge through potential consumers.

According to the analysis carried out, it emerged that companies already present in the country and above all with an already defined market tend towards a mythical or substantial language, through which the product, despite being a key element of the campaign, is placed in the background, fully integrated within an extraneous and extemporaneous space-time, with which the ultimate goal is to convey an emotion rather than a definition and description of the product.

It is no coincidence that among the companies analyzed, those that appear to adopt this strategy are, in the range of the food sector observed, those of chocolate.

In Figures 3 and 4 we can observe two posts taken from the official Ferrero accounts of Bilibili and WeChat. In the first case Ferrero with its Rocher product, is capable, thanks to a long-standing market imposition, with strong Chinese appreciation and culturalization, of promoting its product without naming it, without defining it, but with a contextualized description: “Our date, a sweet moment”.

It is therefore the objective of the campaign to evoke and arouse an emotion, contextualizing the use of the product. But this is possible, and will be seen even more clearly in Figure 4 as the Ferrero company has already established itself in China for some time, its products have entered and are part of Chinese culture (see Ferrero Rocher), an advantageous position which allows being able to enter the sphere of affection (Batra & Ray, 1986).

In Figure 4 we see instead the revival of three fairy tales, set inside the Ferrero Castle. With this strategy, the company manages to communicate hard and soft messages to adults and children; with hard specific data that influence the conception of the brand by the consumer, data such as "Built-in 1946, the third most important chocolate castle in the world" (translation), where it is a specific desire to want to convey a message of strengthening to the brand even to the little ones.

Continuing in the campaign, we will interface with the declination of fairy tales such as "The Princess and the Pea", "The Nutcracker" etc. In the case of the princess and the pea, where the reference to the fairy tale is defined by the fact that the princess is unable to fall asleep because there is something under the mattress that disturbs her, even though there are many layers. And
it is precisely by keeping the layers element that the landlord inserts the Ferrero Rocher element, explaining the composition of each layer.

The same does not do the Venchi company which, on the contrary, specifies, making full use of authenticity and conciseness in how to enjoy the product, bringing it back to typical Italian habits: “A pleasure to take away throughout the year”. Not only is it limited to this, but it also describes how to enjoy the product, advising; “to taste it on an autumn afternoon with the tip of the tongue, with a slow walk through the streets among the autumn colors, etc.”

If we then evaluate other communication strategies, we note for example with the Barilla company (producer of pasta), how the description of the product is set aside in favor of cultural contextualization. Pasta as a food probably already present in Chinese culture does not need a pragmatic description (as contrary to the case, for example, in the posts of the Galbani company, producer of fresh cheeses), but rather a cultural contextualization that can allow, as in the case of Barilla is intended, the consumer to get closer to the type of consumption typical of Italian culture.

(Personal translation) “I'm not a food critic actually, but I know how to recognize a good time for some good food (literary translation with pun not translatable in English). After working, try to leave thoughts out of your head, let yourself be enveloped and pampered by the aromas of the kitchen: in 3 simple steps you can delight yourself with a tasty dish”. In this case, we opted for a transliteration of commercials that we have often seen and still see in Italy, mitigating the message and declining it for the target culture.

It is therefore evident how storytelling has been adopted by food and beverage companies as a marketing strategy, declined and modulated on several levels. It is also evident how directly the correlation between mythical language and the presence of the brand in the country is, where a strong presence of the brand allows the company to focus on evocative and non-explanatory marketing. In any case, the desire to keep the product and the starting culture closely linked, i.e. the Italian one, is underlined, trying without imposing itself to integrate and adapt to the target one.
4. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE FINDINGS

Following the analysis of the structure of storytelling, the language of communication in advertising, and finally after the presentation of the panorama of Italian exports to China and how the reference market is structured, the analysis investigated cases of some advertising messages of Italian food companies, to assess the difference in communication and strategies adopted.

It is evident that storytelling, although with different approaches, has, as seen, direct effects on business. However, it is not a one-shot operation but a long-term and wide-ranging planning that touches every aspect of corporate communication and that, for this reason, goes together with content marketing.

Audience involvement is central. The objective is not simply to respond to a buyer's need through a product/service, but to seek brand values with which consumers can identify. In this sense, the company must be able to tell its story and convey principles shared by the target audience, so as to establish a deep and lasting connection that goes beyond the act of purchasing.

After answering the research questions, to understand which strategies have been adopted by small-medium-large enterprises to promote Italian products into culturally distant markets such as China and which strategies are effective, in order to be considered also for a future business since the storytelling could be applied to all product and service with required a high personal involvement, it became interesting to think about this strategy could benefit from digital strategies.

As seen, companies can use storytelling to share information and make valuable connections. Digital storytelling is the 21st century’s answer to story-driven marketing and could offer an additional solution to meet business goals. Moving on to digital strategies, we can state that technology is an increasingly important part of just about everything people do here in the digital age since they rely on it to stay in touch with loved ones, earn their livings, and keep themselves entertained in their off-hours.
If technology represents a massive part of how people organize, tell, and share their essential narratives this could be central also in the marketing and communication world. That said, today's consumers do not just want great products to buy and services to make their lives easier, they want to feel personally connected to the brands they buy from. It, therefore, seems interesting to intrigue how digital storytelling can be an effective key to meeting this need, combining the power of a good marketing story with modern and innovative tools to reach the target audience.

References


Additional reading
