

Telling stories: opportunities for word-of-mouth communication.

Abstract.

Word-of-mouth is an important aspect of marketing communications and can be conceived as the story-telling of everyday life. This working paper suggests that marketing communicators' understanding of word-of-mouth might usefully be enhanced by the consideration of the tools of the screenwriter, in particular the premise and the active question. The jeopardy of the premise and unresolved nature of the active questions the premise generates may contribute to the potency of word-of-mouth messages. This working paper provides an opportunity to commence this line of thinking and proposes initial exploratory research within the context of word-of-mouth communication within students' experiences of higher education.

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Introduction.

Brands and organisations have become so central to our lives that word-of-mouth communication can be considered to be the storytelling of everyday life. Word-of-mouth can be conceived as conversational stepping stones, connecting people to each other and organisations.

Word-of-mouth communication continues to see rising interest from scholars and practitioners. This is unsurprising given that Kimmel and Kitchen (2013) suggest that in the UK and US people engage in 125 product and service orientated conversations per week, mentioning roughly 12 brands/day. Brands claiming to use word-of-mouth as part of their consumer communication strategies are many and often high profile including: Hitachi; Jack Wills; Nintendo; Superdry; Coca-Cola; Ford; Starbucks; and Domino's Pizza. However Whitley (2014) draws on WoMMA data suggesting that only 6% of marketing executives claim that they have mastered word-of-mouth: there is still much to learn.

This working paper seeks to examine the potential for word-of-mouth communication, as conceived by marketers, to learn from the principles of story-telling, as espoused and executed by our creative cousins, media producers and scriptwriters. The paper argues that word-of-mouth messages can be informed by the notion of the premise, defined by Dancyger (2001:6) as 'two opposite choices facing the main character', so central to the creative pitch for short-form digital storytelling artefacts. This working paper proposes a research project underpinned by consideration of how scriptwriters' use of the premise, might inform word-of-mouth communication.

Word-of-mouth communication.

Scholars' definitions of word-of-mouth communication often still echo the words of Arndt (1967). Harrison-Walker (2001:63) suggests that word-of-mouth communication is 'Informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organisation or a service'. This definition retains Arndt's (1967) emphasis on the informality of word-of-mouth, but arguably places emphasis on the focus of such conversations, rather than on the elements of such conversations which make them engaging and potent.

Whilst for some scholars, the key focus of inquiry lies with who is engaged in word-of-mouth communication (e.g. Mazzarol et al. 2006; Lam et al. 2005), others have examined the nature of the word-of-mouth message. Gladwell (2000) highlights that the very purpose and role of those who spread contagious messages, 'co-producers', is to adapt messages in a manner which will make those messages more potent and interesting to receivers. Kozinets (2010: 83) talking about the electronic context, suggests skilled word-of-mouth communicators take messages, adapting them to increase the message believability, relevance or acceptability. Sweeny et al. (2012) examine drivers and consequences of word-of-mouth, but take time to place emphasis on the word-of-mouth message, in particular its intensity. They conclude their work by urging researchers to 'consider not just word-of-mouth valence and volume, but to also examine specific message details, including cognitive content, richness of content and strength of delivery' (Sweeny et al. 2012:252). Thus the nature of word-of-mouth

messages are worthy of further research. This research intends to examine the content and nature of word-of-mouth messages further by drawing from the expertise in storytelling which lies within our creative industries and which shapes the generation of short and long-form digital products.

The premise.

The notion of a story premise in screenwriting narrative terms (Dancyger 2001; Parker 1999), distils the foundations of storytelling into clear facets designed to engage an audience. In terms of screenwriting the audience may be defined by age, gender, culture, genre and tone, however the narrative foundations articulated within a story premise remain consistent. Dancyger (2001:6) states that ‘the premise refers to the particular challenge facing the main character’, asserting that a ‘narrative works most effectively when the character has a strong goal’ (Dancyger 2001:8).

The importance of articulating a desire is paramount to enabling an audience’s understanding of a character’s motivation. An audience can then project themselves into the narrative by engaging with what a character desires. This however, is not sufficient to engage an audience fully, as articulating a goal provides only one solution. Here the premise adds a further layer of complication by offering an alternative goal, and thereby choice to the central character.

In the context of screenwriting, this alternative choice provides conflict, doubt and tension as the audience cannot easily discern how the story might end. It is a mechanism that artificially imbues the central character with freewill, as the character seemingly deliberates over what to do and choose in relation to their goal. The implication is that the audience engages more effectively with a narrative as the goal and resolution appears unpredictable. Heggie (1992) calls this the active question, also known as a hook. The point is that the unanswered nature of the question is the very thing which retains audience interest and engagement with the story.

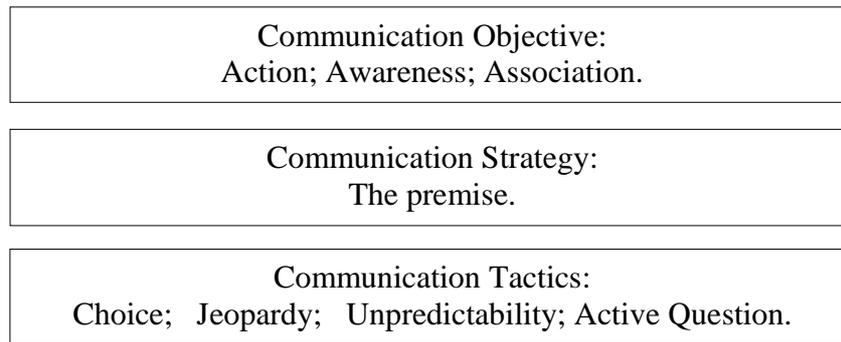
This foundational approach is also directly utilised in verbal pitching of stories (Quinn 2006); thus the synoptic articulation of a screenwriting idea to commissioners is underpinned by the use of the premise, demonstrating the premise’s appeal within a selling context.

Linking the premise to word-of-mouth communication.

We argue that if the development of screenplays utilises the premise at every stage, in both written and verbal forms, then could it not be usefully transposed to word-of-mouth communication? It may be valuable to not merely distil an idea but to communicate it in a way that effectively engages the word-of-mouth recipient.

Marketing communicators may seek to stimulate word-of-mouth conversations which focus on a clear goal, perhaps to raise awareness or box office sales of a film (Liu 2006). However the addition of an alternative outcome, generating a less predictable context characterised by choice, jeopardy, conflict, doubt and tension, may indeed generate more potent and powerful conversations. Clearly the sacrifice of predictability within such communication approaches reinforces the lack of control which characterises word-of-mouth as a form of communication; but arguably it is this very lack of control which builds authentic stories which engage word-of-mouth participants. Figure 1 provides an early conceptualisation.

Figure 1: Integrating the premise into word-of-mouth communication.



The clarity of communication the premise seeks to articulate, combined by the emotional connections and interest generated by jeopardy, may help us to understand how word-of-mouth communication of both valences might be generated and sustained.

Moving forward.

This working paper seeks to articulate the case for engaging in primary research of a qualitative nature, to explore the potential evidence for the proposed connections between the scriptwriters' premise and word-of-mouth communication. The research will be conducted within the context of students' experiences of word-of-mouth communication related to their experiences of higher education. Its intended research aim is:

To explore evidence of attributes of 'the premise' within undergraduate students' accounts of positive and negative word-of-mouth communication within the context of their university experiences.

The research builds on the quantitative work of Cownie (2015) which examines the extent of word-of-mouth communication within UK HE. It seeks to explore whether ideas related to the premise, are evident within students' reports of their positive and negative conversations about HE. It is interested in examining whether institutional prompts for word-of-mouth seek to engage with the premise and notions of jeopardy, choice and unpredictability. It seeks to observe any differences in the applicability of ideas related to the premise, between students' reports of positive and negative conversations about HE. The outcomes of this initial qualitative study are intended to inform a further broader study which takes the emerging outcomes of the research and examines the pertinence of those ideas within a broader consumer context.

Summary.

This working paper sets out plans for a research project which seeks to examine the potential learnings marketers can draw from scriptwriters' use of the premise. The aim is to inform marketers' understanding of the nature and potency of word-of-mouth communication. Initial analysis suggests that the role of the active question, choice, jeopardy and unpredictability may be relevant to effective word-of-mouth communication strategies.

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