



When Storytelling
Becomes Dialogue 8

The role of companies as storytellers has radically changed. Technological development and new digital possibilities are forcing them to pay attention to what their customers are telling them, whether they like what they hear or not. In the following chapter we take a closer look at how digital media provides new opportunities for your company and customers to exchange stories.

Poul Petersen was an ordinary Dane, with an ordinary insurance policy, from an ordinary insurance company; Almindelig Brand Insurance. But he felt that he had been unfairly treated when they denied his claim of 27,000 Euros compensation, for the serious damages caused to his house by a storm. Their handling of the case in his opinion had been extremely poor. He tried in vain to make Almindelig Brand listen to his point of view, but his attempts fell on deaf ears. Then Poul became so bitter that he decided to share his frustrations with the rest of the world. Poul built a simple website titled *Screwed by the Insurance Company*, where he told his story. It marked the beginning of a nightmare for Almindelig Brand. The story was good, it had great conflict and the rumour of the website spread like wildfire. By the time the site had reached 25,000 visitors, Poul celebrated its success by hosting an event to which he also invited the CEO of Almindelig Brand (who needless to say, didn't show up.) The party caught the attention of the media and the story ended up in the national news, while Almindelig Brand watched in stunned amazement. The site had reached 80,000 visitors before Poul Petersen finally got his money.

How many Poul Petersens do you have among your customers? It only takes one Poul Petersen before the avalanche gets rolling.

Companies are Losing Power

Companies are losing control over the information exchange and opinion forming that creates their brands. The former, one-way communication channel from company to market is long gone. And, with the advent of the Internet, there has been a permanent shift in the balance of power between company and consumer. Companies can tell their stories from now until the end of the world, but if their stories are out of tune with the stories of their customers, they will backfire sooner or later.

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Through the Internet, consumers are brought together in communities where they can share their opinions. Consumers and interest groups now have the power to mobilise far greater numbers and strength, and get their message out more quickly and clearly than ever before. This means that brands can be created and destroyed in the blink of an eye. Today, anybody with access to the Internet can take on the role of a storyteller with a global audience. It has created a whole new dimension for storytelling.

For companies it is no longer just a question of telling, but a question of listening. Instead of retreating, your company should take advantage of the opportunities this shift offers, by listening to the stories your customers have to tell you.

Involve Your Customers in Your Storytelling

Through our own personal stories we approach each other as humans, build trust and create relationships. The same is true of the relationships created between customer and company. These form the foundation of a strong brand. As improved digital developments create new frameworks for exchanging those stories,

they also open up new opportunities for strengthening the company's brand.

The link between branding and storytelling is increasingly pronounced in the digital age.

The link between branding and storytelling is increasingly pronounced in the digital age. The massive exchange of opinions about companies and their products taking place on the Internet is, in itself, a free flowing exchange of stories. They cannot be controlled. But companies can try and catch those stories to get a better picture and understanding of what is being said and why.

Customer stories are a regular oil well, while the Internet offers the perfect drill-bit for accessing them. Several companies have tried to establish a dialogue on the Internet – a sort of organised story or "brand community" if you will. By gathering individual customer stories that can be used strategically in other contexts, your customers get to actively contribute to the making of the company brand. Involving your customers in this way adds serious credibility and substance to your business. Let us look at a few examples of companies that have used the Internet to gather stories.

CASE



The People's Car

Almost half the US population has grown up with a Ford in the family. In the USA, Ford is not just another car. It is a piece of Americana, built on pride and emotional attachment. For a time, visitors to Ford's website were encouraged to contribute their personal Ford-stories – specifically about Ford's four-wheel-drive, off-road truck. One of those stories came from James Flaughter from North Carolina:

"My father and I were going to a job in Northeast Texas and were pulling a gooseneck that was loaded with our sandblasting rig. The two trailers weighed about 17,000 lbs. together. We were following one of the ranchers and came upon a hill about

a half a mile long. It was powder-dry red clay, and on top of that, it was very steep. Dad looked over and said, "here we go" and put his foot to the floor. We made it about three quarters of the way up and buried the duals on both sides. The rancher tried to pull us out, but since he only had a two-wheel drive also, he just dug in the powder and nothing happened. We didn't move an inch. Just then we saw an oil field pumper and he was driving a Ford F-350 4x4 off-road. He came up the hill and offered to try to pull us to the top. He tied us on, and just as my dad started to let out the clutch, the pumper gave it that Powerstroke pull and pulled that entire show up the hill without any help from our truck at all. My father looked at me and said, 'my next truck is going to be a 4x4 off-road'. This all happened in 1992, and in 1994 he bought a Powerstroke 4x4 off-road and loves it. We own 14 Fords of all different makes and models in all, including tractors and 18 wheelers."

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As American as this story is, it speaks volumes of the added value Ford gives to their customers. We sense the true affection that the customers feel for the Ford brand. The following story comes from Brian, in Michigan:

"My friend used to tease me about my little Ford 4x4. But the teasing stopped when I pulled his large Dodge Ram 4x4 out of the mud, twice. The same mud that sucked him in was passed over by my little truck like it wasn't there. It's hard to make fun of someone when you're sitting in a truck stuck in the middle of a mud hole."

When collecting stories for your company, it is important to keep in mind what those stories are going to contribute and how they can be used to specifically strengthen the company's brand and support the core story? Ford did not have a particular strategic aim with collecting these stories. They lie hidden far down the order on the corporate website. But in order for the

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stories to have an effect they need to be visible in the right context. Ford dealers could benefit greatly from a small arsenal of stories such as this to use in their daily sales work. ■

CASE

Topdanmark



Topdanmark's Lucky Heroes

Topdanmark is one of Denmark's leading insurance and pension companies. They market themselves under the pay-off, "Sometimes you get lucky, and sometimes it's good to have Topdanmark". In 2002 the company launched their message with a TV campaign. At the same time people were encouraged to visit the company's website and share a good-luck story from their own lives. Visitors to the site could then vote for the best story and take part in a draw with prize money worth DKK 50,000 (app. 6700 Euros). One of the nominees was a story titled *The Rusty Hand Grenade*:

"When I was 10 years old my friend and I were riding our BMX-bikes in the woods when something in the gravel caught my eye. I stopped and jumped off my bike to take a closer look. It was a hand grenade! I picked it up and showed it to my friend; 'Look, a hand grenade. Cool! I'll bring it to school tomorrow'. My friend told me to get rid of it, but I argued that since the split was missing it would have gone off a long time ago, if ever. On the way home my friend wouldn't ride next to me. He said, 'If you are going to bring that grenade with you, then you ride 100 meters behind me'. So I did. We got to my friend's house and went to the kitchen where I placed the grenade in the kitchen sink. His mom came out and I asked if I could borrow a brush. She asked what for, and I told her that I would like to wash the rust from the grenade. When she saw the grenade she went mad and told me to wash it at my own house. I rode home, and on the front lawn my dad was raking the grass. I showed him the grenade, 'Look dad a hand grenade' My dad dropped the rake and yelled at me to put the grenade down at once. I put the grenade in a flowerbox, and my dad told me to get out of there. He ran in the house and ushered the family out

the back door, and then he called the police. The police sent the military to come pick up the grenade, and it wasn't until later that I learned how lucky I had actually been. The hand grenade could have gone off at any moment. The split was gone and all that kept the grenade from going off was the rust. The military took the grenade and blew it up.”

How lucky can a guy get? The competition gave Topdanmark a lot of stories, and around 21,000 people, out of Denmark's population of 5 million, voted. If you were visiting the site to vote and were not already a Topdanmark customer you automatically received an offer for new insurance. In this way the campaign had a sales target too. But Topdanmark also secured the rights to the stories sent in, so that they could use the stories in other contexts in the future.

As in many other fields of business, most insurance companies offer very similar products. They all look alike and therefore have a difficult time explaining why it is that we should buy their insurance policy as opposed to somebody else's. The solution? You create an “experienced” difference. Topdanmark waved a sizeable prize of DKK 50,000 under the noses of the people who helped them gather their stories about luck, but they also appealed to people's emotions: Tell us about a time when you got extremely lucky. All of us have experienced situations like that. Today we can laugh about them, but when it happened, it was perhaps too scary or shocking to think about. By appealing to those feelings Topdanmark moved the main focus away from their product and created a fresh approach to establishing dialogue with potential customers.

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But does this use of storytelling strengthen the Topdanmark brand? Certainly, they support Topdanmark's pay-off. But none of the stories submitted had any specific relation to Topdanmark. None talked about why Topdanmark itself makes a

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difference. Basically they were generic stories that could easily have been told by any other insurance company.

Herein lies an ever-present challenge when companies use storytelling. A story only gains real substance when it clearly shows why your company makes a difference. Otherwise your competitors can simply copy the story. Topdanmark's goal was to take ownership of the concept by having the company brand linked to the idea of being "lucky" or "unlucky". In other words when you think of being "lucky" you should think of Topdanmark. The question is, does this create a long-term foundation for a strong brand? The "lucky" concept is not really rooted in an attitude or a deep felt value anchored in the Topdanmark Company, and it may well prove difficult for Topdanmark to use the concept in the long-term branding process.

The American coffee shop, Starbucks Coffee managed to create a more explicit and natural link to their corporate brand when they launched a similar storytelling initiative in an attempt to establish a dialogue with their consumers. ■

CASE



The company believed that sharing these human stories would reinforce the idea that Starbucks is a great destination for a date.

A Match Made Over Coffee

Over the years employees at Starbucks had heard story after story of customer romances getting started in Starbucks coffee houses. There were in fact stories about people who had met their future wives and husbands at Starbucks – and a couple of times, people had even gotten married at Starbucks. People seemed to genuinely open-up in the casual, laid-back ambience of Starbucks coffee-houses.

So the company decided to try to capture some of these stories and celebrate them with customers and media as part of a Valentine's Day push. The company believed that sharing these human stories would reinforce the idea that Starbucks is a great destination for a date or a chance meeting.

Before moving forward with the idea, Starbucks sponsored a nation-wide telephone survey that included more than 400 singles between the ages of 18 and 44. The survey revealed that more than three out of five adults (62 percent) believed that a couple that met in a coffee-house has a better chance of succeeding in love than a couple that met in a bar. The reason being that bars tend to be noisy and expensive while a cosy café is somewhere safe and affordable.

The message that Americans are opting for coffee rather than cocktails in their search for romance, created a perfect platform for the Starbucks initiative. On January 8th 2003, as Valentine's Day approached, the company launched a national contest they called *Match Made Over Coffee* looking for couples whose relationship sizzled in Starbucks outlets. To participate, entrants had to submit a true, 250-word essay to www.starbucks.com, explaining how they found love at Starbucks. The most creative, romantic and coffee-rich, true-love story would receive an all-expenses-paid trip for two to Vienna, Austria, the coffee capital of the world.

Starbucks received close to 600 entries. An independent panel of judges evaluated each essay based on romance factor (40 percent), creative presentation (30 percent) and the Starbucks Coffee connection (30 percent). A week before Valentine's day, four finalist essays were chosen from the hundreds of coffee courtship stories that poured in from around the nation. On February 14th, the winners were announced: Jacquelyn and John Kuehn from the state of Pennsylvania claimed the grand prize with their endearing coffee encounter. Jacquelyn Kuehn's essay read: "Sunlight poured through the large Starbucks window ... The door opened, and my heart leaped as he walked in. I waved; the smile that lit up his face sent my pulse racing faster still ... John pulled out a chair and sat down close to me. I handed him a Caffé Mocha. 'I hope this is right,' I said.

‘Perfect’ ... Gently he took my left hand in his ... Reaching into his coat pocket, he extracted a small silver box. As he opened it, the sun lit up the diamond ... Slowly John slipped the cool, fiery ring onto my finger. His kiss melted tenderly on my lips ... ‘Stick with me,’ he whispered huskily, ‘and you’ll have exciting times.’ ‘Excuse me,’ said a tentative voice nearby. We turned to see the Starbucks bartender looking uneasy. ‘I couldn’t help overhearing; are you two just getting engaged?’ John grinned. My ring glinted as I spoke. ‘John wanted to present this to me over coffee. But actually,’ I smiled, ‘he just had it cleaned and polished; we’re celebrating our 28th anniversary today.’”

The other finalist couples from New York, Maryland and Virginia each received a \$200 gift certificate for a restaurant in their city of residence. The couple from Maryland, Patrick and Krissy, met on a blind date arranged by Patrick’s mother. “Divorce and dating again is hard enough”, wrote Patrick on his entry. “Had I sunk so low that I needed my mother to fix me up on a date? I agreed to meet Krissy at Starbucks on Sunday afternoon... We have been together ever since, and are getting married August 8, 2003”.

With the *Match Made Over Coffee* contest, Starbucks hoped to highlight the emotional dimension of the brand, which revolves around their vision of the so-called “third place”. The third place is the place between work and home where people congregate to find a sense of community; a place where you can be yourself and hang out – alone, or, with friends and family. In other words, Starbucks is more than quality coffee and hand-crafted beverages – it’s a certain experience, a certain atmosphere. And through these unique Starbucks stories, customers get to take part in a story about this “third place” – the ultimate Starbucks experience.

By tapping into these otherwise tacit stories, Starbucks invites their customers to become part of the brand, which is much more appealing than anything they could do through traditional advertising. In fact, Starbucks has only spent a modest 20 million dollars on traditional advertising over the past 20 years, during which time the company has grown from a mere 18 shops to more than 6,000 retail locations worldwide.■

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When Your Customers Become Part of Your Story

Digital technology has opened up a host of new possibilities for branding through storytelling. These new interactive opportunities give your customers the means to get involved and become part of your story. Some companies have even gone so far as to start inviting their target audience to take part in stories that transpire in their brand universe.

This strategy involves customers on an emotional level through entertainment and drama, in order to tie them closer to the brand and communicate the company message indirectly through the story. Lets take a look at some examples of companies that have used interactive media to involve the target group in this way.

Your Pen-Pal is a Calvin Klein Model

After seven successful years, sales of Calvin Klein's unisex perfume "CK One" started to slip. Something had to be done to reverse the dropping sales curve. And if the target audience – primarily fickle-minded teenagers – were to take an interest in the message, a completely new approach to communication was needed. In 1998 Calvin Klein launched a new branding campaign, moving CK One away from its androgynous image and bringing the brand closer to the universal theme of love. The result was an interesting take on storytelling in the digital age.

CASE

CK

The campaign was centred on a modern love drama. The goal being to kick-start a dialogue with the target group and get them involved in the story. At Calvin Klein a number of characters were invented to play out the story through commercials, print ads and billboards. At the same time these characters' personal e-mail addresses were advertised, featuring ckone.com as the host. Robert was introduced with the address robert@ckone.com, Anna with the address anna@ckone.com and so on. It was an open invitation to the target audience to start communicating with the main characters of the campaign.

It was a simple enough concept. If you sent an e-mail to one of the characters e.g. Anna, you got an e-mail back from Anna written as if it came from a friend: informal, confidential and personal. An excerpt from one of her e-mails reads like this:

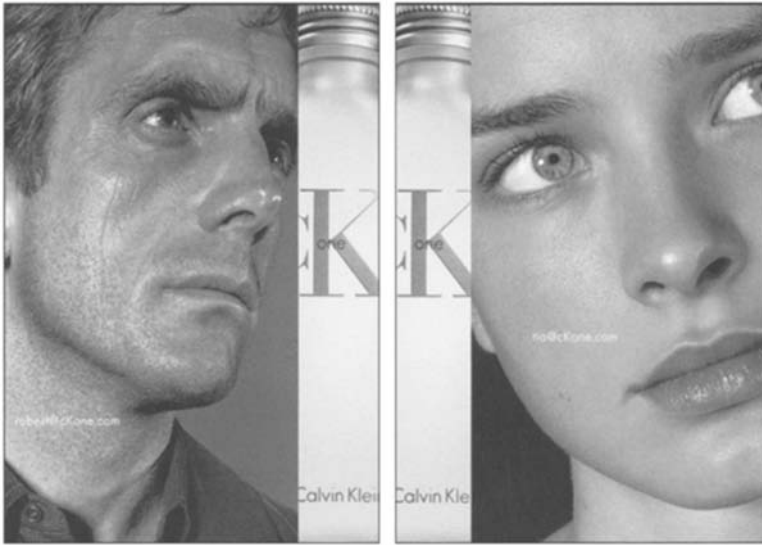
"I would have written sooner but I was scared my mom would walk in on my typing and catch me red-handed. She goes off to the drugstore right now, so I have about a half-hour window. You would not believe how screwed up an idea it was to have a party!"

The basic elements and the conflict of the story had been planned beforehand. The story was set within the world of a TV production company with Robert as the CEO. He was married to Patty and together they had a 15-year-old daughter, Anna, who was crazy about 18-year-old Danny who later became a baseball player. Tia was a producer who worked for Robert. He fell in love with her and left his wife Patty. Ian the Production Assistant also fell for Tia. With the support of Kristy, Ian's best friend, Tia also became keen on Ian – until Ian and Kristy realised that they were into each other...

The story unfolded as a web of intriguing affairs and deceit intertwined in a love drama, which most of all resembled a juicy

soap opera. Inevitably this tantalised the target audience to such an extent that Calvin Klein received hundreds of thousands of e-mails from people who were following the series and desperate to find out what happened next.

Calvin Klein received hundreds of thousands of e-mails from people who were following the series.



Print ads for CK One with Robert and Tia's e-mail addresses.

Traditional mass communication was used for only a brief period of time to create initial attention, but the story that played out through ordinary e-mails lasted more than three years. A scriptwriter was hired to develop the story and continuously write e-mails. He had complete artistic and creative freedom except for a few fixed rules: no drinking, no drugs and no sex among teenagers. Furthermore, references to CK One or other perfumes were not allowed. References to the actual product were completely removed from the story line. The short e-mails were written frequently but with varied timing in order to make it more realistic. And in each mail, the characters revealed new details and secrets from their lives. Who they were in love with, what they dreamed about or what they were unhappy about etc. By giving the main characters of the story the freedom to invite young people into their private universes, the campaign created

an intimacy between the target audience and the CK One brand bringing it close to their lives in a completely new way. The story created a universe peppered with values that were easy for the audience to identify with. They could recognise themselves in the characters' problems, interests and thoughts. And because the whole thing was played out in a form of communication popular with the target audience – e-mail – it contributed to the illusion of an intimate and personal relationship with the characters. Several teenagers tried to influence the story by writing to a character to let them know if the other characters went behind their backs or trashed them. A group of teenage girls from the same school considered Anna their friend, and wrote in an e-mail; "We know that you are really a machine, but you should look out for Danny".

CK One's campaign lasted three years and contributed to a significant increase in sales of CK One.

As a brand revitalisation tool, the story was extremely successful with enough substance to carry a long-term effort. The campaign lasted three years and ran in the USA and several selected countries in Asia, South America and Europe. More importantly, the campaign contributed to a significant increase in sales of CK One. ■

Young generations who have grown up with digital media are an obvious target audience for that kind of interactive storytelling. Motorola, the second largest manufacturer of mobile phones in the world, came to the same conclusion. And as the next case shows, Motorola also bet on branding through storytelling in a digital universe:

CASE



Motorola's Virtual Night-Club

Being "in" is a high priority among teenagers and young people, and many of the products they buy are symbols of that. One of this century's most notable "in" accessories is of course, the mobile phone. Nokia has a firm hold on the cool and fashionable crowd in Europe, while Motorola is more associated with the

quiet guy who does not always get past the door when trying to get into nightclubs. To change that, Motorola created an unusual branding tool that used a different approach to storytelling to try to change teenage and young people's perception of them.

The tool was an online game, built around a story framework where the user took the lead role: effectively digital role-playing. The game was the driving force of a pan European campaign aiming to strengthen Motorola's image. At the same time it also drew attention to Motorola's new T191 mobile phone with its cool, fun features.

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The virtual universe was created within a nightclub named *PartyMoto*; a favourite hangout of the stars. As part of the launch package, the user got to go to the opening bash party and meet the fixed set of characters that made up the regular clientele of *PartyMoto*: fashionistas, models, movie directors, playboys and stars. On the website, you could also read up on the stories behind each of the characters. John Yalla, for example was a notorious playboy and the owner of the night-club. He was famously quoted as saying; "This place is so sizzling hot that if I wasn't the owner, I doubt that even I would get in." Players also got to meet pop phenomenon Virginia Anderson who was famed for her audacious lyrics, husky voice and "bunny girl" attire. And the colourful, creative fashion designer Chiquita Stylez who, based on her glamorous party outfits had created a fashion dynasty of more than 150 employees.

Before the user could start playing he or she had to select a personal character. Male players could choose from a Hip Hopper with baggy pants, a Daddy Cool with a 1970s suit, or a slick Bond-type in a tux. As a girl you got to be a less-is-more Disco Darling, a Hippie Chick with braided hair, or a Bitchy Babe in fishnet stockings. Alternatively you could design your own

character and dress according to your own taste. And naturally, no matter whom you chose to be, you were equipped with a super-cool T191 phone.

Motorola's virtual nightclub at www.partymoto.com.

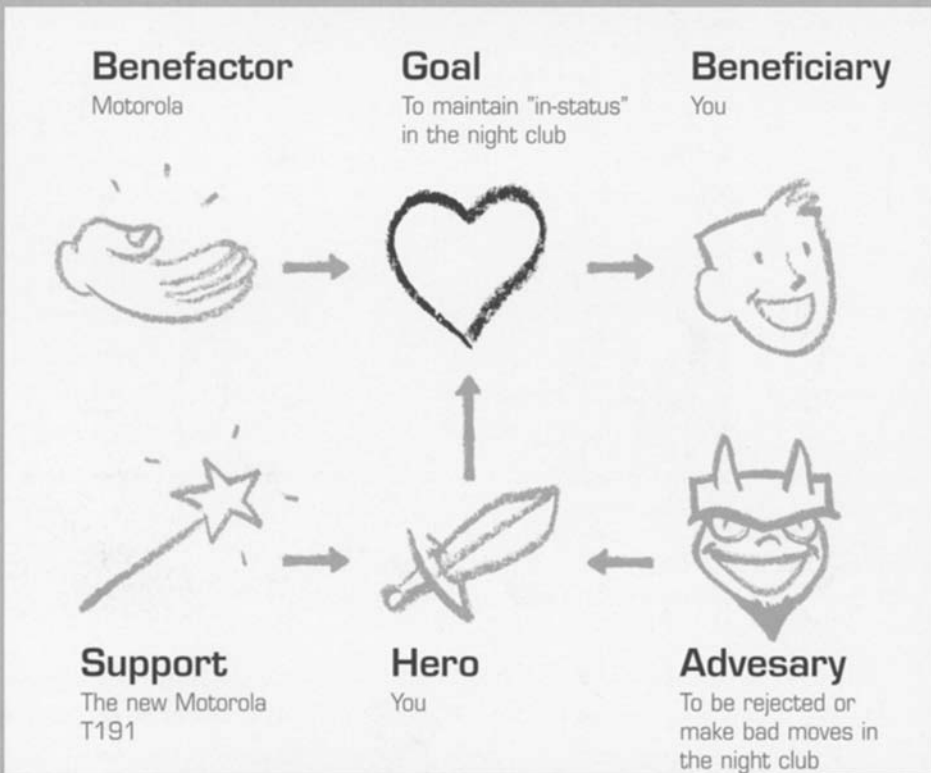


Once the game was completed you could use your points to buy accessories for your mobile phone.

The game played out by chatting and sending secret SMS's to other gamers. You collected points depending on how you got along; being ignored or rejected was bad, where as if you managed to charm your target this would pay out well. The more points you got, the more your status rose, until finally you were promoted from "bouncer-level" to "bar-level" to "DJ level"; the top spot being the "celebrity lounge". Once the game was completed you could use your points to buy accessories for your mobile phone, cleverly bringing the storytelling universe back into the realm of product sales.

If we analyse the structure of Motorola's story, based on the Fairy-tale Model it looks like this:

Motorola's Fairy-tale Model



Source: Inspired by Greimas (1974)

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The story was driven forward by the challenges the user had to overcome in order to gain points. He or she had to prove whether they were *in* or not, based on whether they could figure out how to win points in the night-club of the stars using the Motorola mobile phone as a means to achieving that goal. The campaign used a number of words and symbols already used by the target audience. At the same time, the story used the mobile phone as a status symbol and a "must-have" when it comes to

Motorola brand has a visible position in the story and is explicitly connected to the "in" status.

successful social interaction with friends. The Motorola brand had a visible position in the story and is explicitly connected to the "in" status, and the ability to manoeuvre socially in cool circles such as a nightclub.

Besides banner advertising, the game of PartyMoto was spread virally as users recommended the game to their friends. In order to participate, users had to register on the web-site creating an even bigger potential customer database for the company to build on. ■

Digital Storytelling – Something for Everyone

The examples we have looked at so far show how companies today have begun using the vast array of digital possibilities as a means for creating dialogue with their target audience and getting them involved in a story. But the fusion between storytelling and the digital media is far from new. At the start of the 1990s, when the Internet was still making its first tentative steps, a small movement sprung up in the USA around the phenomenon of digital storytelling.

At first, digital storytelling sounded like one of those fancy management buzz-words, but it was actually a grassroots phenomenon. It began among a group of artists and creatives who were driven by the idea of fusing new digital tools with the need for human beings to tell and share their stories. It was also a rebellion against the established media's monopoly on storytelling.

Digital storytelling is a two-part process: 1) digital production and 2) digital distribution. The digital revolution means that ordinary people can begin producing their own little stories using a computer. By digitally mixing pictures, animation, video, text, sound and music we are given a number of tools to enhance the message in our story. But digital storytelling is also

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about using the Internet as a means of distribution. By launching our stories in the “global movie theatre” we can share our experiences with each other.

The Godfather of digital storytelling was the American, Dana Atchley (1941-2000), who in 1993 took the title of *Digital Storyteller*. Atchley used his own life story as a starting point. He amassed a huge amount of material – old family photos, letters, drawings, music, interviews and old movies and edited the material together on his Apple-computer, eventually ending up with a series of small stories documenting the important events in his life. These experiments became the foundation of an interactive live performance he named *NextExit*.

The Godfather of digital storytelling was the American, Dana Atchley.

With *NextExit*, Dana Atchley attained guru-status among the growing number of digital storytellers in the USA. Creative personalities adopted the phenomenon in order to express their art and tell their stories. In 1995 in an attempt to further spread the idea, Dana Atchley set up the first annual *Digital Storytelling Festival*. Here you could see digital stories in the making, as participants learned how to use the digital tools for storytelling. Later Atchley expanded his work as a digital storyteller and started counselling companies in the art of digital storytelling including Apple, Coca-Cola and Pinnacle Systems.