

Cambridge Judge Business School

Research Report Summary

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AS A TOOL FOR NON-PROFITS TO ACHIEVE LEGITIMACY

Raaida Mannaa

MSt, Social Innovation, Cambridge 2018

Edited by **Dr Michelle Fava**

Research supervised by **Professor Paul Tracey**



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE
Judge Business School

Contents

Key findings	1
Background.....	1
Emerging themes	1
Implications and future research	6
References.....	6
About the project	7

Key findings

Non-profits are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their social impact (Arvidson and Lyon, 2014) and build legitimacy. A strong narrative that shows tangible social transformation to be a core aim of the organisation can help meet this need. Storytelling is therefore a powerful tool for achieving legitimacy. This case study shows how five narrative strategies have been used by a non-profit organisation to build legitimacy, at different stages in its growth.

Background

'adiuvo' is a Colombian, education-focused non-profit based in Barranquilla. Founded in 2012, the organisation mobilises economic, human and technological resources to promote quality education in Colombian public schools. The organisation relies on storytelling as a key tool to advance its mission. Its narrative is built through a variety of media channels, targeting a variety of stakeholders.

This case study was conducted from January-May 2018. The author served as a communications advisor for adiuvo for over three years, prior to the research. To understand their use of narratives internally and externally, participatory observation and in-depth interviews were used, together with content analysis: of media appearances; web and social media content; brochures; business proposals; presentations for events; and applications for incubation programs, grant contests and social impact awards.

Emerging themes

Emerging themes

'adiuvo' used storytelling to create awareness of its mission and impact, building legitimacy through different narrative devices at various stages from venture creation to consolidation and growth. The stages overlapped but distinct strategies were used to achieve the objectives of each stage, summarised in Figure 1.

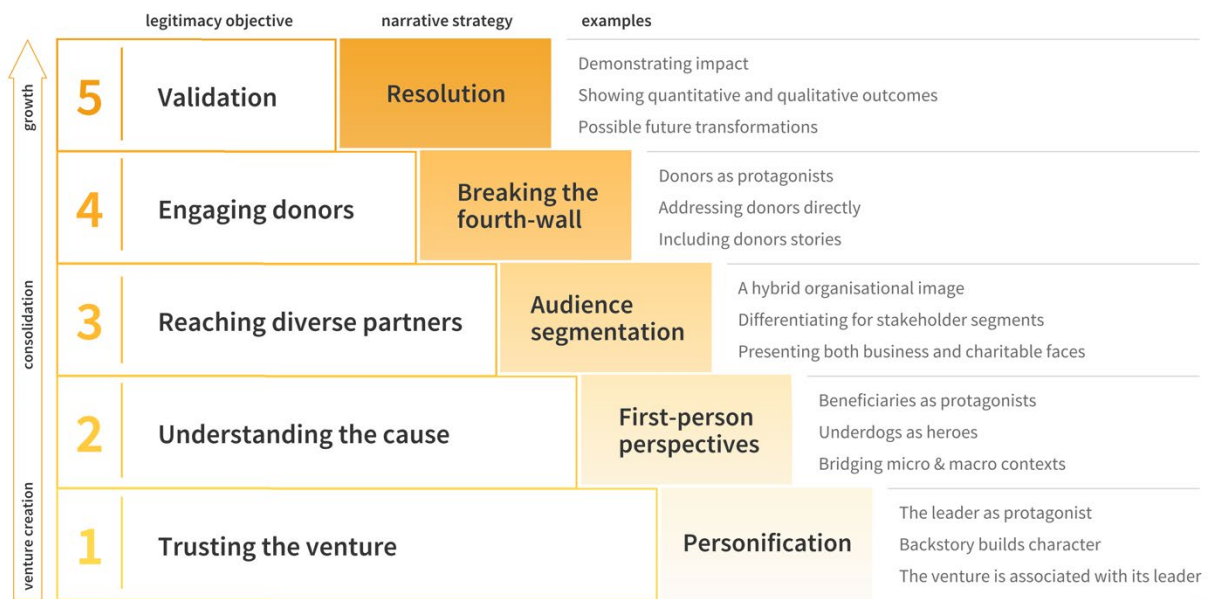


Figure 1. Five narrative strategies used to achieve legitimacy objectives as the venture grew

1. Personification, to build trust in the venture

The organisation was personified in the sense that it was seen to hold the values of its founder and director, Stefanie Tschampel. At its conception, the narrative of adiuvo was shaped by Tschampel, who was outspoken about her commitment to the cause:

"Our mission is of extreme importance and should be part of our country's vision."
(Stefanie Tschampel, adiuvo's director)

"Join this movement. We are the new generation of optimists." (adiuvo's twitter account, @adiuvocolombia, October 13, 2015)

Her own personal experiences became the story that inspired her followers:

"Listening to the leader and getting to know the way she works made me want to participate." (Anamaría Lacouture, Campaigner)

"I believe in adiuvo because I believe in Stefanie: she knows what she is talking about." (Reynaldo Villareal, MacondoLab's director)

Members of the team saw her as an integral part of the organisation: 'adiuvo is her work and passion'. They also considered her collaborative approach to be 'shaping adiuvo's identity'. Trust was established with other stakeholders as Tschampel was seen to embody their values:

"she is a self-made social entrepreneur, curious and creative;
she is responsible and wants to be held accountable for her actions;
she does not have hidden intentions."

Many interviewees treated the woman and the organisation as synonymous. The close association between Tschampel and the venture meant that the values and expertise she became known for were transferred to it. This was clearly important in establishing trust early on in the life of the venture.

2. First-person perspectives to understand the cause

adiuvo's promotional materials highlight the problem of educational underfunding, and poor distribution of funding, which they seek to remedy:

"In Colombia, despite the efforts, there are not enough funds to provide QUALITY EDUCATION for all. And many professors are limited when it comes to improving the experience in the classroom." (adiuvo promotional material)

"The most important element of adiuvo's narrative is the improvement of the quality of education: it is the center of the mission." (Julio Martínez, apps.co business mentor)

In order to bring the cause to life, adiuvo's promotional materials show the authentic voices of participants on location. Their first-person perspectives convey their intimate knowledge of the context, and close relationships with beneficiaries:

"This is a problem that I know well: I went to a public school, so I know what the challenges are. This helps me to connect with the teachers to build stories that showcase the problem in a positive way, demonstrating that we can make tangible change if we work together." (Glennys Parra, adiuvo's project manager)



Post-implementation video report example: English and Math Club Project, Barranquilla

The issue is framed as an 'urgent challenge with a tangible solution that can be achieved'. The solution being the beneficiaries themselves. Students, led by teachers, are presented as 'local heroes' and 'the most powerful tool to solve the problem'.

"adiuvo is giving us teachers a voice; they are helping us put out there the challenges we face, empowering us to make a difference." (Sergio Cetina, Teacher that coordinated a project)

In telling these stories, adiuvo characterises the beneficiaries as protagonists in a wider drama. By solving the problem of educational quality, they are 'building a better country' and tackling social inequality. This narrative is the core of their theory of change.

3. Audience segmentation to reach diverse partners

adiuvo's non-profit model is simple and stable. However, different stakeholders perceive the legitimacy of non-profits (seen as foundations in Colombia) differently, placing more trust in a charitable or 'business-oriented mentality'. As a non-profit, adiuvo incorporates elements of both, and so risks being overlooked in both instances. By understanding their stakeholder groups, adiuvo are able to present themselves as charitable or business-like, as appropriate.

"We have called ourselves a mission and purpose-driven organisation, a social enterprise and even a non-profit enterprise, depending on who we are talking to." (Lorenzo Zanello, adiuvo's scientific advisor)

"We have given adiuvo tools to know how to mix a business-like speech with their non-profit essence and they need to strategically keep using both. This is essential for them to grow." (Reynaldo Villareal, MacondoLab's director)

Presenting multiple faces potentially risks confusing stakeholders and even damaging legitimacy. For adiuvo, this risk was mitigated by transparency and trust:

"What matters is to have clarity and transparency when it comes to the operational model and how resources are spent." (Lorenzo Zanello, adiuvo's scientific advisor)

"The mission of adiuvo is so deep that one understands that there is no double intention: there is coherence in everything they do." (Sergio Cetina, teacher that coordinated a project)

4. 'Breaking the fourth wall' to engage donors

adiuvo's campaign addresses audiences directly. From the start, their mantra has been 'adiuvo is a citizen-based initiative: we mobilise resources with you...'. Donors are positioned as agents of national change: 'the government is not doing enough so we need to do more'. Featuring donors as protagonists encourages engagement:

"Donors feel they are part of the change: they want to participate; they want to fulfil a purpose." (Pablo Jaramillo, Enseña por Colombia's founder, partner organisation of adiuvo)

The crowdfunding donors are positioned as part of a community, creating a sense of collective action:

"We have joined the movement of dignity-centred leaders who serve to heal their communities and transform our world." (Facebook Live Video on adiuvo's Facebook Page, April 12, 2018, referring to adiuvo's connection with the Global Dignity movement)

The venture's promotional material extends a continuous invitation to make participation 'fun and original': 'create campaigns', 'donate your birthday', 'rally your friends'. Donors create personal 'giving stories' which are made prominent on adiuvo's webpages. In this way, donors position themselves as protagonists of the online narrative, creating social transformation through their giving.

5. Resolving the story to validate the venture

True impact will take time to emerge fully. However, it is still possible to offer a sense of resolution by presenting small wins, to validate the venture.

adiuvo found that some stakeholder groups - crowdfunding, microfinance, campaigners and general audiences - preferred personal stories that showed the quality of the venture's impact. School and community members told stories of tangible changes. These were shared through audio-visual online resources, including blogs from beneficiaries:

"We now have access to a clean and private bathroom."

"As the principal of the school, I can tell you that I am very happy with the results. They are evident."

"The community believes in this and wants to do more now that they have seen progress."

"Openly showing the post financing results of each project let us know that adiuvo's work is legitimate" (La Vaquinha's director - Crowdfunding platform)

Showing conspicuous impact through personal stories creates confidence in the projects' authenticity and builds rapport with stakeholders.

Other stakeholders - larger donors, partners, competitors or incubators - wished to see quantitative measures of impact, such as the number of beneficiaries in a given period. These were often communicated privately, but also in promotional material:

"To date, we have completed 17 projects in 37 educational institutions all over the country, impacting the lives of 1750 students in vulnerable conditions." (adiuvo's 2017 corporate brochure)

However, adiuvo's team is aware that this approach is limited. Long-term impact is difficult to account for, and inconspicuous benefits may be equally important. Quantitative accounts of impact are, as adiuvo's director explains, 'needed but very limited'. Acknowledging these limitations is important to ensure a balanced approach.

Implications and future research

Narratives are an important tool for non-profits to gain legitimacy. This research provides a positive example of how narrative strategies can build legitimacy throughout the creation and growth of a social venture. It is important to build a critical understanding of how such narratives can be used and, indeed, could be mis-used. We hope to see further research into the storytelling techniques used across the many organisational forms in which social innovation can happen.

We hope this case study will facilitate discussion around the challenges non-profits are facing, from access to funding to demonstrating the relevance of their work. Many struggles are created by a perceived need to paint an overly positive picture of social ventures. We contend that more authentic narratives could be important in sustaining the relevance and legitimacy of social ventures as an organisational form, in the long-term. In addition, much existing literature on social entrepreneurship is imbued with a sense of 'newness' which, Dey and Steyaert (2010) have argued, has contributed to an 'inadequate mode of academic representation'. We contend that a longer view of how non-profits have operated can offer important perspectives on social enterprise, as the organisational forms are not so different.

References

Arvidson, M, & Lyon, F. (2013) 'Social Impact Measurement and Non-profit Organisations: Compliance, Resistance, and Promotion'. *International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 25(4), pp. 1–20.

Dey, P. & Steyaert, C. (2006) 'Keeping (Social) Entrepreneurship Hybrid: Towards a Dangerous Research Agenda?'. *RENT XX: Research in Entrepreneurship and Small Business*, pp. 1–46.

Dey, P. & Steyaert, C. (2010) 'The Politics of Narrating Social Entrepreneurship'. *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy*, 4(1), pp. 85–108.

About the project

This research was carried out with the support of The Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation.

It was designed and conducted by graduates of the MSt Social Innovation, with the support of faculty and fellows of the programme. The Centre is committed to ensuring wide access to our research findings. We welcome your feedback and ongoing support. The views of the authors do not represent those of their employers or Cambridge Judge Business School. If you wish to discuss this research or access the full report, please contact the Centre at: socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk.

The Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation builds best practices across business, civil society, policy and academia for a more equitable, inclusive and sustainable world.

Cambridge Judge Business School
University of Cambridge
Trumpington Street
Cambridge
CB2 1AG
United Kingdom

T +44(0)1223 339700
enquiries@jbs.cam.ac.uk
www.jbs.cam.ac.uk

