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# Communicating Experiences: A Narrative Approach to Creating Service Brand Image

Dan Padgett and Douglas Allen

*The authors discuss the potential merits of taking a narrative approach to communicating service brand image through advertising. On the assumption that a primary goal of advertising should be to create a vivid image of the brand in consumers' minds, they assess past definitions of brand image and adapt them to the marketing of services. They review metaphors used previously to understand services, and emphasize that the experiential aspect of services should play an important role in how service brand image is conceptualized. Specifically, they suggest that experience is a useful conceptualization for understanding service brand image because it represents the customer's perspective of a service and the symbolic meanings created during service consumption. Using their conceptualization of service as experience, the authors discuss how to view consumers' comprehension of services, and thus how to communicate about services through advertising. They draw on narrative theory to suggest that narrative thought is a predominant cognitive mode of comprehension used by consumers to interpret experience (and hence services) and that narrative advertising should be effective in communicating service experience. Finally, they present a series of propositions linking the formal structure of advertising to responses related to the creation of service brand image.*

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## Service Brand Image

One of the most heated and enduring debates in the marketing and advertising literature pertains to advertising effectiveness: What are the effects of advertising on consumers? What effects should advertisers attempt to achieve? Kotler and Armstrong (1996) suggest that general advertising objectives should include informing, persuading, and reminding consumers. Other scholars have argued that generating sales is the more practical goal for advertisers (e.g., Tellis and Weiss 1995). Anderson and Barry (1979) characterize the two positions as the *hierarchy of effects school* and *sales school*, respectively. However, those are not the only views on the appropriate goals for advertising. For example, more recently, an emphasis has been placed on the role of emotion and affect in advertising (Holbrook 1986; Holbrook and Batra 1987; Peterson, Hoyer, and Wilson 1986). Involvement and its relation to how consumers perceive advertisements have also received attention (e.g., Celsi and Olson 1988; Greenwald and Leavitt 1984; Mitchell 1981).

Adjudicating between various claims as to what should be the focal goal of advertising depends greatly on one's basic assumptions about how advertising works. The hierarchy of effects model suggests that consumers progress through a series of stages such as attention, interest, desire, and action. Hence, if one adopts the hierarchy of effects model, awareness, fostering memory and knowledge of product benefits, and creating positive brand attitude are all defensible and reasonable advertising goals. If one adopts a motivational perspective, forging a bond between brand attributes and abstract consumer values may be deemed an appropriate goal. Adopting an affective perspective would suggest that a primary objective of advertising is to create positive affect toward the ad and the brand.

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Clearly, researchers working in the nascent area of services advertising face some difficult questions about advertising effects. What are realistic goals for the advertising of services? How do services advertisements work? What is an effective services advertisement? We contend that the process by which advertising realizes its efficacy is complex, and that a plurality of research perspectives on advertising effects results from that complexity. Therefore, instead of making a case for one of the aforementioned schools of thought to the exclusion of alternative views, we suggest the concept of "service brand image" as a more encompassing construct that may be helpful in providing a foundation for investigating the effects of services advertising. Several researchers outside the services area support such a position, suggesting that creating brand image, and thus positioning the product appropriately, should be a primary objective of all advertising and marketing strategy (Peter and Olson 1994; Reynolds and Gutman 1984). According to that view, advertisers create specific ad representations to constrain customers' responses related to the service brand. In the next section we argue that service brand image is particularly relevant in the context of services advertising.

### **The Concept of Service Brand Image**

The concept of brand image has a rich history in the marketing literature dating back to the 1950s. Generally, brand image functions to define the product for consumers and differentiate the firm's offering from competitive offerings. Definitions of brand image range from very broad and general to more specific, such as those equating brand image with the idea that brands have personality like meanings associated with them (see Dobni and Zinkhan 1990 for a review). Levy and Glick (1973) and Martineau (1958) offer definitions of brand image that seem sufficiently encompassing, yet concise enough, to delimit brand image in a useful way for advertising research. Levy and Glick (1973) contend brand image is a summary concept that implies consumers buy brands for their physical attributes and functions *and* the meanings connected with the brands. Martineau (1958) describes store image as being composed of functional qualities and psychological attributes. Both of these definitions are compatible with Gardner and Levy's (1955) suggestion in their seminal article on brand image that consumers buy products or brands not only because of their attributes and functional consequences, but also for the symbolic meanings associated with them.

At the foundation of the concept of brand image is an understanding of the attributes and functional consequences, and the symbolic meanings, consumers associate with a product. Hence, for services, we can state that *service brand image includes the attributes and functional consequences and the symbolic meanings consumers associate with a specific service*. Such meanings are attached to a service through a combination of personal experience, communication with other people, and advertising. It is the composite of those meanings associated with a service brand that influences behavior toward the brand, with advertising playing the important roles of informing, persuading, and reminding (Kotler and Armstrong 1996; Shimp 1997). In sum, service brand image is the *consumer's mental picture of the brand* created in response to brand-related stimuli (including, but not restricted to, advertising stimuli).

### **Benefits of Service Brand Image for Advertising Research**

The service brand image concept has potential for being an effective foundational concept for research into services advertising for several reasons. First, service brand image sufficiently incorporates the various perspectives on advertising effects outlined above (hierarchy of effects, motivational, affective, etc.). Consider, for example, advertising for Southwest Airlines. In the past, Southwest's advertising focused on developing the dimension of Southwest's image related to its attribute information and functional consequences—stressing low prices, on-time arrival, and safety record. More recently, Southwest's advertising has attempted to develop a symbolic dimension of Southwest's image by featuring actor Jack Palance, with whom many people may associate affectively charged meanings of ruggedness and toughness as a result of his persona developed over the years in popular culture. In addition, Southwest's ads stress important high-level motivational values such as democracy, freedom, and independence. Southwest is one example of a service firm attempting to develop multiple dimensions of its image through advertising, a reasonable and defensible goal. The service brand image concept admits and focuses attention on a variety of advertising objectives.

A second benefit of using service brand image as a foundation for research on services advertising is the fact that *service brand image is by definition a consumer-oriented concept, stressing the consumer's active role in creating meaning* in response to marketing stimuli and what the marketing stimuli repre-

sent. Advertisements as stimuli can constrain, but not determine, the customer's responses (Mick and Buhl 1992). In other words, by using service brand image we recognize the importance of the consumer in assigning meanings to an advertisement (which may differ significantly from those intended) and in understanding the subject of the advertisement. With service brand image the question is "How do consumers associate meanings with services?" rather than "What message did the marketer intend?" Adopting a consumer-oriented perspective could be especially helpful for services marketers because their field developed from a managerial orientation, focusing primarily on production issues rather than consumption issues.

A third benefit of the concept of service brand image as a framework for conducting services advertising research is that the concept encompasses both functional and symbolic aspects of services. Since its inception, services research has focused predominantly on the functional aspects of service. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, researchers began suggesting the importance of the symbolic aspects (e.g., Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Otto and Ritchie 1995). They contended that attributes and functional consequences are only part of the service from the customer's view. During consumption, customers also attach symbolic meanings to services. Complete understanding of a service therefore can be achieved only by investigating how a customer perceives both its functional and symbolic aspects.

In sum, the concept of service brand image is a useful foundation for service marketers to use in addressing advertising issues. As a customer-oriented concept, service brand image prompts a discussion of how customers attach meanings to services because advertisers must understand what customers "think" about services to influence service brand image. In effect, we must address the consumer's concept of a service if we are to understand how advertising can build service brand image.

### The Service Experience

Building service brand image requires an understanding of how customers make sense of services, or create and attach self-relevant meanings to services. Researchers have developed several conceptualizations of service, including service as an intangible product (Levitt 1972), service as a process

(e.g., Chase 1978; Lovelock 1984; Eiglier and Langeard 1987), service as a performance (Grove and Fisk 1983), and service as an encounter between the firm and the customer (e.g., Czepiel, Solomon, and Surprenant 1985; Solomon et al. 1985). Those conceptualizations are useful for making some managerial decisions, particularly ones concerning service production and delivery, but they have two primary limitations for addressing service brand image through advertising. First, because those ideas of service were developed in response to managerial influences on the services discipline (see Fisk, Brown, and Bitner 1993), they are predominantly production-oriented rather than consumption-oriented views of service. As Pelz (1926) pointed out decades ago, every purchase, aside from the most minor ones, is an event of some significance to the customer, but the same exchange is usually a routine to the vendor. The current conceptualizations of service reflect a managerial goal of establishing routine, predictable service provision, and thus emphasize controllable elements involved in producing the service. Those elements should be considered only part of the customer's consumption experience, rather than the central focus.

Second, the current metaphors for service emphasize the functional attributes and associated consequences for the consumer while largely neglecting the important symbolic meanings of the product inherent in the concept of service brand image we have adopted. As Deighton (1992) pointed out, the critical performance issue for a service is not what kind of performance the service provider is attempting, but rather what kind of performance consumers think they are viewing. Similarly, Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1989) contend that understanding consumer perspectives of phenomena requires consideration of the meanings they associate with the phenomena. Service brand image encompasses the *consumer's* perspective of a service. Hence, to understand service brand image (or the meanings consumers attach to services), we need a customer-oriented conceptualization of service that focuses on the consumption rather than the production of service. Services researchers typically study consumers' reactions to provider-defined aspects of production rather than the meanings customers create in response to their consumption experience. As we know, different perspectives of the same phenomenon often yield different interpretations. We therefore need to examine customers' participation in a service from their viewpoint, rather than from the manager's viewpoint.

### *The Concept of the Service Experience*

Zeithaml (1981) offers a potential beginning point for a customer-oriented conceptualization of service. She contends that services tend to be higher than goods in experience and credence qualities. That notion follows logically from the suggestion that many services involve active consumer participation and simultaneous production and consumption (Shostack 1977). At a more general level, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) argue that consumption is by definition experiential. Hence, we can consider the consumption of service to be an experience. As Edward Bruner (1986, p. 3) states, experience "refers to an active self, to a human being who not only engages in but shapes an action." Current thought in services literature claims customers actively produce the service, and most researchers study the impact of the consumer on the service operation rather than the customer's creation of meaning during the service.

More recently, other researchers have begun to recognize the experiential and symbolic nature of service consumption. Arnould and Price (1993) describe the extended service encounter of river rafting in terms of the extraordinary experience associated with consumption. They interpret the "lived meaning" of the service experience to consumers, suggesting symbolic meanings of communion with nature, *communitas* or connecting with others, and extension or renewal of self. Similarly, Otto and Ritchie (1995) suggest that customers are capable of distinguishing functional quality from the quality of the experience, which they define as affective, symbolic reactions to the service encounter. In sum, those researchers point out that for many services the experience itself is the key perceptual event from the customer's point of view. That is, many services are experiential, and we therefore can use the *service experience* as a consumer-oriented concept for addressing service brand image issues.

Many services researchers use the term "experience" with little explication, apparently assuming "experience" has a common meaning. To avoid confusion, we define a service experience as *the cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions associated with a specific service event*. Hence, the consumer's service experience involves the active construction of personally relevant meanings associated with the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that occur during the consumption (not simply the production) of the service. As Goffman (1974) suggests, experience entails the interpretation of everyday events. Our definition implies a series of related actions by the customer and

other people involved in the consumption of a service, and a reflection on those actions. In addition, our definition assumes a time-bounded progression of events beginning with the identification of service consumption as a distinct situation and ending with the resolution of the situation. The experience is a perceptual phenomenon that suggests customer-defined boundaries for the situation. Actions that occur in a setting over time are the province of drama.

### *The Drama of Experience*

Drama has been used to describe a variety of consumption-related contexts, including rituals (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), consumer experiences (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), and even services (Grove and Fisk 1983). Celsi, Rose, and Leigh (1993) used Goffman's earlier work (1959, 1967), and moved beyond Grove and Fisk's (1983) performance metaphor of services to provide a dramatic framework for understanding the consumer's experience of skydiving. They developed the dramatic progression of the skydiving experience from *agon* (introduction of conflicting forces), through *denouement* (resolution of conflict), to *catharsis* (emotive release following the resolution of conflict). Their model is based on the classical dramatic model from classical Greek theater (see Stern 1994 for a more complete discussion of that model and an alternative model, *vignette drama*).

Given our interest in the customer's perspective of service as a basis for investigating service brand image in advertising, we suggest that the classical dramatic model is a reasonable approximation for many service experiences. Recall that to the customer each exchange is significant (Pelz 1926), thus isolating each individual service situation from surrounding events. In a common service experience, the *agon* occurs when the consumer realizes a specific need for service. In other words, conflict is introduced that requires action from the consumer. We suggest that need recognition is in essence the beginning of the consumer's service experience because it represents the moment when the situation is defined as an independent context, and activity (thoughts, feelings, and behaviors) related to addressing the conflict begins. The conflict builds until the service is consumed, resolving the conflict (*denouement*), as when a customer goes to the hairdresser to get a haircut. Finally, tension is released (*catharsis*) as the consumer realizes the emotional consequences of the service (e.g., I feel my haircut gives me a more professional appearance and feel more confident).

Using the dramatic construction as a model of the experience focuses on the symbolic meanings associated with a service, but also includes the functional component of the service. Both the symbolic meanings of self-achievement, success, and self-worth, and the functional consequences of the haircut (shorter hair, less maintenance required, etc.) are represented in the drama of the customer's service experience. The classical dramatic model therefore appears to be useful for addressing service brand image issues. However, implementation of the model for managing service brand image is predicated on an understanding of how consumers construct dramatic meanings during service experiences.

### Narrative Interpretation of Experience

Interpreting lived experience requires separating a certain progression of related events from unrelated events as the drama of experience unfolds. Understanding experience is the province of narrative psychology (J. Bruner 1986, 1990; Robinson and Hawpe 1986; Polkinghorne 1988). The basic premise of narrative psychology is that *people have a natural propensity to organize information about people and their actions in story format*. Such is the case with services, where customers must organize a complex sequence of events and their reactions to these events into a meaningful whole. Narrative theory also suggests that people relate their interpretations of experience to others by narrating, or telling stories. Narrative psychology informs our study of how customer perceptions of service and associated meanings build service brand image.

Though narrative has many definitions and is applied in many different disciplines (e.g., philosophy, sociology, anthropology, literary and rhetorical criticism), but because our objective is to explain how consumers understand service experiences, we draw from an application of narrative in psychology<sup>1</sup>. Specifically, we focus on the work of the primary theorist in narrative psychology, Jerome Bruner (1986, 1990). Bruner provides an explanation for how people understand experience. He suggests that two modes of cognitive functioning order experience, the paradigmatic and the narrative modes of thought, and suggests that they function differently and provide different outcomes.

The paradigmatic mode of thought "attempts to fulfill the idea of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation" (J. Bruner 1986, p.15). Its

goals include generalizable truth, abstraction, and prediction. To accomplish those goals, the person adopts a distanced perspective of the phenomenon, reporting observations, testing hypotheses, and using formal rules of logic to develop theories and arguments. Appropriate logic suggests a single explanation for an event, which is deemed either conclusive or inconclusive according to the weight of the evidence. The paradigmatic mode of thought seeks the superior explanation for an event, and competing explanations are evaluated on the criterion of truthfulness. *The paradigmatic mode can be characterized as rational or logical psychological functioning*. Bruner suggests people use the paradigmatic mode of thought when presented with stimuli that include implicit or explicit arguments. As suggested by a reviewer, we define arguments as associationally or logically connected ideas not enacted by characters, including ads that attempt to persuade the consumer through logic.

In contrast, the narrative mode of thought is based on the goals of understanding and the construction of meaning. "Narrative deals with the vicissitudes of human intention" (J. Bruner 1986, p. 17), implying an involved, self-relevant reflection on experience. The narrative mode seeks to orient experience in time and location by use of case studies and interpretation. The narrative mode of thought constructs stories, which suggests the possibility—or likelihood—that there can be multiple interpretations of a particular experience. The stories are evaluated on the basis of a relaxed form of causal probability. The narrative mode seeks a lifelike or plausible explanation for events, and does not necessarily seek to identify the best explanation because the idea of a correct interpretation has no meaning. Bruner suggests people use the narrative mode of thought to understand storied stimuli. As suggested by a reviewer, we describe storied stimuli as any stimuli that include causally/chronologically connected events enacted by characters (irrespective of ad form or presentation format—drama, song, dance, mime, etc.). Typically, such stimuli involve actors with motives, an event sequence, and a setting that has physical, social, and temporal components. Hence, according to Bruner, ads that portray actors (characters or brands) acting to achieve some goal would be interpreted through the narrative mode of thought because the customer would create a story to interpret the ad stimuli. To Bruner, our own personal experiences are interpreted through the narrative mode as are the stories about experience told to us by another.

Bruner contends that the two modes of thought are complementary, but that the predominant explanation of psychological functioning has focused almost entirely on the paradigmatic mode, rather than considering the narrative mode. Thus, most psychological work considers people to be rational thinkers rather than storytellers, a role Bruner suggests is more natural for people. Other theorists echo Bruner's contention that people use narrative to understand experience (e.g., Polkinghorne 1988; Sarbin 1986). That argument has two primary implications for service advertisers interested in managing service image. First, *given the experiential nature of many services, for an appropriate study of service brand image, the assumptions of the narrative mode of thought may be more promising than those of the paradigmatic mode of thought.* Consumers construct different symbolic meanings for the same product experience, and treating service brand image as a nomothetical construct could be misleading. How then, do services marketers communicate experiential aspects of service? Second, if consumers use the narrative mode of thought to understand services, perhaps *certain types of advertising appeals are more appropriate than others for conveying the symbolic meanings inherent in service brand image.* What should ads look like to encourage customers to associate symbolic meanings with the service firm? How do different ad forms influence customers' creation of service brand image? We discuss those issues in the next section.

## Representing Service Image Through Narrative Advertising

### *Typologies of Message Appeals in Advertising*

Message appeal generally refers to a basic characterization of the content style of an advertisement. Researchers have offered numerous typologies of possible message appeals (e.g., Aaker and Norris 1982; Frazer 1983; Laskey, Day, and Crask 1989; Ray 1982; Simon 1971; Vaughn 1983). An underlying assumption of much of the research is that there should be a relationship between types of message appeals used and the brand choice process of consumers for the product category being advertised. As Stafford and Day (1995, p. 57) state, "Whether the message is categorized as emotional versus rational, thinking versus feeling, or transformational versus informational, its effectiveness is believed to depend on whether brand choice within a product class is logical and

rational or based largely on affect." Hence, developing adequate typologies of message appeals has been viewed as important for devising product advertising strategy.

The research on message appeals in traditional goods advertising has been extended to the context of services advertising (Cutler and Javalgi 1993; LaBand, Pickett and Grove 1992; Stafford and Day 1995; Zinkhan, Johnson, and Zinkhan 1992). Most of the work is premised on the understanding that marketing services is different from marketing goods. It follows that particular message appeals may be more effective for advertising services. Much of the work has drawn on the same typologies used for the study of product advertising. For example, in content analyses LaBand, Pickett, and Grove (1992) and Zinkhan, Johnson, and Zinkhan (1992) found that services advertisements were more informational or cognitively oriented than emotionally oriented. Interestingly, Cutler and Javagli (1993) found the opposite. Further, conflicting rationales have been put forth as to why either informational or emotional appeals should be more effective for advertising services. LaBand, Pickett, and Grove (1992) argue that informational advertising is used more often for services because factual information about attributes and consequences of services may make services more tangible. In contrast, others reason that emotional or transformational appeals can aid in making services tangible or transforming intangible services into meaningful associations (Cutler and Javalgi 1993; Zinkhan, Johnson, and Zinkhan 1992). Importantly, making a service tangible through advertising has received support in the literature (e.g., Legg and Baker 1987), but the efficacy of that strategy has not been demonstrated empirically.

Stafford and Day (1995) slightly altered the direction of research on services advertising by shifting the emphasis away from the issue of intangibility and focusing instead on the interaction between the type of service advertised and the type of message appeal used. Hence, the key distinction was not between goods advertising and services advertising, but between types of appeals appropriate for different types of services. More specifically, Stafford and Day studied the effects of message appeal (rational vs. emotional), message medium (print and radio), and type of service (two categories of services based on a classification scheme by Bowen 1990) on attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the service, and patronage intention. Their primary findings suggest that rational appeals are more effective than emotional

appeals in generating attitude toward the ad for both categories of services.

Three points must be noted about the adaptation of message appeal typologies developed in the context of tangible goods to the advertising of services. First, services advertising researchers have adopted the rational/emotional dichotomy as the primary distinction between message appeals. That dichotomy has been important in many typologies of products (e.g., Aaker and Norris 1982; Vaughn 1980), but the rationale for why emotional or informational appeals would have a unique advantage in communicating a service is somewhat ambiguous, particularly as service brand image is made up of both functional and symbolic meanings. In fact, convincing but somewhat conflicting rationales have been given as to which type of appeal (cognitive/informational vs. emotional/transformational) should be more effective in making services tangible (Cutler and Javalgi 1993; LaBand, Pickett, and Grove 1992; Zinkhan, Johnson, and Zinkhan 1992).

Second, the rational/emotional or thinking versus feeling distinction has been conflated with the informational/transformational dichotomy put forth by Puto and Wells (1984; Wells 1989). Evidence of the conflation can be gleaned from the Stafford and Day (1995) statement quoted above. However, Puto (1986) goes to great length to distinguish transformational ads from emotional ads. Puto and Wells (1984, p. 638) define a transformational ad as one "which associates the experience of using (consuming) the advertised brand with a unique set of psychological characteristics which would not typically be associated with the brand experience to the same degree without exposure to the advertisement." Thus, transformational ads are experiential and transform the consumer's experience with a brand, but the transformational effect need not be affective, although it often may be.

Third, the vast majority of ad classification typologies are based on the content rather than the form of ads. That is, the typologies mentioned above pertain primarily to what is said (content) rather than how it is said (form). As Boller (1988) and more recently Stern (1994) contend, however, the propensity of an ad to constrain the meanings consumers create in response to the ad stimulus involves both the information in the ad and the presentation format. Boller's work suggests that ads structured as stories (causally connected events acted out by characters) typically prompt different responses than ads structured as arguments (associational or logically connected ideas not enacted by characters). Stern

(1994) suggests that different drama structures (classical dramas vs. vignette dramas) can also lead to different emotional outcomes. Hence, to determine how best to link components of service brand image with ad stimuli, we must consider how the content and form of ad stimuli influence the creation of service brand image in customers' responses to the stimuli.

In sum, though several message appeal typologies have been applied to services advertising, the primary distinction being between rational and emotional appeals, we have no clear consensus as to whether those typologies are useful for services advertising. As services marketers discovered in the late 1970s (see Fisk, Brown, and Bitner 1993 for a discussion), general principles that apply in marketing traditional goods may not be suitable for direct application to services marketing. Services advertising requires acknowledgment of the role of ad form and content in the creation of service brand image. In the next section we link message appeals to our concept of service brand image.

### ***Narrative Representation of Service Brand Image***

Given our theoretical conceptualization of service brand image, we suggest that a primary goal of services advertising should be to communicate and convey both functional and symbolic meanings about service experience. That notion has several implications for work in the area of services advertising. Because of the intangibility of service attributes and benefits, the distinction between informational and transformational ads should be examined more closely. First, the original distinction between transformational and emotional appeals should be more carefully respected. Although transformational ads may be emotional, their more important function with respect to services is to influence consumers' perceptions of the consumption of services or the service experience. Second, the traditional dichotomy between informational and transformational advertising may be somewhat counterproductive in the case of services. Because transformational ads convey important meanings about the experience of consuming services, thinking of transformational ads as *not* providing crucial information about a service seems misleading. As Puto and Wells (1984) point out, the classifications of informational and transformational are not mutually exclusive. We suggest that, given the experiential orientation of services, there is considerable overlap

between those two classifications—the conveyance of experience is critical to communicating information about services. Hence, counterposing transformational and informational service advertisements may not be the most useful dichotomy for addressing service brand image issues.

Following Boller (1988) and Deighton, Romer, and McQueen (1989), we believe a beneficial dichotomy would be argumentative ads versus narrative ads. Deighton and his colleagues suggest a dichotomy based on argumentative ads and drama ads. Argumentative ads are narrated (include a speaker), without characters or plot (a progressive action sequence that involves conflict and its resolution), and seek to persuade by using appeals that can be verified objectively and judged for truth. Drama ads have no narrator, but involve characters acting out a plot (again see Stern 1994 for a discussion of vignette drama ads that work differently). Such ads persuade through subjective appeals that are evaluated on the basis of verisimilitude.

Boller (1988) suggests an argumentative/narrative dichotomy. He contends that ads are narrative if they include characters, a setting, a plot, and a time frame. Whereas the drama ad involves a direct observation of action, Boller uses the more general term “narrative” to imply simply that some ads have a story as a foundation. We prefer the narrative ad distinction to the drama ad distinction because in the narrative understanding approach we adopt (Bruner 1986, 1990), direct observation of action and interpretation of written and oral representations of action are both understood through the narrative mode of thought. Hence, in our view, drama ads are a special case of narrative ads because a dramatic play is a particular presentation format for conveying a story. Other special cases of narrative ads include songs, dances, and mimes, among others, and the story presentation could be oral, written, or visual. We believe the argumentative/narrative dichotomy is more appropriate than the argumentative/drama dichotomy, as narrative is consistent with our conceptual foundation and “narrative” is the more general term, implying storytelling without regard to a specific presentation format.

The argumentative/narrative dichotomy has several benefits as a conceptual foundation for services advertising and building service brand image. First, many noted theorists view narrative as the primary form through which people communicate and comprehend experience. Hence, the dichotomy is commensurate with the conceptualization of service im-

age we outlined previously, and therefore has a solid conceptual grounding for being relevant to services advertising. Also, the narrative/argumentative distinction should help alleviate some of the confusion about the category of transformational ads. Finally, the dichotomy has implications not only for the *content*, but also for the *structural form* of service ads, thus providing several interesting propositions about the execution of service ads to convey service brand image information.

## Applying Narrative to Create Service Brand Image

### *Building Functional Versus Symbolic Brand Image Components*

Recall that *narrative ads* present a causal/chronological series of events acted out by a character, whereas *argumentative ads* present associational or logically connected ideas not enacted by a character. That distinction implies both a content and a structural component in narrative ads—a specific content (characters, actions, and setting) and a form, commonly known as plot (the causal event sequence). Our argumentative/narrative dichotomy provides options for managing service brand image, indicating that service brand image can be influenced through argumentative or narrative ads. However, given the experiential nature of service consumption, our framework suggests that argumentative ads provide limited opportunity for vesting service brands with consequential symbolic meanings. For example, consider a recent ad for the US Postal Service. The ad shows a delivery worker for Federal Express, one for United Parcel Service, and one US Postal employee. As each worker is shown holding a priority mail envelope, accompanying verbal and visual messages state each delivery company’s price and number of trucks. The ending comment by the spokesperson questions the judgment of someone who would choose a smaller, private company to deliver packages when such companies charge more than the US Postal Service for similar service. The ad provides a potentially compelling argument based on availability of equipment and price, but little symbolic brand image information. A strength of such argumentative ads is the conveyance of functional product attributes and consequences; their weakness is a lack of information that would engender symbolic responses from customers and thus build the symbolic component of service brand image.

In contrast to argumentative ads, narrative ads present stories, prompting consumers to construct functional consequences and symbolic meanings to interpret the advertisement. For example, consider a recent Federal Express ad in which the opening scene shows a man walking purposefully toward one of his seated employees. The other employees shy away as the "boss" walks by. Once he reaches the seated employee, the man demands to know what happened to one of the packages she was supposed to have sent, which he claims did not arrive at the destination on time. She timidly replies that she'll check, and inserts a disk into her computer. She then calmly replies that the package was delivered and provides the name of the recipient who signed for it. As a parting shot, she asks the boss if he would like her to call to get the recipient on the telephone. The boss frowns and retreats. As he closes the door behind him, the office staff erupts into cheers congratulating the employee. As in the argumentative ad for the Postal Service, attributes and functional consequences of the service are fairly obvious—packages get delivered and can be tracked, you have control over information, and you get reliable service. However, unlike the Postal Service ad, the narrative Fed Ex ad provides a representation of what it is like to experience the service, thereby demonstrating appropriate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with consuming Fed Ex.<sup>2</sup>

In effect, the social interaction of the service is communicated through the narrative form of the ad, which includes characters, plot, setting, and time. The ad *demonstrates rather than explains* the functional elements of the service (e.g., how to use the computerized tracking system), but also prompts the consumer to construct symbolic meanings associated with the experience of interacting with the Federal Express brand. Several symbolic meanings are possible, such as victory, support, good triumphs over evil, camaraderie, or even negative meanings such as oppression, injustice in the workplace, and stereotyping of women as holding low-level menial jobs.

P1: Narrative ads should be more capable of providing symbolic information about service brand image than argumentative ads.

P2: Argumentative ads should be more capable of conveying functional information about service brand image than narrative ads.

From the preceding examples, we would expect consumers to argue less with the Fed Ex ad than with the Postal Service ad because the Fed Ex ad makes no direct argumentative claims subject to judgments of "truthfulness." Rather, the Fed Ex ad presents a possible consumption outcome for the service. The consumer sees a scenario, which is evaluated on the basis of the plausibility and probability of such an outcome.

P3: Argumentative ads are more likely than narrative ads to prompt consumers to counterargue, and thus are more likely to be unsuccessful in engendering positive responses from customers.

Although consumers are more likely to argue with argumentative ads than with narrative ads, the latter require more careful attention to common cultural symbols that promote appropriate symbolic meanings for service brand image. For example, in the Federal Express ad, the basic plot is similar to persecution by a tyrant, a familiar storyline. The employee is able to triumph over the tyrant through self application and external help (Fed Ex), and thus is a heroic character. The setting—a large corporate office filled with busy workers—is readily recognizable, even though most people who see the ad have never been in a similar setting. Importantly, the story elements are ones many consumers "know of" and therefore can use to interpret the ad. Other meanings are possible, however, because consumers use stories they know to interpret experience (Schank 1990). Many potentially valuable settings, characters, and plots (or causal action sequences of a story) can be borrowed from current popular culture.

P4: For narrative ads to effectively convey symbolic meanings for service brand image, the ads must draw on common cultural stories.

The preceding propositions basically link the ad stimulus with the content of the ads. Ads including characters, actions, and settings should be most amenable to conveying symbolic meanings for service brand image because customers can create stories to interpret such ads. Ads that present logical arguments are more likely to encourage counterarguments from customers, but should be as effective as narrative ads for communicating functional meanings for service brand image. Although ad content is crucial in constraining customers' responses, ad structure (form) is also important. We next consider the possible impact of ad structure on service brand image.

## Linking Structural Form to Service Image Responses

The content of an ad can be presented in many forms. For example, consider the folk tale *Cinderella*. It can be conveyed as a story (a series of events narrated by a person), a play (a dramatic enactment of the story), a dance, a mimetic presentation, or even as an argument suggesting that good things happen to good people. If we assume our goal is to convey our service brand image as a good company, we might use any of those alternative forms for presenting our image to customers. We are interested in how the narrative and argumentative structural forms differ in terms of their ability to impart service brand image. A storied structure presents conflict and a sequence of related events that resolve the conflict. Events are chronologically and causally linked in such a way that those that occur before others are assumed in a loose sense to "cause" those that follow. In contrast, argumentative ads structure ideas by association, providing logical connections. The two structural forms have different strengths and weaknesses in conveying service brand image information to customers.

Stories have a basic plot structure that when simplified functions as the basic skeleton of the action and the sequence of events. However, the same plot can result in a variety of *themes* or summary points (the gist) of a story. For example, consider the basic plot structure of *Cinderella*: (1) Cinderella goes to live with stepmother and stepsisters, (2) stepmother and stepsisters are jealous of Cinderella, (3) stepmother and stepsisters mistreat Cinderella, (4) stepmother forbids Cinderella to go to the prince's ball, (5) fairy-godmother enables Cinderella to go to the ball, (6) prince falls in love with Cinderella, (7) Cinderella leaves ball unexpectedly, (8) Cinderella loses shoe, (9) prince finds shoe, (10) prince uses shoe to hunt for Cinderella, (11) prince finds Cinderella, (12) Cinderella and prince are married, and (13) they live happily ever after.

Though that plot (or an abstract representation of that plot) is common for the variety of versions of *Cinderella*, any two people who read the story might create different meanings. One person might view the story as a morality tale in which the wicked stepmother and stepsisters are eventually humbled by Cinderella's rise to prominence. Another person might consider *Cinderella* an important demonstration that holding a constant desire for something one wants will eventually be rewarded (Cinderella wanted to be happy and live elsewhere). Still another might sug-

gest that *Cinderella* is really a story about the rise to heaven from hell for people who suffer on earth. Each of those interpretations is feasible, but an ad writer probably intends one specific meaning. Prior experience and cultural knowledge will determine the most likely interpretation for a given consumer, but across consumers the storied portrayal is likely to elicit multiple interpretations.

Argumentative ads have the advantage of presenting logically connected ideas, thus limiting the number of potential interpretations for service brand image. However, because those ideas are based on logic, the customer is in a sense forced to argue for or against them. Such ads therefore may be useful for limiting multiple interpretations, but may create difficulties by forcing customers to agree or disagree with the information they provide. Narrative ads, in contrast, encourage the customer to evaluate the information on the basis of plausibility. Hence, we expect a narrative structure to allow a wider variety of interpretations than an argumentative structure that presents logically connected ideas.

P5: Argumentative ads should elicit fewer interpretations from customers than narrative ads.

The preceding discussion suggests that narrative ads are open to multiple interpretations, even when the advertiser uses common cultural stories as a basis for the ad. Hence, although the customer is able to shape the meanings to be more personally relevant than perhaps may be possible with argumentative ads, the advertiser is at a disadvantage because different customers will interpret the ad by creating different meanings. In effect, a single ad can generate a variety of symbolic and functional consequences, some in addition to those intended by the advertiser. Advertisers who use several different narrative ads during a campaign may actually increase the ambiguity of the service brand image rather than solidifying it with consistent messages. To avoid that possibility, advertisers need to present narrative ads with similar structures that elicit the same theme (or complementary themes). For example, we can summarize the theme for the aforementioned Fed Ex ad as "Fed Ex helps people do their job better" (other themes are certainly possible). If Fed Ex wants its service brand image to include the symbolic benefits of support and aid, its advertising must reinforce those meanings. The key for Fed Ex would be to develop storied ads that espouse such traits for Fed Ex. In other words, Fed Ex should present stories that have similar themes of support and aid. Thematic consis-

tency for the target audience is essential across a campaign to develop a consistent service brand image. Argumentative ads, because they elicit fewer different interpretations, may be helpful in providing consistency across different ads, particularly with functional aspects of service brand image.

P6: Multiple narrative ads work best to create an identifiable service brand image when the ads support the same theme(s).

P7: A combination of ads should be more capable of creating both aspects of brand image than either narrative ads or argumentative ads alone (narrative ads to convey symbolic brand image information and argumentative ads to convey functional brand image information).

### ***Other Future Research Issues***

The test of advertising effectiveness is determining whether consumers associate the desired functional benefits and symbolic meanings with the service brand. In other words, does the ad engender a positive service brand image? From our discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of argumentative and narrative advertising, we expect argumentative ads to be most useful for building the functional aspects of service brand image and narrative ads to be most useful for associating symbolic meanings with the service brand. An interesting question based on the idea of experience as a foundation for addressing service brand image is whether one ad type or another would be more effective for different services. We consider two different sets of services: more experiential versus less experiential services and consumer versus business services.

Some services are more experiential than others—consuming services of an ATM is less experiential (requires fewer behaviors, thoughts, and feelings during consumption) than consuming services of a vacation resort or a restaurant meal. Are narrative ads equally effective for all services or are such ads useful only for highly experiential services? We suggest that narrative ads are equally effective for demonstrating the symbolic aspects of service brand image for all services. We base that claim on the idea that the experience we are interested in conveying through advertising is the consumption experience, not the production experience. For example, an ATM service experience involves freedom and avoiding the hassle of lines and limited business operating hours, not just the act of interacting with the teller machine

(although that is also part of the experience). Rather than arguing for the superiority of one type of ad over another for more or less experiential services, we contend that the relative percentages of narrative ads and argumentative ads should be different for more and less experiential services. Services that are low in experiential qualities are typically functional (ATM, dry cleaning, lawn work, etc.), and therefore should require few narrative ads because the symbolic aspect of service brand image may have little influence in determining customer behavior. However, narrative ads should still be a primary means of establishing the symbolic meaning of consuming the service (e.g., financial freedom, control, etc.).

P8: The percentage of narrative ads used to convey symbolic brand image information should be relative to the experiential nature of the service—more experiential services (medical care, restaurants, etc.) should require a larger percentage of narrative ads relative to argumentative ads than less experiential services (banking, repair services, etc.).

Similarly, we anticipate that business consumers will respond well to narrative ads for development of the symbolic dimensions of service brand image. Because business customers are interested in results, the use of narrative ads could aid in building meanings associated with success, partnership, and fairness for service firms in the business arena by demonstrating the experience of service benefits. However, given the nature of business consumers, we expect argumentative ads to dominate the advertising output of most business services.

P9: Business services should require fewer narrative ads than consumer services because business buyers typically emphasize functional aspects of the service when making a purchase decision.

Finally, though we have attempted to provide a thoughtful and thought-provoking framework for investigating services advertising that creates service brand image through narrative understanding, several other issues remain for future study. We purposely excluded media form from our discussion. Our reasoning was that oral, written, and visual representations of characters acting to achieve goals in a setting are all viewed as stories for the purpose of understanding. Hence, in our initial discussion, we felt that presenting the basic ideas of our framework was more important than exploring the potential intricacies of the interaction between presentation for-

mat and content. Our initial feeling is that ad medium would not change our effects if the outcomes for service brand image were measured at the thematic level. For example, people understand *Cinderella* as the same story (the theme is consistent) whether they read a book, see a movie, or watch a mime act it out. We therefore expect our arguments to apply across media.

P10: Ad medium should be irrelevant to determining effectiveness of narrative ads for creating service brand image.

In addition, as is the case with any dichotomy used to provide a framework for studying a phenomenon, we chose to focus on the two extreme positions within our dichotomy to clarify and explain our ideas. In reality, many ads combine story and argument. Hence, one interesting task would be to investigate the boundaries of our propositions. Are ads of one type more effective than ads of mixed types? If so, when, and for imparting which elements of service brand image? Also, in what sequence should different ad types be used for creating service brand image? Those issues warrant empirical investigation and provide direction for future research in services advertising.

## Conclusion

We present several novel insights that have potential for furthering research and understanding in the area of services advertising. First, we address the ongoing debate over advertising effectiveness, and introduce the concept of service brand image as a laudable objective of advertising that seeks to delineate and differentiate a service brand. The concept provides a goal for services advertising that stresses the importance of consumer perceptions whereas historically much research has focused on production-related issues. In addition, as a focal goal of services advertising, the idea of service brand image encompasses not only the functional attributes and consequences realized by purchasing services, but also the symbolic and experiential components inherent in the experience of consuming services.

Second, we point out the experiential nature of many services (the consumption of many services involves complex experiences) and introduce narrative understanding as a primary mode of understanding used in everyday life, especially by people trying to make sense of experiences. To accommodate the fact that people often engage in narrative understanding of phenomena, especially experience, we suggest that

an effective way of communicating service experience is through narrative-based (storied) appeals that involve causally and chronologically connected events enacted by characters. Thus, we present the service experience as a key consumer-oriented concept for studying the consumption of services from the customer's point of view.

Third, we recommend an argumentative/narrative dichotomy for investigating brand-related meanings in ads. The dichotomy represents a continuum ranging from storied to argumentative presentations of information. Further, we suggest that advertisers can manage service brand image by using a combination of narrative and argumentative advertisements. Storied advertisements are especially effective for conveying symbolic information related to service brand image, whereas argumentative ads are useful for conveying functional service brand image information. Also, we introduce propositions about how the content and structure of ads might influence their ability to convey service brand image. We hope our work will spur efforts to explore the propositions and lead to new and alternative directions for understanding services advertising.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The term "narrative" is applied in many disciplines for a variety of purposes. Like other terms that have multiple uses, "narrative" has many meanings. For clarification, we use the term in a general sense as adopted from the literature on understanding everyday experience. In that literature, "narrative" refers to "stories" and hence, is typically used as an adjective that describes another noun, as in "narrative mode of thought," which describes a thinking process whereby people create stories to understand experience. Accordingly, "narrative" as a general term subsumes other specific story forms such as drama, mime, songs, dance, etc. In addition, that conceptualization refers to written, oral, and visual representations of a story. We use "narrative" consistently in that way throughout the article.

<sup>2</sup>In our framework, the ad is classified as a narrative as it includes actors, purposeful behaviors, and a setting—components of a narrative ad. Other, more restrictive dichotomies based on how terms are used in literary criticism might classify the ad as a drama ad because it

lacks a formal speaker or narrator. In our framework for developing service brand image, the foundation for the ad (story vs. argument) is more important than presentation format (drama, narrative, argument, etc.). Note that in a strict sense, all ads have an implied narrator because consumers know that an ad is a purposeful marketing communication. Hence, from a formal perspective, all ads have a narrator. We chose the more general use of "narrative."

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