

Communication Design For Social Impact.

Using Digital Media And Storytelling Practices For Disseminating Csr Activities

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ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) represents the opportunity to include ethical and environmental issues in a company strategic vision, aiming at creating competitive value on three main assets: economy, society, and environment. Although there are many virtuous companies, which operate not only for increasing profitable outcomes, but also for fostering sustainable development, many CSR activities remain unknown for the wide audience. This is partly due to the fact that promotional and communication strategies are mainly focused on pushing products and services on the market, keeping business vision and brand's values on a secondary level.

Today, design as a discipline is more and more involved into transformative social, economic and environmental scenarios. If, on the one hand, there can be identified many relevant design projects aimed at fostering social wellness, on the other hand, it is likewise fundamental to identify engaging ways for communicating and disseminating best practices, with the goal of expanding the awareness of apparently unrelated audiences towards societal responsibility.

Based on the consideration that communicating CSR activities requires a strategic approach, the hypothesis validated through the analysis of the results of a course in Communication Design, advances the idea that storytelling practices on digital media represent an engaging way for establishing a relation between companies and the society. This paper aims at bringing a contribution to the responsibility of communication design towards society, discussing relevant projects in this field and proposing a strategic approach for amplifying CSR activities.

CSR and Shared Value

Sustainable development is today a relevant topic for entrepreneurs, designers, and stakeholders. Many countries have set goals to be reached for protecting the planet, being aware that the future will be pervaded by a new awareness about protecting natural systems, from which humans draw the energy for surviving, sharing a project which includes equal distribution of resources, social equality, and the work for a more equal access to economic resources. The 2030 agenda, promoted by the European Union, declares 17 objectives towards sustainable development, to be reached by 2030 in order to guarantee a virtuous existence for everyone.

In this scenario, companies have a big responsibility, as they exploit (and often destroy) natural resources without a long-term vision, with the risk of draining the planet and supporting the enormous difference between richness for a few and poverty for many. To all this, a powerful migration movement, due to the ongoing wars, is taking place in many parts of the world, making an already unstable situation worse.

However, something is changing in the industrial realm and many entrepreneurs are adopting business management policies oriented to the integration of business strategies and the attention towards environmental, social, ethical, and cultural issues. This model is defined as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) [1] and it is based on the assumption that a company can be defined as socially responsible if it does not limit its business only to profit objectives, but it also takes care of the context in which it operates. If the context (social, environmental, cultural context) is healthy, then the company will see its own business success and its reputation grow, supporting a more sustainable and innovative development. A company and its context are strictly connected: a system improvement is inevitably mirrored on the other, generating reciprocal value [2]. CSR does not represent a recent activity, even if only in the last years it has become a central topic in the economic debate; in the USA, during Roosevelt Presidency, a new business responsibility was born aiming at overcoming individualism towards a new sense of community. In Italy, an enlightened entrepreneur of the 50s as Adriano Olivetti, created a new business model based on the introduction of ethics in business processes, with a special attention towards the quality of life of his employees, the local community wellness, and the construction of a system which integrates humanistic values with a technical and scientific culture. During the 80s, the studies on CSR increased and the first theoretical contribution on the topic was produced by R. Edward Freeman [3][4]; the author introduced the Stakeholder Theory, by which it is defined the relation between a company and those groups of individuals who assume important roles for reaching business objectives. This theory was considered mature in the year 2000, when, at the United Nations, Kofi Annan (who was at that time Secretary General) presented the Global Compact, a code of conduct based on nine points, which, from that moment on, will be adopted by many global companies committed to disseminate corporate social responsibility values. The underlying principle is simple and it is based on the concept that if a company is able to establish a positive and socially responsible relation with its stakeholders (employees, clients, suppliers), there will be a reciprocal advantage not only in economical and business terms, but also in terms of quality of life and respect for the environment [5]. Moreover, the adoption of the CSR model allows companies to access financial grants thanks to a renewed reputation and trustworthiness for the public opinion. In fact, consumers are more and more aware of environmental and social issues, tending to choose products of those companies which adopt virtuous conducts on both the social and environmental levels.

To apply CSR principles means to move from a business profit culture to a relational culture and, in particular, it can be translated in the following actions [6] [7]:

- Improve the working environment through a good human resources management supporting employees' personal motivation and participation the company mission by promoting activities for safety at work and equality of opportunity; giving value to cultural diversity; supporting work-life balance, for example by creating corporate child care facilities; promoting disease prevention campaigns and supporting employee well-being.
- Improve the relations with local communities, non-profit organizations, internal voluntary organizations, and more in general the context in which the company operates, by supporting solidarity programs and promoting the relationship between companies and citizens (here is the origin of the concept of social citizenship).
- Develop a positive company perception, adopting policies for enhancing product quality by activating a dialogue with customers, consumer associations, and stakeholders.
- Enhancing the production process through origin certification labelling, sustainable production, product innovation, energy consumption optimization, and reduction of transport costs and resources.

- Improve the company reputation establishing a positive relationship with commercial partner and international suppliers, avoiding low-cost workforce and child-labor force, and verifying the ethical principles of each partner.
- Increase brand authority by promoting actions on the local context, establishing relations with universities and research centers, and promoting dialogue with young people supporting their education.
- Being part of a shared project able to improve the world in which we live.

There are many companies in Italy and the world which adopted CSR as their own flag for contributing to the planet sustainable development: for example, Illy and Lavazza working both in the coffee industry, have adopted their own ethical code; Ikea and H&M are committed to material reuse and recycle; but there are many other examples.

The model of CSR developed further through the concept of Shared Value, a term created by Porter and Kramer [8] in order to define the existing correlation between industrial productivity and the quality of the context in which a company operates. According to the authors “the purpose of the corporation must be redefined as creating shared value, not just profit per se. This will drive the next wave of innovation and productivity growth in the global economy. It will also reshape capitalism and its relationship to society. Perhaps most important of all, learning how to create shared value is our best chance to legitimize business again [9].

This way of operating might bring to a proper turnaround, in a moment in which business is perceived as a system only able to accumulate profit in the short-term, working at the disadvantage of populations and enlarging the difference between business and society. The concept of shared value is based on the idea that a company competitiveness grows as the economic and social conditions of its context improve.

Therefore, shared value represents a step forward compared to the CSR model and the NGOs, which are getting weaker and weaker in offering radical solutions to societal issues. To clarify this dynamic, it can be noted how many companies (i.e., those working in the coffee, cocoa, or tea industries) have developed strategies and techniques for sustaining local economies with the aim of increasing efficiency, creating dedicated cluster for specific crops in which suppliers, institutions, and farmers are supported according to the local economy and produce incomes for both the local context and the buyer company. In other words, it is not only a matter of creating local occupation as a sufficient benefit, but to create the conditions for a renewed economic growth for everyone. The company adopting a strategy based on shared value becomes an agent of change through collaborative models aiming at social innovation. Another good example of shared value is represented by the activities conducted by Waste Concern (Bangladesh) for transforming 700 tons of litter coming from the slums in organic fertilizer, bringing benefit to both the farming industry and the local community health and being able to produce economic value in a win-win logic, for both the company itself and the local farmers [9].

The theory of Shared Value is based on a virtuous circle which contemplates the synergy between:

- The ideation of new products and markets, i.e., healthy and organic food, microcredit and micro-financing, low-cost mobile phones and technology products, digital services for distance price control, packaging reduction, assistance services;
- The redefinition of productivity in the value chain, such as assets, processes, and already existing activities;
- Enabling local clusters development for supporting the activities aimed at increasing value.

According to Porter and Kramer, the concept of shared value is able to “redefine capitalism”, as companies will be the agents promoting and sustaining new consumption in favour of a

more sustainable economy. Moreover, Porter and Kramer affirm that “Profits involving a social purpose represent a higher form of capitalism, one that will enable society to advance more rapidly while allowing companies to grow even more. The result is a positive cycle of company and community prosperity, which leads to profits that endure” [9].

The interconnection between shared value and social value will be, in the future, the driving force for companies willing to earn back their reputation which was put into crisis by questionable ethical practices.

A main critical point emerges in the CSR and Shared Value models: companies adopting these approaches usually keep their activities unknown for the wide audience, unable to dedicate specific communication campaigns. However, the scientific literature demonstrates how important communication is for promoting a company social values [10] [11] [12] [13]. The communication project for Leroy Merlin which is going to be discussed in this paper brings to attention the use of dedicated engagement strategies and campaigns for communicating CSR activities effectively.

CSR activities: the case of Leroy Merlin

There are many European companies which have adopted and applied CSR principles to their businesses; among them the case of Leroy Merlin is remarkable. Leroy Merlin is a French multinational company working in the home improvement and DIY sector. The company has 400 stores worldwide and 48 stores in Italy, where almost 6.000 employees are working. Compared to other companies, Leroy Merlin has applied CSR principles to many business aspects: from employee satisfaction to the one of its customers; from controlling the production chain to the support of the third sector, designing processes and services, both internally and externally, according to ethical values and sharing them to the whole governance model. The company’s approach is based on the consideration that the industry is not a self-referential organization, but it works for establishing long-term relationships with the context in which it operates. The company vision can be summarized in the following sentence: “each person has the right to ideal housing”, meaning that every home should be realized with affordable and accessible products. The reasoning behind this vision is that improving a person’s home mean to improve a person’s life.

The CSR model adopted by Leroy Merlin includes the sharing of its principles with the business partners, giving value to the best products made in Italy; buying raw material (i.e., wood) coming from certified suppliers and produced through renewable resources; reducing the environmental impact; respecting local biodiversity; leading the customers towards conscious choices; and offering solutions for energy consumption.

A central point in the company’s sustainable policy is the construction of a positive work climate, focusing on the wellbeing of its workers and employees, so that they could enhance their sense of belonging to a bigger project aiming at a more sustainable development. As Olivier Jonvel, CEO of Leroy Merlin, says: “I think that companies could benefit of an important competitive advantage if they are able to satisfy the demand of a socially responsible model, in which ethics is part of the value chain. For Leroy Merlin, for instance, the attention towards environmental sustainability was born almost 10 years ago, focusing on the awareness that we should limit the negative effects of Carbon Footprint. To deal with this issue we have optimized our supply chain and we have developed relationships with our local suppliers. However, the core of our business policies is the Social Business, a new concept which we think is able to contribute to reach both business and ethical objectives. This model includes our commitment to operate in the third sector and in social solidarity, giving help to schools, elderly and charity housing. A company should first of all be able to improve its business in order to offer a sustainable lifestyle for all the actors involved” [14].

For several years, Leroy Merlin has supported many project aimed at social and environmental sustainability and innovation. Among them:

-“Il bricolage del cuore” (“Heartfelt DIY”), a project aimed at supporting corporate voluntary work, by giving the possibility to the employees to work as a volunteer for one day of the year for social or community projects.

-“Agorà dell’abitare” (“Agorà of housing”), an initiative which involves many stakeholders sharing resources and competences, facilitating the collaboration between companies, citizens, and local NGOs.

-“I cantiere fai-da-noi” (“The Do-It-Ourselves building site”), an initiative aimed at responding to the housing issue. The project considers those who will benefit of the social housing as an active part in the building process, supporting a reciprocity logic: once the housing works are completed, they are involved into similar initiatives in order to help those who are in economic or socially worse situations. In this way, a value for the community is being created, supporting social integration and training for disadvantaged people.

Although known and participated by the involved stakeholders, these activities remain mainly unknown for the wide public. This is partly due to the fact that promotional and corporate communication strategies are mainly focused on pushing products and services on the market, keeping business vision and brands’ values on a secondary level.

However, Leroy Merlin can be considered as a pioneer in adopting the CSR model, at least for the Italian context; in order to give value to its activities, the company asked for the help of designers for communicating and disseminating in a more effective and engaging way.

Communication design plays a fundamental role in this scenario, and digital tools and media represent an opportunity for engaging people in the mutual relationship between companies and the society, disseminating best practices. The research group Imagislab (Design Department, Politecnico di Milano) has been dealing for several years with projects focused on building communication strategies, creative contents, and audiovisual storytelling with the aim of constructing positive experiences towards social innovation within the broad field of branding. The research group has a long experience in communicating using narratives and audiovisual media for envisioning scenarios and cities, for constructing social TV in weak urban contexts, and for communicating emergent social themes. More recently, research and design activities have focused on CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) as a topic able to connect social value with business goals of brands and companies. In order to respond to the request of a company as Leroy Merlin, the research group has worked on the definition of a design methodology able to respond to the many challenges required for communicating in the contemporary scenario, in which virtuous companies are more and more demanding to establish and maintain strong relationships with its customers.

In this paper, the results of a course in Communication Design are presented, discussing how marketing concepts and communication strategies have been adopted in order to disseminate the CSR activities of a multinational retailer company. The hypothesis validated through the Design course is based on the consideration that CSR activities not only should be appropriately communicated, but it also requires a strategic approach in which digital media represents the key driver for connecting brands and customers, harnessing the ability of storytelling and narrative representation to enjoy, fascinate and inspire people.

Methodology

The course Final Synthesis Design Studio: Brand Tales. Telling Leroy Merlin CSR Activities held at the School of Design of Politecnico di Milano, involved 45 students in Communication Design of the Master Level, divided into 9 teams (5 students each team). The course lasted for 5 months, from October to February, 2016.

Each team of students was asked to design a positioning strategy and promotion campaign for the CSR activities of the company, working on the integration between digital and traditional media. Moreover, storytelling practices and narrative outputs were considered as essential

parts of the strategic asset, in order to promote business choices and activities in an engaging way, harnessing the ability of narrative representation to enjoy, fascinate, and inspire people. Working towards the perspective of brand reputation and inbound marketing, the strategies designed by the students had the following specific objectives:

- a) CSR Awareness / Brand advocacy: strengthening the awareness for the CSR activities of the company Leroy Merlin in order to increase its advocacy on the national level.
- b) Relation Brand / Territory: communicate and disseminate the local activities in order to maintain the relationship between the brand and the area in which it operates.
- c) Internal Commitment: encourage involvement and participation of the employees as CSR ambassador.

Guided by the team of professors, each team developed its project following three main phases, each of them including specific parameters for both analysis and design. The first phase, Analysis and Positioning, is based on the analysis of the brand and its CSR activities, understanding business values, mission, and vision, and analyzing the CSR activities (if any) of the competitors. The second phase, Promotion, is focused on the definition of the communication strategy starting from the analysis of the target and its needs and media habits, in order to define goals, concept, and media channels. The third and final phase, Content Production, represents the creative phase, in which designers ideate and produce the creative outputs for conveying CSR messages and information, structuring the contents on the different media and imagining the user journey.

Case Study Analysis

The case we are presenting is one of the most representative projects among the results achieved during the design course. Although very different, all projects are including storytelling practices and strategic thinking, applied to the communication and dissemination of Leroy Merlin CSR activities.

#Procediamoinsieme (#LetsMoveOnTogether)

The project #Procediamoinsieme started with the analysis of the brand Leroy Merlin and its CSR activities, defining its scope and characteristics and identifying the current competitors in the Do It Yourself retailers market. The main point of strength was identified as the relation that the brand Leroy Merlin establishes with its customers, and with the context in which it operates. In fact, differently from other brands, which develop CSR activities worldwide, Leroy Merlin mainly conducts activities in the local context in which its stores are located. On the one hand, this approach represents an opportunity, as it allows for the creation of long-term relationships with the stakeholders, but on the other hand, it creates a non homogeneous communication, as each single project is communicated as separate from the others.

The first phase of analysis continued with a deep investigation of the specific CSR activities of the brand (Fig.1). The students examined the online available material and interviewed Leroy Merlin Italian CSR Manager Luca Pereno, in order to get the whole picture of the activities conducted so far. As a result of this phase, it was highlighted that Leroy Merlin is active on the Italian territory since 2008 and since that time the CSR activities were mainly focused on environmental issues, as the reuse and recycle of material, and the use of renewable resources for energy production. However, since 2013, the CSR activities of the brand focused principally on social issues, including projects about education and schooling, social housing and parks, focusing on weak targets as disabled people, migrants, and homeless people. Moreover, the brand included projects focused on the commitment and engagement of its employees, improving their work climate and wellbeing.

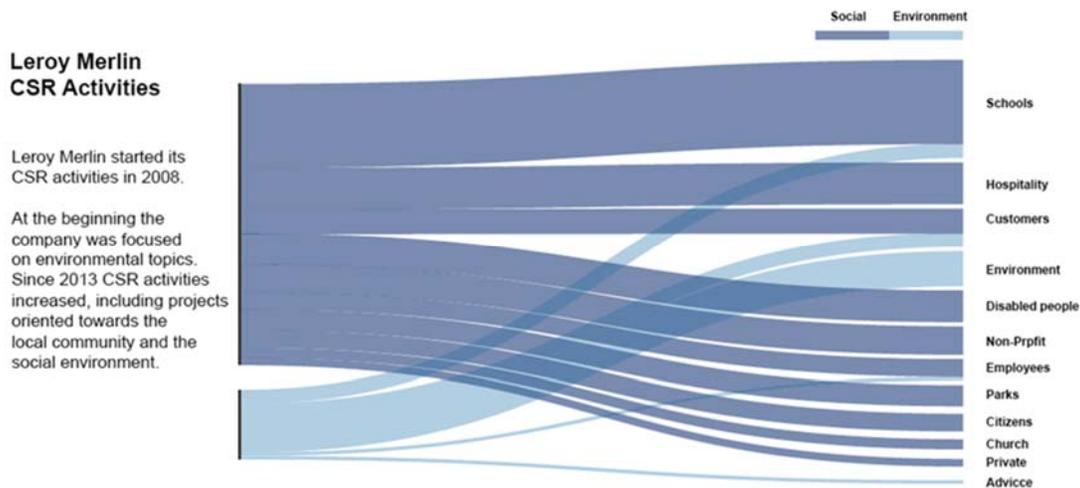


Fig.1 – Analysis of the CSR activities of the brand Leroy Merlin

For the development of the project #Procediamoinsieme one specific CSR activity was selected by the students as the main representative; the project “Agorà dell’abitare”.

“Agorà dell’abitare” represents a network of institutions, citizens, associations, and companies sharing common values; taking place in 4 cities in Italy, under the name “Agorà dell’abitare” many projects are activated, in order to involve disadvantaged people in social initiatives, and to support voluntary community work for the company employees. The students analyzed the communication channels and the media used to disseminate the CSR activities, and analyzed the online sentiment [15] on social media (namely, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn) getting to the result that the engagement (represented by likes, comments, and shares) on these media was very low, although mainly positive.

The second phase is represented by the study and analysis of the target, investigated through the creation of clusters of archetypal customers of Leroy Merlin possibly interested in the CSR activities of the company. Four groups were identified and represented using the design tool of the personas: the group of people between 65-75 years old, in their retirement age, who are looking for relations and social activities; the group between 45-64, who are looking for family activities and the improvement of local institutions (as public schools or city parks); the group aged between 25-44, who are looking for work experiences and/or voluntary projects; the fourth group is represented by the employees of Leroy Merlin. By analyzing the needs of these target groups, the communication campaign was set-up harnessing the engagement potential of digital media and storytelling practices. The main strategic concept of #Procediamoinsieme is based on specific needs of the target, in order to grow the awareness about CSR activities for both customers and employees. The strategy has a double aim: on the one hand, it is oriented towards customers, focusing on the concepts of collaboration and sharing knowledge for disseminating CSR solutions; on the other hand, it addresses also the community of employees, communicating the values and benefits of the active participation in CSR activities.

The campaign uses a mix of different media in order to reach the different target groups (Fig.2), integrating online activities with in-store interaction between customers and employees. The media mix is composed of three social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube); the official CSR website of Leroy Merlin; a monthly newsletter (which is different for customers and employees); and an app, specifically designed for the campaign.

TARGET OBJECTIVES

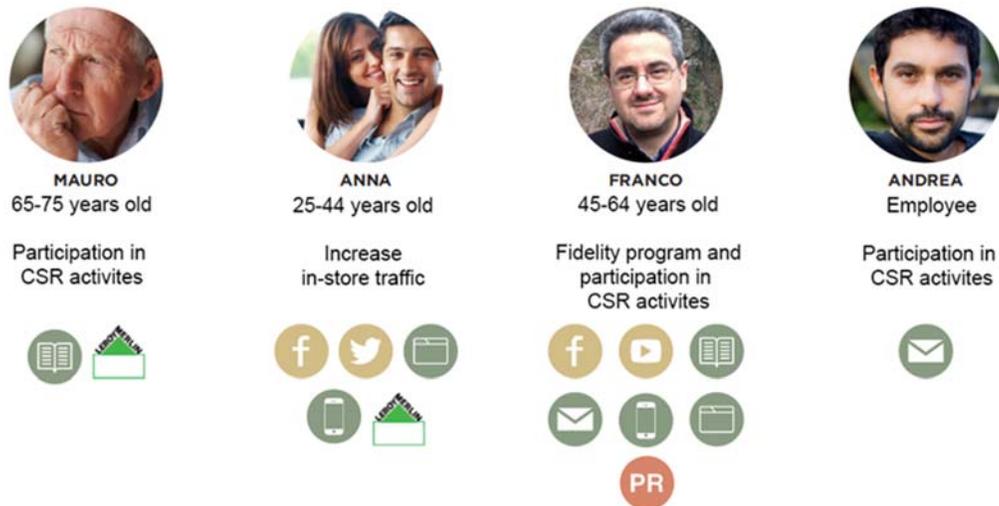


Fig. 2 – Target objectives and media mix.

The basic concept of the campaign is to tell the stories of people who benefited from the CSR activities of the brand, mixing reality with a layer of fiction, in order to emotionally engage users and customers. While the stories are told through videos on social media, the app allows users to discover additional content, which will lead them to go to the stores and participate in the project.

The third phase was focused on the design of the creative content, using storytelling as an effective way for reaching the strategic goals. The students took inspiration from real stories of the people who benefited from the help of Leroy Merlin CSR activities, and elaborated the stories creating a proper storyworld [16] [17], which represents a metaphor for CSR activities and results, and which is populated by characters, storylines, and conflicts. The storyworld describes a situation in which the world is pervaded by wars and conflicts, and for each hostile event, things in the world appears more and more oblique, until they inevitably break. However, a group of resisting citizens, organizations, and institutions start to work together in order to set things back on track, working collaboratively for improving the world. Three main characters are presented through their personal stories: Yussuf, a Syrian refugee who flew from his country since he lost his house; Lucia, an Italian teacher who works in a damaged public school; and Mario, a man who lost his job. They all live in an oblique world, as their situations are getting worse, until they got in contact with "Agorà dell'abitare" and the group of active citizens, institutions, and organizations who helped them.

The story of each character is told through a series of four short videos published on a Facebook fanpage entitled "Agorà dell'Abitare". The videos can be defined as animated mockumentaries, mixing the animation and documentary styles (Fig.3). Each video is accompanied by a short text, in which the user is called to find out what happened to the character and he/she is invited to click on a link for discovering the project. The landing page describes the project "Agorà dell'abitare" and invites users to participate, downloading the app for additional content, and encouraging users to go in-store for participating to a CSR activity or to make a proposal for a possible future activity. In this way, storytelling is used as an engaging way to communicate the actual benefits of the CSR activities, harnessing the power of narrative fiction to inspire people.



Fig.3 – Stills from the mockumentary telling Yussuf's story.

Luca Pereno, CSR manager of Leroy Merlin, explained in an interview after the presentation event, in which the students introduced their project to the company, that the project #Procediamoinsieme represents an important step further in the communication activities for the CSR activities of the company. The manager focused on the fact that the presented project does not only underlines the positive values promoted through CSR activities, but it also focuses on what the company can improve in order to better communicate and engage with both customers and employees, in order to create shared value among the different stakeholders. The manager continued emphasizing that the role of communication in the domain of CSR should not focus on the self-celebration of the brand, but it should focus on giving value to the current existing activities in order to stimulate and promote constant improvement and enhancement [18].

CONCLUSION

Today, design is moving from a market-oriented perspective towards a social-oriented perspective, in which the role of the designer is not only to produce ideas to sell products, but also to imagine, develop, and create ideas which could tackle the many challenges that societies are facing, working in synergy with other actors and professionals, and orienting creativity towards the recombination of existing assets [19]. Designers today have to deal not only with products and services, but also with relations, communities, experiences, and social practices. In this view, the role of design, and specifically of communication design, is not only to elaborate promotional campaigns for the CSR activities conducted by companies, but also to engage customers and people in a responsible process of consumption, considering also the benefits for the society itself. In this process, storytelling practices represent a fundamental means for communication as they allow to evoke new meanings, making use of signs and symbols adding a layer of emotions, attractiveness, and engagement to the exchange of information and messages. Storytelling can be used by designers in order to go beyond the functional solution-oriented dimension of the discipline, and activate new meanings in the continuous interaction between representation and interpretation. Storytelling represents an important strategy for designers to engage with people, users, audience, stakeholders, and communities, encouraging interaction, stimulating empathy, and maintaining motivation. As designers are more and more working with people, rather than for people, the issue of building

trust, and creating connections can be considered as a significant skill for designers. Storytelling is often used in this sense, for the ability of narrative representation to enjoy, fascinate, and inspire people.

In the era of participatory design, of co-design and design for social innovation, a communication designer holds both cultural and technical tools for developing strategies and artefacts able to represent, recount, and disseminate those practices, which would remain otherwise unknown for the wide audience and for stakeholders. However, in the future, if companies will put in action virtuous practices on the economic, social, and environmental levels, it is through communication that these contents and messages will be given proper value for customers and stakeholders. It is then part of the designer's responsibility to orient his/her creativity to growing the engagement and awareness of people towards conscious and sustainable behaviors and consumption.

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