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**Business-to-signature-story-to-Business**

*Erik Andrén, Therese Hermelin and Akankshya Mishra*

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# **Business-to-signature-story-to-Business**

A qualitative study on signature stories in Business-to-Business brands.

*Erik Andrén, Therese Hermelin and Akankshya Mishra*

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this master paper is to explore if different Business-to-Business brands sit on signature stories using David Aaker's four criteria defining a signature story.

**Methodology:** The study's qualitative methodology consists of finding different Business-to-Business brands and analyzing these if they are sitting on a signature story. To explore if Business-to-Business brands have signature stories, the chosen brands will be analyzed through David Aaker's four criteria defining a signature story. Furthermore, except the study's qualitative method, this study will also be conducted as an exploratory study.

**Findings:** The research found that only four Business-to-Business brands out of 16 fulfill Aaker's four criteria defining a signature story. Moreover, three out of these four brands tend to communicate their stories through videos which could be a factor why they fulfilled Aaker's four criteria. Lastly, when talking about signature stories in Business-to-Business brands, their signature stories tend to not be "once upon a time" stories but focusing more on their history. This means that the definition of signature stories tends to differ from Business-to-Business brands and Business-to-Consumer brands.

**Original/value:** The paper is first of its kind to analyze Signature Stories from a Business-to-Business perspective, from both Aaker's four criteria concerning signature stories and the papers own matrix regarding signature stories and external communication.

**Keywords:** Explore, Signature stories, Business-to-Business brands, Storytelling, Intriguing, Authentic, Involving, Strategic Message.

**Paper Type:** Research paper

## Introduction

Everyone must certainly love stories. Stories have been told since the ancient times of the cavemen where they sat around their campfires and shared narratives about hunting or fishing. These types of sharings therefore created effective mechanisms for transferring knowledge to other cavemens. Today, stories are told in various channels and gatherings but the importance of it stays the same. (Visual Storytelling Institute, 2018)

Furthermore, when someone shares a story, something interesting happens. Our brain creates different chemicals depending on what kind of story is being told. It can create, for instance, Dopamine which stands for the joy chemical responsible for reward and pleasure, Oxytocin (the love hormone) which creates a sense of trust and the ability to empathize with other human beings. Although, stories can also create stress hormones such as Adrenaline (energy hormone) which our brain creates during stressful or harmful situations. Therefore, it is of great importance for, for example, brands to communicate well-formulated stories which create the right types of chemicals in their brains. (Visual Storytelling Institute, 2018)

Even though businesses get more and more tech-driven every year due to globalization, a powerful emerging tool in branding is storytelling. But there is a phenomenon in the area of storytelling which plays an important role for the communication of a brand. This phenomenon is called *Signature Stories*.

According to David Aaker (2018) a signature story is: “An intriguing, authentic and involving narrative that delivers or supports a strategic message clarifying or enhancing the brand vision, customer relationship, organizational values and/or business strategy”. Furthermore, a signature story is hence at the center of advertising,

branding, and marketing. The story expresses what the particular brand stands for, why the brand exists and why consumers should choose the brand. (Aaker and Aaker, 2016)

Brands can not only rely on exposure of their signature story because only a small percentage of exposures are noticed by the audience and even fewer are handled. This means signature stories need to, first and foremost, attract the eye and mind of the audience and moreover offer a combination of seven following characteristics: Thought-provoking, novel, informative, inspiring, exceptionally relevant, humorous, or awe-creating content.

In an interview at Forbes with David Aaker, he talks about the importance of signature stories. The importance of signature stories lies mostly in Business-to-Business brands because customers have a type of scepticism in the brands sales pitches and therefore, they want to learn about successful case studies about the brands. Furthermore, Business-to-Business brands tend to be reluctant to the idea of signature stories because they struggle to find the “wow” factor. To have a distinct signature story, it needs to be strong and realistic, and not be another selling effort. (Forbes, 2018)

Moreover, literature about signature stories mostly presents the term as a phenomenon for Business-to-Consumer brands and not for Business-to-Business brands. Brands such as L. L. Bean and Daniel Wellington are perfect examples of Business-to-Consumer brands with signature stories. But why does literature not present as many Business-to-Business brands than Business-to-Consumer brands? Are Business-to-Business brands not as interesting to the reader? Do they not sit on signature stories? Can they even have a signature story? And if they sit on one, what does it look like?

## Purpose

The purpose of this master paper is to explore if different Business-to-Business brands sit on signature stories using David Aaker's four criteria defining a signature story and thus answer the following questions:

- *Which of the listed Business-to-Business brands have signature stories according to Aaker's four criteria?*
- *Why do these Business-to-Business brands have signature stories?*
- *How do these Business-to-Business brands differ from the rest?*

## Literature review

### *Storytelling*

The term storytelling is a communicative tool that more and more people adapt into their brands. The origin of storytelling goes back thousands of years when the term entirely was associated with telling a story in words, symbols, emotions, and pictures. (Moin, 2020) Although, ever since the 1980s, the concept of storytelling has been established within the field of marketing, advertising, PR, and sales (Seebacher, 2021).

According to Moin (2020), storytelling is about telling a story in a certain way to engage the audience with the purpose to reinforce and enhance the experience of a brand, a company, or an organization. This means that the concept refers to the "integration of content into a story" and the information and facts is thus passed on through the utilizing of a story (Seebacher, 2021). Moin (2020) believes that the communicative tool is used to speak to the recipient of the message and evoke emotions and associations. With that said, it is difficult to discuss storytelling without mentioning the rhetorical techniques of persuasion namely ethos, pathos, and logos. The "rhetorical triangle" that has to do with the ability to appeal to the audience by first of. highlighting credibility, second of,

evoke the preferred feeling and third of, the use of logical arguments.

### *Signature stories*

In David Aaker's book *Creating Signature Stories – Strategic Messaging that Persuades, Energizes, and Inspires* (2018), Aaker describes a signature story as a narrative being intriguing, authentic and involving. A signature story also delivers a strategic message which clarifies the brand vision, the customer relationship, the organization and its values and the present and future business strategy.

The signature story can either be based on the company's own stories or borrowed stories. It can also have different purposes such as being portrayed as a founder story, offering story, brand story, customer story, growth strategy story or a borrowed story (Aaker, 2018).

Furthermore, Aaker (2018) defines four presented aspects and criteria for labeling a story as a signature story. Those are the following: *Intriguing, Authentic, Involving and delivers a strategic message.*

### *Intriguing*

The first criteria, according to Aaker (2018), for a story to be classified as a signature story is that it has to be intriguing. A story needs to grab the audience's attention for it to be prosperous. Without attention from the audience, the story has no effect. Brands cannot either only rely on exposure to the story for it to succeed. Aaker continues arguing that only a small percentage of the exposures from potential customers are noticed and even a smaller amount of these exposures are handled. As said before, a story should offer a combination of seven characteristics: thought-provoking, novel, informative, inspiring, exceptionally relevant, humorous or awe creating. One way of measuring if a story is intriguing is by seeing if it generates a word-of-mouth effect on the customers viewing the story. This could be measured by people communicating verbally or via digital communication. (Aaker, 2018)

### *Authentic*

Furthermore, the story has to be authentic, which relates to the credibility of the text. The audience needs to perceive the story as genuine and truthful for the story to be labeled as a signature story (Aaker & Aaker, 2016). However, a signature story does not have to be real for it to be authentic. Many brands communicate fictional stories to their customers in order to create different feelings and therefore attract new customers. Even though a signature story is fictional, it has the appearance of truth, in other words, verisimilitude. Additionally, authenticity also stands for a story having substance behind it and a strategic message portrayed in the form of transparency, policies, and programs. If a story does not have any supporting substance to confirm the strategic message, the authenticity becomes very weak which could also lead to the brand being tarnished. (Aaker, 2018)

### *Involving*

Moreover, for a story to be labeled as a signature story, it has to be involving. With that said, it has to get the audience member drawn into the story which usually creates different human reactions in our brain. These human reactions can be either *behavioral, emotional, or cognitive* (Aaker & Aaker, 2016).

By looking at the cognitive reaction an intriguing story has, it shows the audience can more easily process the story and accept its meaningful key aspects. On an emotional level, an intriguing story can shape different feelings between the audience and the characters. An intriguing story can also shape feelings with the story's climax or surprise moment. Lastly, the behavioural reaction an intriguing story can create means it can motivate the ones being exposed to the story by taking action. This can for instance mean telling close ones about learnings or advice you have. (Aaker, 2018)

### *Delivers a strategic message*

Last but not least, according to Aaker and Aaker (2016), the story has to deliver a

strategic message. More specifically, the story needs to involve narratives which clarifies the following four factors: the brand vision, the customer relationship, the organization and its values and the present and future business strategy.

It's important for a story to include these four factors because a signature story can be described as a strategic asset which can create energy and visibility to the brand. A signature story can also motivate the employees by picturing a company everyone wants to work with and lastly, it can even motivate customers to consume their products over an extended time.

### *Business-to-Business brands*

The concept Business-to-Business, B2B, is a term often used in marketing and has to do with whom the company directs the product towards. It means that marketers direct the product to other businesses, in contrast to B2C where the marketers direct their product directly to the consumers (Kleinemaß & Seebacher, 2021). Since Business-to-Business marketing occurs between market contributors, for instance, suppliers and/or subcontractors, they are therefore neither the end consumers nor end customers. This implies that purchasing tends to be rather institutionally driven than individually driven. Although, according to current studies the Business-to-Business marketing area is more often converging with the B2C marketing area since the buyer behaviour is starting to become more homogeneous to which of the end customer sector, within the industrial sector. (Seebacher, 2021).

### *Signature stories in B-2-B brands*

Aaker (2018) mentions that any company can create a signature story. Although he finds them particularly important in Business-to-Business companies seeing that first of all customers more or less are buying a relationship with an organization, and second of all customers want to learn about successful case studies since it, from a customer perspective, often are the best choice for signature stories. In

contradistinction to a B2C context, where it is easier to find emotional stories, Business-to-Business customer success signature stories often attends to be more aligned to practical benefits and processes. Therefore, for a Business-to-Business brand to create an intriguing signature story, they are in need to find a way to dramatize the description, compound and/or the outcome. (Aaker, 2018) This creates three consequential challenges. (1) First of all, to be able to create a signature story that is accurately involving, authentic and intriguing. (2) Secondly, to avoid story overload and make sure that the story does not overload the target audience and/or reader. (3) Thirdly, perhaps the most significant for the company, to create a process and organizational structure within the brand to find, and later on use signature stories. (Aaker, 2016).

## **Methodology**

The methodology of this master paper aims to present what kind of research method is being conducted as well as outlining the process of gathering empirical evidence for further analysis. The methodology also presents various judgement calls and definitions for making a specific and detailed analysis.

### *Method of research*

The paper will be conducted using, first and foremost, a qualitative research method. Because this paper aims to examine if different Business-to-Business brands sit on signature stories, the paper would be better conducted with a research strategy emphasizing the work more on words rather than a quantitative method, which quantifies the empirical evidence and analysis with data and numbers. The most usual research strategy when conducting a qualitative research method is by constructing interviews of focus groups for generating empirical evidence. This paper will not conduct such a strategy. The purpose is constructed in a way which

makes interviews as the empirical collection strategy not the most efficient way of collecting answers. Moreover, this paper will therefore conduct the approach of literature review, which means collecting and analyzing already existing texts and documents. (Bryman & Bell, 2011)

Because the analysis will be conducted by gathering information from different Business-to-Business brands, the most efficient way of gathering such information will be by looking at texts and documents regarding these brands.

Furthermore, apart from using a qualitative research method, this article will conduct an exploratory study. Because signature stories in Business-to-Business brands is not such a frequent topic for research and because when a similar situation occurs, an exploratory research method is suited, this article will set out by exploring said topic. (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2015) By conducting exploratory research, the aim is to study different Business-to-Business brands and see if they have the potential of sitting on a signature story. Moreover, this article will also study, if these brands have a signature story, why they have signature stories and lastly how these brands differ from the brands who maybe do not sit on a signature story.

### *Approach*

The process of conducting this research will firstly be done by searching for different and interesting Business-to-Business brands. Because this paper asks which of the listed Business-to-Business brands have a signature story, the chosen brands will be analyzed with the four criteria of a signature story presented by David Aaker. What is very important when reading this is the paper's definition of a signature story. As Aaker explains, a signature story is an intriguing, involving and authentic narrative which also delivers a strategic message (Aaker, 2018). Although, Aaker does not talk about what kind of narrative a signature story can be classed as, and Business-to-Business brands do not

communicate very much with storytelling. This means for the analysis to be consistent with every brand, the narratives which will be analyzed through Aakers four criteria will be their history.

#### *Choice of Business-to-Business brands*

Which Business-to-Business brands will be chosen for analysis then? The authors will firstly look at the top 20 Business-to-Business brands in the world as well as Sweden which will add up to a total of 40 different brands. Afterwards, the brands will be analyzed and picked based on how interesting they might be and which sector they operate in. This prevents the paper from analyzing Business-to-Business brands with a majority in one single sector. The amount of chosen brands in the end will be based on the authors' thoughts about the brands.

#### *Credibility*

Whenever a research article of another type of paper is being conducted with a qualitative research method, the paper must present and be aware of the credibility it has. Although, some of the aspects presented as a criteria for credibility cannot be applied to this paper because they emphasize qualitative research methods using interviews as the empirical collection tool. Because this paper finds its empirical evidence in already existing texts and documents, *dependability* and *confirmability* will be discussed as an approach for credibility.

Dependability is the aspect of credibility in which the quality of the empirical evidence is reassured. It means the researchers would conduct a form of audit approach to guarantee a level of quality. (Bryman & Bell, 2011) To reassure the authors of this paper have conducted this type of credibility, All the texts and documents were read with caution to ensure valid texts were included in this paper.

Confirmability on the other hand is the approach where the authors ensure they have acted in good faith during the research.

In other words, this means the paper should be apparent that the authors have not allowed personal values, and such interfere with the research. (Bryman & Bell, 2011) Because this paper is conducted in which its empirical evidence comes from published texts, it is very hard for the authors to let their values, or such interfere with the research and analysis. Furthermore, to ensure this does not occur, the authors will conduct a plan where they will regularly read through the paper to reassure there are no abnormalities in the article.

## **Empirical Results**

To be able to achieve the purpose of the study and answer the three research questions, first of all, a rich variation of Business-to-Business companies was chosen. The observation of Business-to-Business brands consists of two different tables on companies. The first one contains the top 20 ranking Business-to-Business brands in Sweden in 2019 (Sustainable Brand Index, n.d.). The second table includes the top 20 ranking Business-to-Business brands in the world (B2B Marketing, 2017). The two selected tables together contribute with a variety of brands on both the national market, in Sweden, and the international market and it therefore creates a good foundation for this paper. Based on the two tables, we then started with the observation.

We looked into all of the 40 companies to see if they seem to have a signature story, at first glimpse. The observation of the 40 top Business-to-Business brands on the international and national market resulted in a list consisting of 16 companies. The 16 brands were selected due to several aspects. First of all, we found the companies very interesting. Second of all they contribute with a great variety of brands that together creates a general picture of Business-to-Business brands, both international and national and from different sectors. Last but not least, we are convinced these selected



brands will provide a general view of the research topic in order to answer the research questions.

We then created a table, containing the 16 brands. We decided to investigate more in depth and therefore chose to analyze David Aaker's four criteria defining a signature story, namely if the story is *intriguing*, *authentic*, *involving* and if the story *delivers a strategic message* (table 1). The table provides a foundation for this paper and a basic assumption for the main part of this paper, namely the analysis. The idea behind the table is to be able to get an idea of whether the chosen Business-to-Business companies have a signature story? If they meet some or all of the criteria, and if not, can it still be considered a signature story brand with only a few criteria fulfilled, and if so, why?

Based on the table we then created a four-field signature story matrix (matrix 1) that we adapted to the findings on the table by adding the different companies to the different boxes (matrix 2). This matrix presents four possible situations for brands whether they have a signature story or not, and if they communicate this externally to its customers or not. Firstly, if a brand does not sit on a signature story and they do not communicate it externally, the brand in question would then, according to the matrix, be placed in the *Unaccomplished* area. This means that a brand, in terms of signature stories and their communication with it, is unaccomplished. Secondly, if a brand on the other hand has a signature story, but does not communicate it externally, the brand will find itself in the *Potential* area. The potential area suggests that a brand now has potential to externally communicate their signature story to its

customers. Thirdly, if a brand does not have a signature story but they are communicating externally, they would in this situation find themselves in the *Progress* area which symbolizes that the brand therefore can create a signature story to communicate. Lastly, if a brand does have a signature story and communicate it, they are, what the matrix calls, *Accomplished*. This means that the brand in question has their signature story which they use to communicate to its customers. Furthermore, as a signature story dictates, it can create positive impressions on us.

## Analysis

This part of the article will mainly focus on the result of the observation. The analysis will present the empirical result and what it means in terms of Business-to-Business brands and if they sit on signature stories. The analysis will also contain examples from the chosen brands which will be conducted using David Aaker's four criteria defining a signature story and thus answer the following questions:

- *Which of the listed Business-to-Business brands have signature stories according to Aaker's four criteria?*
- *Why do these Business-to-Business brands have signature stories?*
- *How do these Business-to-Business brands differ from the rest?*

### *Aaker's four criteria table*

As a result of the observation regarding the chosen 16 Business-to-Business brands including whether they fulfill Aaker's four criteria, the constructed table is formulated as follows:

Aaker's four criteria table

Brand	Intriguing	Authentic	Involving	Strategic message
E.ON	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Vattenfall	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Stena Recycling	No	Yes	No	No
Länsförsäkringar	No	No	No	No
Folksam	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
SUEZ	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Valio	No	Yes	No	Yes
Ericsson	No	Yes	No	No
Ragn-Sells	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
General Electrics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SAP	No	Yes	No	No
Intel	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
HSBC	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
FedEx	Yes	Yes	No	No
Shell	No	Yes	No	No
JP Morgan	Yes	Yes	No	No

The applied table explains the relationship between Business-to-Business companies and Aaker's (2018) four criteria for a story to be labeled as a signature story in a simple yet applicable way. The table illustrates the 16 chosen Business-to-Business brands whether they fulfil Aaker's criteria: *Intriguing*, *Authentic*, *Involving* and delivering a *Strategic message*.

#### *Signature story brands*

According to the table above, the listed Business-to-Business brands tend to differ a lot regarding which criteria they fulfil. Some of these brands have a certain storytelling which is, for example, intriguing and authentic, but does not have a storytelling which fulfils the criteria for being involving or delivers a strategic message.

The most common fulfilled criteria in Business-to-Business companies is

authenticity, which means that the story is not perceived as contrived and not only great sales messages. 15 out of 16 companies fulfill this criteria, everyone except Länsförsäkringar (Länsförsäkringar, n.d.) who does not live up to any of them, according to Aaker (2018), seeing that their website hardly mentions anything about either their brand history or marketing, and is therefore perceived only as a great sales message. The criteria *intriguing* and delivers a *strategic message* are both being fulfilled by 9 out of 16 companies. With this said, most of the Business-to-Business brands succeed to touch upon the audience's very own life-world and raise attention, stimulate the audience and provoke some kind of engagement. Furthermore, they even manage to convey the brand's competitive advantages, for example the brand's relevance, personality, image, culture, heritage, or even values and

value proposition. The least commonly fulfilled criteria is the one called involving. With this in mind, it means that most of the Business-to-Business brands fail to draw the audience into the plot. Without the audience involvement, the brand can easily fail to create a desirable effect, in particular an emotional, cognitive or behavioural response, which could in fact increase the audience image of the company in a positive way. (Aaker & Aaker, 2016)

With this said, only four out of the listed 16 Business-to-Business brands fulfill all the criteria for being classed as a signature story, according to Aaker. The table shows that only E.ON, Suez, General Electrics (GE) and Intel fulfil the criteria of a signature story which suggests their storytelling being intriguing, authentic, involving and delivers a strategic message. To get a more in-depth view on these particular Business-to-Business brands and their signature stories, the analysis will continue by focusing on these four brands.

#### E.ON

E.ON uses an integration of pictures, videos and real catchy story narratives for its storytelling called “The E.ON Story”. The story talks about the evolution of mankind and its link to energy sources and uses. It narrates how energy is essential for the creation and maintenance of life and society. The story also revolves around sustainability, innovation, collaboration and power of groups and communities, for example, the power of we. (E.ON, n.d.)

The E.ON story fulfills all criteria of being intriguing, authentic, involving and delivering a strategic message. The most important message in their story seems to be that with their energy networks and customer solutions, they ensure a sustainable, digital, and more decentralized energy world – and thus a future worth living in. The story connects the aspects of people, strength of unity and transformation. It also focuses on the value of strong partnerships and the collaboration; thus the story not only involves just

customers but also other stakeholders. (E.ON, n.d.)

#### SUEZ

The story of SUEZ seems to be a combination of original videos of their successful projects and video narratives by SUEZ employees with the theme; SUEZ - the winning spirit for 150 years where their story reflects the ideas of ambition and innovation. The ambition to support major revolutions for human progress and innovations to improve mankind’s health, protect the environment and preserve resources essential for life. (SUEZ, n.d.)

The employees narrating the journey of SUEZ and life changing innovative projects with real video clips, shows the authenticity of the story. The story engages the viewers to imagine the journey of industrial adventure from the start which was the construction of the SUEZ canal. The story included project video clips of water distribution and wastewater collection network, treating urban wastewater & industrial effluents, invention of the first ever motorized refuse collection vehicle and reverse osmosis desalination plant. In a way the whole story seems intriguing and involving. The story also focuses on the importance of industrial and citizen participation to get sustainable solutions, which seemed like an indirect message to customers, potential customers and stakeholders stating sustainability can be achieved only if the entire community works together. (SUEZ, n.d.)

#### General Electrics

General Electrics, GE, uses brand storytelling as a signature story model. They find internal storytellers and they look at what is going on within the organisation and translate these stories to create personal and human connections, hence it is authentic. It is intriguing and involving as they encourage imagination where they involve potential buyers to see a different vision. (General Electrics, n.d.)

Furthermore, GE tells the story of products and services in complicated environments in terms of what they can change, help, or transform instead of what they actually do. They explained how it uses stories to communicate its strategic messages in a talk at the June 2016 ANA conference on Master of Business-to-Business marketing. Their story followed the movements of GE's DNA, the founder Thomas Alva Edison, and the way this DNA is mirrored by imagination, creative thinking and invariably being in motion, concerning the core messages and core strategies of GE. This is an explicit, however original approach to Business-to-Business storytelling. GE's authentic narratives, surprise, intrigue and involve the audience whereas conjointly being entertained and informative. GE offers nine storytelling areas, according to themselves, which includes getting personal and adapting to the media as well. (General Electrics, n.d.)

#### Intel

The analysed story of Intel is themed "Do something wonderful" which is taken from the original quote "Go off and do something wonderful" by Intel co-founder Robert Noyce. The use of impressive graphics and narrations makes the story intriguing, and the story revolves around the idea that the world needs technology which can enrich the lives of every person on earth. The story also focuses on their new visual identity stating that the new visual expression of Intel is a signal that Intel is entering a new era, where the rich legacy of the company drives its future, where the pursuit of something wonderful fuels everything it does. Intel's story is involving and connects with people as it shows how their breakthrough technologies and innovations,

for instance AI, are changing lives of ordinary people and across various areas, for example, communication, education, and health. (Intel, n.d.)

According to the presentations above regarding E.ON, SUEZ, General Electrics and Intel, it appears more clear why these brands fulfill the criteria of a signature story, while other brands do not. Although, whilst Aaker for Forbes (2018) talks about a signature story as a "Once upon a time" narrative with a distinctive beginning, middle and end, it seems to not always be the case for a Business-to-Business brand. This means that Aaker's four criteria might not be as suitable for the Business-to-Business audience than the Business-to-Consumer audience. According to the chosen 16 brands, it is not entirely unusual that the information on the brands webpages focuses more on delivering a great sales message than to actually tell a good and interesting story which appeals to the audience, not in the least was this the case for Länsförsäkringar (Länsförsäkringar, n.d.). The weakness of Aaker's four criteria in a Business-to-Business brand is the fact that if the brand itself even really markets themselves externally. It might sound obvious, but in reality, it seems that some companies take their target audience for granted, and therefore choose not to market themselves to the same extent as their opponents.

#### *Four field signature story matrix*

Therefore, another matrix can appear more suitable for this type of research. With that said a Four Field Matrix was created which compares if and to what extent the brand uses external communication and if, and to what extent it can be considered a signature story, based on Aaker's four criteria.

### Signature story matrix

External communication


		No	Yes
Signature story	No	"Unaccomplished"	"Progress"
	Yes	"Potential"	"Accomplished"

By applying E.ON, SUEZ, General Electrics and Intel in the matrix and basing the application from Aaker's four criteria

table and the in-depth analysis of these brands, the matrix can be presented as follows:

### Signature story matrix

External communication

		No	Yes
Signature story	No		
	Yes		

The analysis of E.ON, SUEZ, General Electrics and Intel combined with the four field signature story matrix creates an image of the brands being all in the same area, in other words they are accomplished in terms of signature stories. But why is that? The

brands all sit on signature stories in their communication which clearly and easily can be traced to their websites. The analysis of these types of stories in each of the brands suggests that their stories are intriguing, authentic, involving and delivers

a strategic message which gives the conclusion that these Business-to-Business brands sit on signature stories. This will firstly locate them to the bottom tier of the matrix. Moreover, these brands communicate their stories to the public, in other words externally, to customers and other stakeholders because of its availability. This suggests that E.ON, SUEZ, General Electrics and Intel all together move more precisely from the bottom tier to the bottom right corner of the matrix, making them accomplished in terms of signature stories.

Furthermore, the analysis of the websites, shows that E.ON, SUEZ and Intel use videos as a way of external communication while General Electrics do not, but they all still fulfil Aaker's four criteria regarding a signature story and find themselves accomplished according to the four field signature story matrix. With that in mind, a signature story only constitutes a narrative which is intriguing, involving, authentic and delivers a strategic message which means it can be accomplished with or without visual communication.

By having videos as a way of communication to a brand's customers can, according to Moin (2020), be linked to the rhetorical technique called pathos. Pathos refers to the technique regarding the creation of different emotions of, for example, a story. Furthermore, by focusing on pathos in the communication can awake different behavioral, emotional, and cognitive reactions (Aaker & Aaker, 2016) which also could easily be done using videos as a communication tool. One could argue that this might be the reason why E.ON, SUEZ and Intel fulfilled the criteria regarding a signature story, because their communication where based upon their videos.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This part of the article will further explain the findings, based on the analysis.

Additionally, it will also include a conclusion.

### *Findings*

From the analysis, a few findings can be established. First off, out of the 16 Business-to-Business brands we observed, only four of them did fulfill all of Aaker's (2018) four criteria of a signature brand. This indicates that signature stories are not very common within Business-to-Business brands and/ or a company might strive towards having a signature story but does not entirely fulfill all the criteria according to Aaker.

What further can be discussed is that E.ON, SUEZ and Intel, who fulfilled all the criteria tend to storytell through videos. One reason that we can identify is that a video may be an easy way for a company to involve the audience, which was one of the criteria, out of all four, that the least brand fulfilled. For a Business-to-Business company to market through a video can therefore be a rather easy and clever way to be able reach out to the target group in a desirable way.

Furthermore, as Aaker for Forbes (2018) portrays a signature story as a "once upon a time story", the Business-to-Business brands' signature stories are not characterized as such. These brands communicate their signature stories in a way, as the analysis presents, which does not fall into the aspect of a "once upon a time" story. With this in mind, E.ON, SUEZ, General Electrics and Intel still have signature stories, even if they are not a "once upon a time" story. This finding can conclude that this type of story as Aaker talks about can be hard to define in a Business-to-Business brand because said brands do not communicate their stories in such a way. Maybe there are other Business-to-Business brands who do communicate their stories as such which can be a suggestion for further research, but the analyzed brands do not communicate that way. Signature stories tend therefore to differ depending on if the firm in question a

Business-to-Business brand or a Business-to-Consumer brand is. “Once upon a time” stories are more frequent in Business-to-Consumer brands because their storytelling tends to differ from Business-to-Business brands and their storytelling does not involve as much history as it does in Business-to-Business brands.

Moreover, one interesting factor to discuss is about David Aaker and his literature which this paper is based upon. One could argue that this may not be the only definition of a signature story. This could create questions regarding why the definition of a signature story looks like what David Aaker says? If there are other definitions out there, how do they differ from Aaker’s definition?

### *Conclusion*

The main conclusion we can draw from the discussion and analysis part is that Business-to-Business companies do not focus enough on signature stories. One main reason why Business-to-Business brands might not use signature stories as much can depend on the situation. A signature story works as a strategy to get the company's specific brand message into the mind of their own target audience. This is mostly done through human interaction and word-of-mouth. With this said, a Business-to-Business brand does not have the same fundamental idea as a Business-to-Business brand. In relation to a Business-to-Consumer brand, where signature stories easily can be found, it is not that simple to apply a Business-to-Business brand since the brand does not directly talk to the consumer but to a business that later resells the company’s products or services.

Moreover, it is difficult to talk about a signature story in a Business-to-Business brand without observing the history behind the brand. Hence, it may not be a “once upon a time” story according to Aaker, yet it can still be defined as a signature story. When looking at these factors for Business-to-Business brands, it could help to read between the lines. Rather than a “once upon

a time” story the four defined signature stories Business-to-Business brand do use the signature story for a marketing purpose. They do this in an alluring way, with the aim to express why their brand exists, what their brand stands for and additionally, how they differ from their competitors, in other words why we should choose them and not their competitors.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

The study is limited to merely focus on Business-to-Business brands. The study is further limited to the research area of storytelling and more specifically signature stories. In relation to the given time limit of this paper, 40 Business-to-Business brands were selected and then narrowed down to 16 in order to provide a more in-depth analysis of the brands. After defining which companies have signature stories, only these four are further analyzed, in accordance with the purpose of the study. Moreover, an additional limit of the study is that the empirical results are based solely on the website of the brand. Entirely information on each and every brand, which construct the basis of table 1 and later on the matrix, is retrieved from the companies’ own websites.

Due to the limitation of the study, there are many opportunities for further research within this area. First of all, we identified a gap between the amount of previous research on signature stories within Business-to-Business brands compared to B2C brands. Therefore, it would have been interesting to further investigate whether there is any explanation for this. It would also be interesting to focus on Business-to-Business and Business-to-Consumer brands, for instance if the signature stories vary depending on if the brand is a Business-to-Business- or a Business-to-Consumer company, and if they vary, then how and in what way? In addition to this, it would also be interesting to examine whether it differs in different sectors, for

instance in banking, technology, insurance, or food.

Furthermore, a suggestion for further research can be to look at other literature defining a signature story. Depending on if the definition of a signature story differs from literature to literature, one could argue that maybe more or less than the analyzed four Business-to-Business brands actually sit on a signature story. If that is the case, a discussion could be presented regarding which definition of a signature story is most fitting for Business-to-Business brands and if one definition is more accurate than the other.

### **Ethical considerations**

Although we chose a plethora of different Business-to-Business brands, this study does not give a clear view of the whole Business-to-Business branch as a whole. Our findings only suggest the analyzed brands. Analyzing a whole branch would be too of a bigger task, considering that limited time of this paper.

Furthermore, whether the listed Business-to-Business brands sit on a signature story or not, depends on our thought beliefs and analysis. Our conclusion is a product of these aspects which we possess. If we, for instance, held interviews or focus groups regarding which Business-to-Business brands have a signature story, our conclusion could have been different based on the knowledge and perspective of the participants in said interviews.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1: Ranking Business-to-Business companies international year 2017

# BrandZ™ B2B Top 20

	Brand	Category	Brand Value 2017 \$Mil.	Brand Value 2016 \$Mil.	Brand Value % Change 2017 vs. 2016
1	 Microsoft	Technology	143,222	121,824	18%
2	 IBM	Technology	102,088	86,206	18%
3	 Wells Fargo	Regional Banks	58,424	58,540	0%
4	 UPS	Logistics	58,275	49,816	17%
5	 GE	Conglomerate	50,208	54,093	-7%
6	 SAP	Technology	45,194	39,023	16%
7	 accenture	Technology	27,243	22,813	19%
8	 intel	Technology	21,919	18,632	18%
9	 ORACLE	Technology	21,359	19,489	10%
10	 HSBC	Global Banks	20,536	20,276	1%
11	 HUAWEI	Technology	20,388	18,652	9%
12	 FedEx	Logistics	19,441	16,236	20%
13	 ExxonMobil	Oil & Gas	18,727	16,838	11%
14	 Shell	Oil & Gas	18,346	14,940	23%
15	 citi	Global Banks	17,580	17,055	3%
16	 CISCO	Technology	16,725	14,508	15%
17	 DHL	Logistics	15,844	13,199	20%
18	 J.P.Morgan	Global Banks	14,129	11,943	18%
19	 Hewlett Packard Enterprise	Technology	14,018	NEW ENTRY	
20	 SIEMENS	Conglomerate	13,947	12,485	12%

Source: Kantar Millward Brown / BrandZ™ (including data from Bloomberg)

## Appendix 2: Ranking Business-to-Business companies in Sweden 2019

# Ranking

SWEDEN B2B - 2019

### TOP 20

- 1 Lantmännen
- 2 Arla
- 3 E.ON
- 4 Vattenfall
- 5 AMF Pension
- 6 Orkla
- 7 Stena Recycling
- 8 Länsförsäkringar
- 9 DHL
- 10 Skånemejerier
- 11 Sortera
- 12 Folksam
- 13 Green Cargo
- 14 Suez
- 15 Trygg-Hansa
- 16 Valio
- 17 Ericsson
- 18 Ragn-Sells
- 19 Fortum
- 20 Preem

### INDUSTRY WINNERS

- Handelsbanken  
E.ON  
Lantmännen  
Preem  
Ericsson  
AMF Pension  
Riksbyggen  
Telenor  
DHL  
Stena Recycling

### INDUSTRIES

- Banking  
Energy  
FMCG  
Fuel  
IT & Technology  
Pension & Insurance  
Real Estate  
Telecommunication  
Transport & Logistics  
Waste Management

### Appendix 3: Table 1 - Aaker's four criteria table

Aaker's four criteria table

Brand	Intriguing	Authentic	Involving	Strategic message
E.ON	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Vattenfall	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Stena Recycling	No	Yes	No	No
Länsförsäkringar	No	No	No	No
Folksam	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
SUEZ	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Valio	No	Yes	No	Yes
Ericsson	No	Yes	No	No
Ragn-Sells	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
General Electrics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SAP	No	Yes	No	No
Intel	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
HSBC	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
FedEx	Yes	Yes	No	No
Shell	No	Yes	No	No
JP Morgan	Yes	Yes	No	No

**Appendix 4: Matrix 1 - Four field signature story matrix**

**Signature story matrix**

**External communication**

		External communication	
		No	Yes
Signature story	No	"Unaccomplished"	"Progress"
	Yes	"Potential"	"Accomplished"

**Appendix 5: Matrix 2 - Four field signature story matrix with companies**

**Signature story matrix**

**External communication**

		No	Yes
Signature story	No		
	Yes		