Spotlight
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Can storytelling about the past shape the future of your family business?

Heritage communication serves nine distinct strategic functions across marketing, governance, and culture

ANNA BLOMBÄCK · OLOF BRUNNINGE

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Family businesses routinely invoke their history—"family-owned since 1897," "four generations of craftsmanship"—but few treat heritage communication as a deliberate strategic tool. Most firms default to a nostalgic "About Us" page and leave it at that. This study argues that heritage messaging can do far more when it is designed with specific audiences and business functions in mind.

The researchers analyzed the corporate websites of **55 family-owned companies in Sweden and Germany**, examining both text and visual content to understand what kinds of historical messages firms share, how they frame them, and which stakeholders they appear to target. The firms ranged from fewer than 50 employees to over 1,000 and spanned manufacturing, retail, services, and agriculture.

WHAT WE STUDIED

Using content analysis, the researchers coded heritage-related communication across corporate websites. They examined taglines, "About Us" sections, timelines, photo galleries, founder biographies, and video content. Each message was mapped to an inferred aim, a target stakeholder group, and a business function (marketing, management, or governance). The result is a stakeholder-function framework that connects heritage messaging to specific strategic purposes—moving it from decoration to a plannable resource.

KEY INSIGHTS

Heritage messaging serves nine distinct strategic aims

The study identified nine ways family firms use their past to serve present and future objectives. **Authenticity through longevity** uses the firm's age to build brand credibility with customers. **Quality through legacy** emphasizes time-tested expertise and accumulated knowledge. **Reliability through stable ownership** signals continuity to investors and partners. **Values through time** reinforces corporate culture by anchoring it in founding principles. **Responsibility through tradition** communicates long-standing community and sustainability commitments. **Adaptability through resilience** shares stories of surviving crises or market shifts to demonstrate flexibility. **Strategic coherence through historical roots** connects past decisions to current direction. **Family accountability through narrative** makes the family's governance role visible and traceable. **Memory as a cultural asset** preserves and curates the firm's history for internal identity-building.

Each aim targets different stakeholders—customers, employees, owners, investors—and serves different business functions. The practical value of the framework is that it forces firms to ask: who is this heritage message for, and what is it supposed to achieve?

Family heritage and corporate heritage are related but not identical

In family firms, the company's history and the family's history overlap—but they are not the same thing. A firm that changed ownership in the past may have a corporate heritage that predates the current family. A family may want to emphasize values or experiences that are not directly tied to business operations. The choice of which narrative to foreground—family, corporate, or both—depends on the audience and the objective. Conflating the two without deliberation can create confusion or undermine credibility.

Format and placement shape effectiveness

A homepage tagline like "family-owned since 1897" functions as a quick trust signal. A detailed founder biography buried in a sub-page serves a different purpose—depth over reach. The study found that visual storytelling (timelines, photo galleries, video interviews) is common and engaging, but not all heritage content is designed with strategic intent. Some pages function more as memory archives than active communication tools. The distinction matters: a heritage page that no one visits or that targets no specific audience is a missed opportunity.

TAKEAWAYS

Map heritage messages to business goals

Use the nine-aim framework to audit existing heritage communication. For each message, identify the target audience, the business function it serves, and whether it is achieving its purpose. Generic storytelling that serves no specific function should be revised or replaced with targeted messaging.

Tailor the narrative to the stakeholder

A message about "three generations of ownership" reassures customers about reliability but may mean something entirely different to a prospective employee or an external investor. Consider what each audience values and adjust the framing, format, and placement accordingly. Heritage communication is most effective when it meets the stakeholder where they are.

Decide when to emphasize family, firm, or both

Sometimes family heritage is the stronger signal—succession stories, values, personal commitment. Other times, corporate heritage carries more weight—innovation track record, customer relationships, industry expertise. The most effective firms make this choice deliberately for each context rather than defaulting to one narrative for all audiences.

Use heritage as a leadership and governance tool, not just marketing

Beyond branding, heritage communication can onboard new employees with company values, create emotional ownership among next-generation family members, and ground strategic decisions in historical precedent. Firms that confine heritage to marketing are using a fraction of its potential.

IMPACT

This study provides a practical framework for moving heritage communication from sentimental storytelling to strategic resource management. The nine-aim typology gives family firms a vocabulary for discussing what their history should do—not just what it says. For scholars, the stakeholder-function mapping connects heritage communication to established frameworks in marketing, organizational identity, and governance. For practitioners, it offers a diagnostic tool: audit your current messaging, identify gaps, and design heritage communication that serves real business objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Audit your current heritage communication.** Catalog every heritage-related message on your website, marketing materials, and internal documents. Map each to an audience and a purpose.
2. **Segment your stakeholders.** Match specific heritage messages to the needs of different audiences—customers, employees, owners, investors—rather than broadcasting one generic narrative.
3. **Invest in storytelling assets.** Photos, videos, founder quotes, and customer testimonials bring history to life. But ensure they serve a strategic aim, not just nostalgia.
4. **Extend heritage beyond marketing.** Use heritage narratives in leadership development, governance communication, and employee onboarding to unlock the full strategic potential of your firm's history.

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CEFEO AUTHORS



Olof Brunninge

Associate Professor

Jönköping International Business School

olof.brunninge@ju.se

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