History as a Dog and Pony Show?
The (Mis)uses of History for Marketing by Wells Fargo & Company

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper researches the question of how the history of the bank Wells Fargo & Company is used in its marketing as a case study for the rapid spread of history marketing in Europe. The paper assesses the critique of philosophers and academic historians towards history marketing by using the Wells Fargo & Company as case study.
Design/methodology/approach – Historical quantitative analysis, focusing in a case study.
Research limitation/implications – The paper finds that the use of history in times of crisis to strengthen the marketing towards clients and staff may lead easily to the usage of singular historical narratives, which count as sin for writing history.
Keywords – History marketing, heritage brand, narratives, tradition, philosophy of history
Paper Type – Research paper

Introduction
One of the striking features of today’s European businesses is a widespread adoption of history as a tool of marketing, branding and as tool to communicate corporate culture to customers and employees. Especially in Germany, but more recently also in Scandinavia (for example the Danish Lego) and in the Netherlands (the spinoff of Sara Lee’s coffee and tea division as DE Master Blenders 1753), history marketing has become influential (Schug 2003). Companies started to see that their history made them unique and gave them reputation, identity, authenticity which were excellent assets in marketing and communication (Roowaan 2009).

This adaption of history into the management of firms meant also the confirmation to narrative approaches of communication with customers and employees. Historians and business scientists stepped eagerly in this new market and quickly supplied guide books (Schug, 2003; Herbrand and Röhrig, 2006; Michalowski, 2007; Bühler and Dürig, 2008; Roowaan, 2009; Nannen, 2009). Because in the German speaking countries this trend of using history for business purposes started earlier than in other European countries, the first critical assessments by philosophers of history have also emerged here, questioning method and ethics of this new type of history writing. The (mis)use of history by corporations was also challenged by British organisational scientists from the 1990s onwards, but overall critical assessments of corporate history are rare.

In Europe history marketing is a very recent phenomenon, and since the owl of Minerva only flies out at dusk, Wells Fargo & Company seem to be a good case to test the assumptions of the critics on history marketing and investigate how the company has used its history. Wells Fargo & Company, currently the 23th bank of the world (gfmag.com), already uses historical objects in its branding from an early age (1958), was amongst the first wave of American companies to establish a history department (1975) which grew out to be the largest of America, and uses since the establishment of the department purposely a strategy of applying history in its marketing. From the 1960s the bank hired academic historians to write histories on the bank. Those activities match the three forces which propel the German history marketing movement: a process of increased emphasis on historical marketing and (historic) events, in combination with scientific progress, of which it is argued that the development of scientific historical research have caused the former two phenomena (Grieger, 2012).

This assessment of the use of history by Wells Fargo will be done in four steps. First by giving an overview of the background and presumptions of history marketing and heritage branding. Thereafter the main critique on corporate history and history marketing will be presented. Thirdly a little background of Wells Fargo & Company will be provided and the emergence of the history department and its tactics and techniques will be explained. In the fourth and last part the adoption of history in the
strategy and marketing of Wells & Fargo & Company will be accessed through the annual reports from the 1960s onwards. In this part the development and presentation of the historical narrative of the company will be compared with the criticism on history marketing. In this way we get a good insight in the development of history marketing, its usefulness for the company and its faithfulness to the discipline of history.

**Theories of History Marketing and applying history in management**

From the 1970s onward the appreciation and spread of heritage evolved rapidly (Lowenthal, 1998). The 1970s were also the decade in which the new academic discipline of public history was established. Notably the historian Robert Kelley was very active in this movement and started an undergraduate program at the University of California in 1976 and launched the magazine *The Public Historian* in 1978. With the academic positions of historians shrinking, and based on his experience as historic consultant on water litigation Kelley felt that there was ample need for people trained in historical methodology and with historical insight in museums, government or in business (Kelley, 1978; Johnson, 1999). One of the aims of the new field was the valorization of uses of archival and oral history in business processes, and in litigation after the dictum “good history is good business” (Ryan, 1988: 563).

In business there was a growing appreciation for uses of history. In an enquiry for the production of the *Directory of Business Archives* of 1969 it was found that only 113 out of 700 companies had some kind of archival system and only 13 full time business archivists were active at that time. During the 1970s the number of business archives doubled and the number of full time archivists quadrupled. Big corporations like Disney, Anheuser-Busch and Corning Glass opened a business archive. The reasons for the quick rise seem to lay in the use of archives in court cases, the ‘nostalgia craze’ and America’s bicentenary (1976) which inspired companies to likewise celebrate their history. In 1975 Wells Fargo established its history department; this places the bank in the forefront of corporations which developed a corporate archive.

The adaption of history as a business tool became apparent in the establishment of many corporate museums from the 1980s onwards, often in the form of a theme world or brand experience (Knabe, 2004). This trend was accompanied by a sharp rise in historic festivities and corporate anniversaries (Hölschen, 2005). These new forms of applying history emerged parallel with the discovery of corporate culture in the early 1980s (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Deal and Kennedy, 1980). As a continuation of this trend, from the mid-1990s companies also started to see themselves as brands. This led to the concept of ‘corporate brands’ (Balmer, 2010). At the same time heritage and the heritage industry reached its zenith (Gries, Ilen and Schindelbeck, 1989; Lowenthal, 1998). Especially in Germany the trend of historical marketing and celebrating historic events went hand in hand and was spurred by a fast emerging business history field (Grieger, 2012).

The roots of this historical adaption for management in Germany were tragic. After the exposure of the destruction of bank files of Holocaust victims at the Swiss Bank UBS in 1997 the media turned its spotlight to the role of corporations during the Nazi era. German corporations turned to academic historians to explore their role in the Nazi war machine and Holocaust, leading to many well researched volumes of corporate histories (Feldman, 2002; Bazyler, 2003). It was noticed that companies which had acknowledged their role early on, like Volkswagen and Deutsche Bank (Mommsen and Grieger, 1996; Gall et al., 1995), got through this crisis much better and were applauded for their transparency. Many companies found that they could be only a truly social responsible company when they took also their ‘corporate historical responsibility’ into account, and be transparent and trustworthy about their past (Ackermann, 2012).

This excavation into the past of German corporations led to better equipped corporate archives, and to the notion that in order to sustain credibility, the history had to be kept researched. Companies that acted on their corporate historical responsibility gained that trust and could use its history and heritage in history marketing or branding. Companies started to see that their history made them unique and gave them reputation, identity, authenticity and institutional memory. They saw that by using their heritage in their strategy, marketing and communication the substance and trust by the public was enlarged (Roowaan, 2009). Especially the rediscovery of ‘tradition’ played a large part in this history marketing movement. Many companies, ranging from Siemens AG and Faber-Castell to Märklin and Mazda Germany, turned to their archives and their corporate communications departments to start narratival campaigns in which they emphasize their unique reputation (Herbrand and Röhrig, 2006).
This adaption of history into the management of firms meant also the confirmation to narrative approaches of communication with customers and employees. Narrative approaches make clear that ‘all behaviour is historical’ and that such behaviour ‘takes place over time and in particular contexts’ (Zald, 1996, p. 256). This change is labelled the ‘historic turn’ in organisation studies which is an adaptation of the ‘linguistic turn’ of the humanities in the business world (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Booth and Rowlinson, 2004). Although the linguistic turn is sometimes seen as relativistic because of its postmodern roots, this should not be overestimated. Many of the propositions of postmodernism, like deconstructivism or microstoria, have not lived up to their expectations, and it is now often stated that the only lasting element of postmodernism is a renewed attention to the narrative (Ankersmit, 2009; Partner, 2009). After some hesitation we see that the application of narrative approaches in organisation studies is by now wide ranging (Kahne and Reitter, 2013).

**Historical branding**

Wells Fargo can be seen as a ‘heritage brand’, a brand that constantly emphasizes its history, a claim which is supported by an identity which can be traced back in archival records, uses symbols to communicate its identity, but most importantly is maintained by a ‘organisational belief that its history is important’ which becomes apparent in long held core values. Heritage brands can only grow over time, and can only thrive in an atmosphere of long term ‘brand stewardship’ of the management (Urde, Greyser and Balmer, 2007, p. 4, 5). The concept of ‘heritage brands’ is highly influenced by the notion of ‘invented traditions’ of the historians Hobsbawm and Ranger ([1983] 2010). It is therefore no surprise that especially during times of crisis heritage brands emphasize stability and continuity, as they communicate a ‘sense of grounding and safety’ (Merchant and Rose, 2012, p. 1). Wolf Olins (1990) was one of the first to use the invention of tradition in corporate identity.

Mythmaking is also a quality that is connected to heritage brands, based on the work of Holt (2004) who states that consumers chose heritage brands to experience the stories which are embedded in the brand (Holt 2004: 36). Those brands can only be successful if they align their brand myth with an important tension in society. The myths can be changed over time as the example of Mountain Dew’s make clear. What Holt demonstrates is that which changes in zeitgeist different elements of the history are emphasized in marketing to connect the historical story to then relevant themes. This is also how traditions function, despite their air of continuity, traditions constantly change over time in order to accommodate new tensions and to stay relevant. Mythmaking was therefore not wisely chosen by Holt, as it quickly associated with fabrication, a qualification which is also near to Hobsbawm’s own interpretation of ‘invention of tradition’. Hobsbawm was very reluctant and cautious about nationalism, and therefore he saw invention of tradition as something negative. In the historiography of invented tradition the negative connotation was overemphasized. In anthropology the notion that ‘all traditions are constructed or “invented” at some stage in history and this quality does not necessarily make them less genuine’ (Otto and Pedersen, 2005, p. 447), which led to more attention of the purpose of tradition: namely communication and instruction which is based on past and present and which inspires action in the future (Kroeze and Keulen, 2013).

To better understand the historical assumptions of branding, it is wiser to use a hermeneutic frame (Hatch and Rubin, 2006). Hatch and Rubin explain that the concept of ‘horizon of expectation’ of the historian and philosopher Richard Koselleck (although they do not mention him in the text) explains that the meaning of brands changes over time and thus giving brands and branding a historical dimension.

Although heritage branding is time consuming and expensive, the results can be very rewarding as consumers are prepared to pay a higher price and tend to be more loyal customers (Urde, Greyser and Balmer, 2007). Wells Fargo qualifies as a heritage brand. When tested it was found that television advertisements of Wells Fargo which was staged a scene from the Californian gold rush (1848-1855) produced feelings of happiness, nostalgia, emotional connections to and fantasies about the past (Merchant and Rose, 2012).

**Criticism on misusing history in history marketing**

Because the trend of history marketing first started in the German speaking countries, the first critical assessments by philosophers of history can also be found there. Soon after the trend emergent methods and ethics of this new type of history writing were questioned (Gries, Ilen and Schindelbeck, 1989; Kühberger and Pudlat, 2012; Crivellari, 2012). The (mis)use of history by corporations was also challenged by British organisational scientists from the 1990s onwards (Rowlinson and Hassard, 1993;
Booth et al., 2007; Delahaye et al., 2009), but overall critical assessments of corporate history stays underdeveloped.

When we assess the critique on history marketing the first objection that is often found is a moral one: may history as “tool of enlightenment” be used to add value to products or make companies “cultural responsible actors in society”? (Crivellari, 2012; Kühberger, 2012).

A second point of criticism is of more methodological importance. When looking at how history is used in marketing we find that it is often ‘timeless’ or ‘ageless’ (Crivellari, 2012, p. 20). This leads to history as integration with a ‘continuous and unified narrative of corporate culture’ in which history is treated as a continuum of corporate culture. In this narrative there is no fundamental difference between how people acted in the past from how they act today (Booth et al., 2007). Corporate histories have a tendency to be composed in this matter as Delahaye et al. (2009) found. They described corporate histories as narratives who present the history of the organization as a carefully selected linear and progressive success story in which the development of the whole company neatly fits.

When we remember the warning on heritage and the essence of history from David Lowenthal we have to accept that in the words he borrowed from L.P. Hartley: ‘The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there’ (Lowenthal, 1985, p. xvi). If we don’t treat history as such, we may end up with nostalgia or we fail to see the explaining factors for change in history.

A critique along the same line, be it on the other end of the scale, is that history is selectively chosen for the benefits of today’s management questions, while other parts of the history are silenced or overlooked (Rowlinson and Hassard, 1993). An example would be Volkswagen 60th anniversary in 2009, which chose 1949 as the foundation date instead of the more problematic 1938 when the first Kraft durch Freude Wagen – the predecessor of the VW Beetle – was produced. The tendency of purposely fabricating a history to give the brand a better reputation is rightly condemned (Crivellari, 2012). This can be for example seen in the abbey beer market, where beers which were first produced in the 1950s get labels with medieval dates suggesting that the beer itself has a long heritage (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink, 2008).

This criticism goes to the fundamental core of good academic history: historical difference and change makes out the heart of the discipline. Timelessness, together with nostalgia and progress are the three enemies of historical awareness which is crucial for writing history (Tosh, 2010). The criticism on history marketing and heritage branding is fundamental and therefore all the worthwhile to investigate further, which will be done through the case of the American bank Wells Fargo & Company.

**The history of history marketing at Wells Fargo & Company**

Wells Fargo & Company was founded in 1852 by Henry Wells and William Fargo as an express service and bank in California which in its first year held $300.000 in its vaults. Now, 160 years and 2000 mergers later, it is the fourth largest bank of the United States with a revenue of $86 billion and total assets in worth of $1422 trillion. The most important merger was a “merger between equals” in 1998 between Norwest and Wells Fargo Bank. Although Norwest was slightly larger (nr. 157 vs. nr. 160 of the Fortune 500), the joint management choose to go ahead under the Wells Fargo & Company name (Wells Fargo, 1998).

The main reason for this decision was the Wells Fargo logo, which by then was in the top ten of most recognizable logos of the world. This made Wells Fargo the most valuable bank brand of the United States and the 16th most valuable brand of the world (Mussachio Adorisio, 2009, p. 114; Brandirectory.com). The Norwest logo did not hold that quality, or as a senior manager of Norwest commented: ‘It’s hard to give a kid a ride on a big green “N”’ (Anderson, 2002, p. 234).

![Picture 1, 2 and 3. The logo of Wells Fargo in the 1960s, 1990s and 2008.](image-url)
The senior manager pointed to the logo of Wells Fargo which represents a Concord stagecoach from the 1860s. In less than twenty years the stagecoach lost a great part of its relevance through the quickly developing railroads from the 1870s onwards (Fradkin, 2002). In the 1890s the development of the West and the frontier was already viewed through a nostalgic lens, which Wells Fargo exploited for instance in 1893 by using stagecoaches to attract attention for their participation in the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. At that time American Express and Wells Fargo had the right to use the Wells Fargo and Pony Express brand name and logos, which frequented in both companies advertisements. In the 1930s American Express for example participated in parades and fairs with three stagecoaches. In those days Wells Fargo chose more often to use the Pony Express logo instead of the stagecoach in its advertisements (Fradkin, 2002, p. 211-213).

The development of the Stagecoach as logo and ‘guaranteed crowd pleasure’ by Wells Fargo had many elements of pure chance. The collection of working (replica) stagecoaches which are now the most famous historical object that Wells Fargo uses in its branding started in 1958 by accident. In that year the company rented a stagecoach for the opening of a new bank branch in Hayward, California. The free rides were such a success that the bank started to use the stagecoach as promotion tour ever since (Brewer, 2002). Already in the same year the Wells Fargo Stagecoach Appearance Program was established to work the frequent requests for bookings (wellsfargohistory.com). Since then the Appearance Program has risen dramatically, to 15 coaches which are making over 500 appearances per year.

The adaption of the stagecoach as tool of marketing in 1958 coincided with the airing of the popular NBC TV-series Tales of Wells Fargo (1957-1962) with western actor Dale Robertson who played the role of the company’s detective who researched robberies of stage coaches during the Gold Rush. The 167 episodes were supported by a large collection of merchandise, and became the third most viewed show of 1957-1958, some 14, reaching 76 million viewers in total (Marill, 2001, p. 45; Jackson and Abbott, 2010, p. 132; www.classictvhits.com). Wild West history became a highly fashionable theme in the 1950s with many westerns and comic books produced, of which Wells Fargo had its own series. The company produced three own history books up until 1968 and got great coverage in another fifteen more and featured in a large amount of academic and popular articles. As the historian Philip Fradkin noticed ‘It is hard to imagine another business in this country that has gathered as much free publicity’ (Fradkin, 2002, p. 142).

Despite the free publicity on its history and the stage coach program, Wells Fargo in the 1950s was not very occupied in capitalizing on its own history. The bank did not possess the exclusive rights of the name Wells Fargo nor the name Pony Express. The exclusive rights were offered in 1960s by American Express for a small amount, but this offer was turned down. ‘The bank’s horizon at that time was very limited’ as a later memorandum mentioned. In 1969 the bank became a part of a holding company under the name of Wells Fargo & Company and decided that it had to protect its historical name. It was decided to buy this historical name back from American Express for the much higher price of $2 million. From that day it hired a law firm to ‘aggressively protect its trademark’ (Fradkin, 2002, p. 213).

The change of mind was connected to the strategic change between 1964 and 1968 by the new chairman Ernie Arbuckle, who was the former dean of Stanford Business School. He changed Wells Fargo from a traditional bank into a financial service company. In his strategy ‘Technology was it undercarriage. Marketing was its creative body of thought’ (Anderson, 2002, p. 266). For the first time computers could be used to evaluate the increasing volume of credits. The computer could also help to identify the most important client groups which could be targeted in the banks first company wide marketing plan. The use of the stagecoach and the frontier spirit became the main elements of this new marketing initiative. It was Richard Rosenberg, a young manager who held an MBA in Marketing, who would become ‘the father of bank marketing’ who set up the marketing department of Wells Fargo in the early 1960s. He introduced the use of the stagecoach in advertisement. In 1966 he came up with this idea of printing a full color image of a moving stagecoach on bank checks which he called ‘Stagecoach checks’. The CEO of that time was not pleased: ‘We’ll let you play cowboys and Indians this one time, but I never want to see that kind of advertising again, and using a stagecoach kind of thing’ (Rosenberg, 2005, p. 44). The mood changed quickly when in the first year 40% of the customers switched to the stage coach checks and on top of that the checks attracted new customers (Anderson, 2002, p. 267).

In 1969 Wells Fargo acquired the exclusive use of their name. With the acquisition of the name Wells Fargo also received four tons of historical records from American Express, which until then.
were presumed lost in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. The bank already possessed a collection of
gold rush memorabilia which were collected from the 1920s onwards by a vice-president and
displayed in the lobby since 1941. From the 1960s special exhibits travelled amongst the branches, a
practice that is kept up until today.

In 1974 the former dean of Stanford Business School and then chairman of Wells Fargo Ernest
Arbuckle formed a History Task Force which concluded that the history of the company formed a
‘unique corporate asset that needed to be administered with the same care that its financial assets
receive’ (Anderson, 1981, p. 24). Therefore the company felt that it had ‘to protect the integrity of its
name, its history, and its corporate symbol’: the Stagecoach logo. The Taskforce found that historical
resources could be used in ‘legal, operational, planning, marketing and public relations’ (Anderson,

This was proven two years before. The bank had hired the historian W. Turrentine Jackson as
independent consultant to sort the tons of acquired records. Jackson had in 1966 proven that the
allegation of Waddell F. Smith, great grandson of one of the founders of the Pony express, who had
claimed that Wells Fargo was never involved in the Pony Express to be false. Smith had claimed that it
was fraudulent

‘to credit that company [Wells, Fargo & Co.] with important things someone else did and
lavish unearned praise upon it to the detriment of the ones who actually did those things is not
right. Nevertheless, that unworthy act has been committed by misinformed, careless, or selfish
persons willing to profit by the misrepresentation or misstatement of thoroughly documented
historical fact’ (Turrentine Jackson, 1966, p. 315).

In 1972 Wells Fargo was again accused by Smith. This time he stated that Wells Fargo had ‘never
operated a stagecoach line in California’. Thanks to the records Turrentine Jackson was quickly able to
prove that Smith’s acquisitions were untrue (Turrentine Jackson, 1972). A satisfied E.E. Munger, vice-
president of Marketing, wrote to the president that the articles ‘have been of great value to us in
repairing the serious damage done to our recognized historical role, credibility and image by the
virulent, anti-Wells Fargo campaign pressed over many years by Waddell F. Smith’ (Fradkin, 2002, p.
216).

With the establishment of the History Department in 1975 Wells Fargo was on the forefront of the
corporate archive movement which took off in the late 1960s. Wells Fargo’s history department soon
became the self-proclaimed ‘model’ for the field. From 1975 onwards it staffed twelve professional
historians, archivists, museum specialists and stagecoach drivers (Anderson, 1981). The History
Department of Wells Fargo grew further and was in the 1980s thought to be the largest of corporate

The department worked on analyzing financial policies and published many monographs on the
history of regional banking. On top of that, it opened three museums at the main branches in
California, in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Sacramento (Mooney, 1986, p. 434). It was not only
Wells Fargo who committed itself to history, history stayed also important in other corporations. In
1980 the Business Archive Committee had 175 members, while there were 60 business archives at that
time (Smith, 1982, p. 275-277).

The largest part of the work of Wells Fargo’s history department was not on academic historical
research but on preparing promotional material. They were involved in training the advertising
department to give their commercial ‘a boost’. The introduction of ‘personal banking’ in 1976 was
done through a series of popular TV-advertisements on the Wells Fargo agents and famous coach
drivers like the one eyed Charley Parkhurst (who was born as Mary) under the slogan ‘Personal effort
275).

Using history to make new technological acceptable became a common practice in the 1980s at
Wells Fargo. William Zuendt, who ran the computer systems of Wells Fargo and would become the
bank president (1994-1997), was one of the leading advocates of this approach. He learned the
fundamentals of bank marketing from Richard Rosenberg (Rosenberg, 2005, p. 43) and believed in the
idea from John Naisbitt’s Megatrends (1982) that new technology would only be accepted if it was
counterbalanced by a human response (high touch). Advertisements in which Wells Fargo agents and
stagecoach drivers were therefore used to assure customers that ‘personal services’ were always
important to Wells Fargo and would stay important in the future (Anderson, 2002, p. 286). This was
supported by the CEO of that day Carl Reichardt who claimed in 1982: ‘We have a name and history, and an ability to market our services that is second to none, and we will continue to build on those strengths, particularly in the West’ (Fradkin, 2002, p. 217).

Another good example of balancing new technology with “high touch” was the production of facsimile newspaper handouts for the Wells Fargo Museum in Sacramento in which they try to use the romanticized history of Sacramento banking to place their 1980s values of ‘service’ and ‘community spirit’ in a historical line (Walkowitz, 1986, p. 228). This focus on public relations and marketing was typically for the focus of the corporate history departments in the US in those days (Mooney, 1986).

An important signal of how important the history program of Wells Fargo had become in the 1990s is the appointment of the head of the history department Andy Anderson to Head of Communications in 1992. Operating on an annual budget of slightly under $1 million, the history department operated then five museums, attracting 500,000 visitors a year. The initial number of three working stagecoaches had grown to seven, which appeared in 279 parades and community events which would be seen by about 5 million people annually (Watson, 1992). Wells Fargo also lends its object collection to museums, as way of free publicity and of promoting the western image of the company. In a sponsored exhibition in the 1990s next to the stagecoaches on loan, a TV advertisement with historic images was shown, with a voice-over explaining Wells Fargo’s financial products of that day (Donath, 1991). According to Anderson its history made Wells Fargo unique. ‘In the financial-services industry, where almost everybody offers the same products and services, history is something that we have that is unique (…) History is our corporate identity and a very valuable asset in all our marketing, advertising and public-relations programs’ (Watson, 1992). History and especially the living logo stayed important throughout the 2000s. Between 2000 and 2013 ‘Wells Fargo Stagecoach’ featured in 679 newspaper and business wire articles [1].

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<th>Year</th>
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* The second museum opened in 1982 in Los Angeles.
** Visitor number is from 2011 and based on 10 museums.

Customers were not the only target group for historical marketing, history was just as actively used for supporting the corporate culture, especially in times of great changes of the 1990s. During the (Californian) recession of 1990-1992 which coincided with a merger wave the board searched for new key values. Those values, integrity, teamwork, commitment, and flexibility were distributed through a series of interviews of coworkers on the values, and illustrated by historical vignettes on the historical importance of those values.

The merger with First Interstate added 500 new branches to Wells Fargo and made a rehearsal of this practice necessary. Under the name “Best of Wells Fargo” the new coworkers were introduced in the history of Wells Fargo. By using historical documents like the ‘Instruction to agents’ from 1880 in which ‘the most polite and courteous treatment of all customers’ was required. A year later Wells Fargo merged with Norwest, which made it necessary to instruct the 50,000 employees of the former Norwest why there brand was made obsolete. Former Norwest CEO Dick Kovacevich who had become the new Wells Fargo CEO made a series of ‘Making History’ tapes in which the history Wells Fargo was explained in the context of every state’s history and culture. The tapes were accompanied by historical publications of the History Department (Anderson, 2002, pp. 298-303, 392).
The coworkers received a crash course in the history of Wells Fargo, which left little room for the history of their local banks. The historical narratives of pre-merger banks which could be useful for giving the banks more local historical roots were left out in favor of a stylized Wells Fargo narrative (Musacchio Adorisio and Boje, 2008). This meant that some banks lost a specific part of their history, but at the same time the merger was seen as a shining white knight coming to the rescue (Musacchio Adorisio, 2008, pp. 618, 619). Also coworkers also find the history of their new organization interesting, as one of the bankers reminded:

‘When we first converted to Wells Fargo they had us to watch a 20 minutes videotape with all the history and all the things that they did and where they have been you know it’s all promotion stuff but they have a nice museum at the bottom floor of their building and I happened to be there on an Amigo trip and ((LAUGHS)) and I went across the street and went into the museum and it’s pretty interesting’ (Musacchio Adorisio, 2009, p. 127).

The purpose of the name change of Norwest to Wells Fargo was important for capitalizing on the history, as a distributed poster “Building the Wells Fargo Brand” reminded the staff. It read:

‘In the 1850s, the reassuring sight of a red and gold stagecoach blazing across the open frontier, or arriving in a township, immediately evoked the name Wells Fargo. It stood for forward-thinking, security and superior service. It still does. The Wells Fargo brand gives us a strong competitive advantage – one that can only be maintained through teamwork and the commitment of everyone at Wells Fargo. Through constituent and repeated use, our brand identity will continue to communicate Wells Fargo’s extraordinary heritage and the superior customer-focused financial services for which it stands’ (Fradkin, 2002, p. 218).

Since its initial effort from the late 1960s to make use of the history of Wells Fargo, at the end of the 1990s had become a heritage brand. According to brand specialist David Aaker the logo itself gave Wells Fargo the sense of ‘reliability in the face of adversity, adventurousness, independence, and even building a new society out of wilderness’. If banks which did not own such a symbol would have to invest heavily to create this, and this would go at the costs of other associations on its own logo (Aaker, 1991). But above all they would have needed much time and also have the ‘organisational belief that its history is important’ for the company and the brand, which is in the case of Wells Fargo a belief that is held for over forty years, otherwise the attempt would fail.

History in the Annual reports of Wells Fargo, the emergence of a stylized historical narrative
From a bank who owns the largest historical department, runs twelve historical museums and seven smaller exhibits, publishes many volumes on its history and fosters a standalone historic website (www.wellsfargohistory.com) and history blog (http://blogs.wellsfargo.com/guidedbyhistory/) one might expect a fair and balanced display of the history of the company. Focusing on the annual reports we can establish how Wells Fargo has used its history for its official narrative.

The annual report is chosen as a sample because the importance of the annual report grew significantly over the years. This is recognizable through the increase of volume. In 1967 the report only held 27 pages, a number that has grown to 248 pages in 2012. The annual report became not only the place to account for a growing number of financial statements, but also to report on the banks efforts on corporate citizenship and the place for the CEO to explain his vision and strategy. Often this vision gets connected to the history of the bank. For example in 2012 when CEO John G. Stumpf explains that the theme of that year “the power of conversation” or ‘how best to serve our customers and help them succeed financially’ is a constant factor in the history of the bank. ‘We’ve been having those conversations at Wells Fargo for more than 160 years, and they are the cornerstone of our success’ (Annual Report, 2012, p. 2).

A picture of the stagecoach was displayed at every cover of the Wells Fargo annual report from at least 1967 up until 2006. In 2007, 2010 and 2012 the cover held a picture of clients and coworkers of the bank (Wells Fargo A&P). The styles of the cover changed rapidly. In 1967 the modern and the old were still combined with a picture of a stagecoach against a backdrop of a modern well lit city with skyscrapers. Inside the introduction of the new marketing plan and the stagecoach checks is covered: ‘Capitalizing on Wells Fargo’s unique service mark and its Western heritage two new styles of
stagecoach checks were introduced in 1967. Both styles were extremely well received’ (Annual report, 1967, p. 8).

In the 1970s the bank turned to an almost 19th century lay out of the annual report, by using an oil painting as cover picture in 1972 and an emblem which resembled a newspaper heading in 1973 and 1976. Despite the heritage covers the history of the bank is not mentioned in the annual reports of that decade. Even the introduction of the history department in 1975 does not get any attention in the annual report.

1976 is an important exception. In this year the bank looks ahead to the upcoming 125th anniversary of 1977. The past and the future are still viewed as opposing when the bank states that it is: ‘proud of its rich historic past, but modern and innovative in meeting the challenges of a changing world’ (Annual report, 1976, p. inside cover). The annual report presents many historic pictures of old offices and of historical artifacts. The accompanying text boxes are rather factual and no effort is made to write an ongoing narrative of past operations with the practices in 1976. There is one central theme in the accompanying texts: the history of trust and reliability. The earthquake of 1906 is taken as example. After the shock Wells Fargo kept operating uninterrupted from a private house using ‘children’s composition books’ as bank ledgers. Another example is a photo of a Wells Fargo agent’s dog on a treasure box from 1894 which accompanied by the words ‘alert and faithful’ carried the message of the ‘tradition’ of ‘safety and reliability’ (Annual report, 1976, p. 15, 18).

During the 1980s the photography of the stagecoach suggested more speed and action, by showing high dust piles behind the stagecoach, galloping horses or in the bend leaning stagecoach. This is in line with Fradkins (2002, p. 217) finding that Wells Fargo portraits of the stagecoach in that era went ‘from stasis to movement’ which marked the larger freedom and new energy that the bank gained through the deregulation of the banking sector.

From 1991 to 1995 the bank chooses photographs of a waiting stagecoach were the driver meets its customers. One could be tempted to see a representation of the 1990-1992 California recession in those pictures. In 1992 after years of absence the board once again turns to history for reinforcing their trust in the bank. The annual report starts with a historic oversight of the company and the claim that the logo of the stage coach is ‘an enduring symbol of reliability – the pride in “coming through” for its customers that has been a Wells Fargo hallmark for over 140 years’ (Annual Report, 1992, p. inside cover). This message is strengthened by the explanation of the chairman Carl E. Reichardt and president Paul Hagen that ‘Wells Fargo has been through its share of recessions in the past 140 years and, like most banks, we’ve also had our Share of loan problems. We’ve always managed to survive the former, resolve the latter, and come through each crisis a little stronger and smarter than before’ (Annual Report, 1992, p. 9).

In 1998, the year of the merger between Norwest and Wells Fargo, that the stage coach is the symbol for ‘coming through’ for our customers’ is rehearsed (Annual Report, 1998, p. inside cover). This time the history of over 1500 mergers is emphasized and the new board emphasizes that their motto of ‘brand new opportunities’ is actually as old as Wells Fargo itself. In their words the founders were ‘pioneers in cross-selling, too. They weren’t content with a stagecoach transportation company. They wanted their customers banking business, safe keeping business, delivery of goods business and mail business. They delivered products, services and information across the American frontier and the world. It’s the same for new Wells Fargo today’ (Annual Report, 1998, p. 4).

The next year the board again emphasizes that the history is in constant line with the future. First by introducing the slogan “then as now”. ‘WE CONNECT! Wells Fargo was founded on the American frontier 148 years ago to satisfy a fundamental human need - to connect one person to another and one market to another by transporting goods, services and funds fast and securely across great distances. We’re still doing it today’ (Annual Report, 1999, p. 6). A year later in 2000, ‘our product is service’ is the central theme. The cover with a picture of a stagecoach and this slogan suggests that is the case since the foundation of Wells Fargo.

In 2001 Wells Fargo celebrates its 150th anniversary. The tone of the celebration is very different from the one in 1976. Already in the motto it becomes clear that the past and the future are connected: ‘Connected to our past: focused on our future’ (Annual report, 2001). The report is written from an integrating perspective and holds an introduction of a timeline of 17 pages in which 16 staff members of the bank for every decade of the banks existence ‘reflect on a special person or event from that time that still influences our company today. The 16 staff members represent both the diversity of the bank as well as the different cultural and geographical backgrounds of America.
The (Mis)uses of History for Marketing by Wells Fargo & Company

The founders are celebrated by CEO Richard Kovacevich who states that ‘They knew what their customers wanted and they gave it to them – dependability and convenience, security and trust, plus outstanding service. They believed in the power of ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things. That spirit lives today as we prepare for the “Next Stage” of success for our team members, customers, communities and stockholders’ (Annual Report, 2001, p. 16).

Other stories that are covered are since long part of Wells Fargo historical canon: like the ‘Lincoln elected!’ painting of a pony express rider spreading the news is taken as example for the speed of communication by the coworker of the internet services group. Another classic is the story of Casie Hill, who as a widow became a Wells Fargo agent between 1884 and 1908 and is the name giver to one of the operations centers. A good example of the portrayal of corporate culture as a continuous unified narrative line is the story of James B. Forgan who worked at the North Western Bank in Minneapolis. He introduced a List of Duties in 1888. ‘His “General Rule No.1” read: “The ordinary routine work of the office must be dropped instantly when a customer is waiting for anything and his business attended to first.” Here we are 114 years later and it’s still our No. 1 operating rule for customer service’ (Annual report, 2001, p. 5). It is a good example of how the 2000 historic mergers are treated in the timeline, only the development of Nor(th)west gets mention and there is no distinction made between the corporate culture and development of Wells Fargo and Norwest, they are portrayed as one singular narrative.

In 2002 history also plays a part in the annual report. Customers of Wells Fargo are photographed with an old money box to connect them to the theme of that year “one strong box”. ‘The strong box that protected the valuables of Wells Fargo customers 151 years ago is still a powerful symbol today. It stands for security, longevity and peace of mind. Who better to entrust with your assets than a company that’s been around 151 years!’ (Annual Report, 2002, p. 16).

In the following years history is hardly ever mentioned in the annual reports. The stagecoach is even abandoned as cover picture in the 2007 report, for the first time in at least 40 years. This changes immediately when a new crisis hits: the financial crisis of 2008. Not only does the stagecoach return as cover picture, also the president and CEO John Stumpf is once again photographed in front of a stagecoach, a practice that was abandoned for 21 years. In his letter to the owners he emphasizes, much like the recession of 1990-1992, that Wells Fargo has seen many crises in its existence and has always weathered them. The message of Stumpf is one of American nationalism: ‘We’re capitalists and proud of it. We believe in free enterprise. We’re Americans first, bankers second. We’re long-term optimists’.

The optimism for the future is based on both his personal history and the history of Wells Fargo bank. Stumpf writes:

‘Our country and our ancestors have faced far more difficult challenges than those we face today. Just ask your grandparents or read about their lives. My parents were children of the Great Depression. They raised 11 children on a family farm in central Minnesota, worked hard and sacrificed, and taught us what is really important in life. I see no reason why with discipline and determination our great country cannot persevere and prosper through these times as well. Now more than ever before, our company wants to stand by our customers and do what’s right for them just as Wells Fargo has done for almost 16 decades and seven generations’ (Annual Report, 2008, p. 9).

When we compare the use of history by Wells Fargo in the annual reports over the last 40 years, we can see a clear pattern emerging. It becomes clear that at first the brand gets the most attention, only in three years since 1967 it was not displayed at the cover. Most of the years the logo of the stagecoach is not connected to the history or culture of the bank. History is used in times of instability and crisis, and during festivities, just like the heritage brand theory suggests. At first, for example during the 125 years anniversary in the 1976 report, this is done in a factual fashion. From the early 1990s we see in line with the advancements in (history) marketing and corporate culture of those days that a singular historical narrative emerges. This is clearly stimulated by long years of instability, first started by the
recession of 1990-1992 and later by a series of mergers up until the Norwest merger of 1998. We can see that this leads to timeless view on history were examples out of the past are without any historical distance transferred to the present. The clearest example of this is the 1999 motto “then as now” and the treatment of history during the 2001 150th anniversary.

Conclusion

The use of history marketing has been in existence since the late 1950s as the example of Wells Fargo makes clear. Just as in Germany the development of academic historical profession had a great influence on the use of history at Wells Fargo and informed its marketing activities. On a meta level the emergence of public history had its influence on the decision to establish a history department. Certainly in the first years academic historical study was necessary to get a better grasp of the history of the company, which could be used in litigation and to fight off attacks on Wells Fargo historical reputation. The past was also for the first time seen as an element to deliver the newest technology, in the form of marketing (of bank checks).

When more of the history itself was known, it became easier to use history in the marketing of the bank. The nostalgic but broad pictures of a stagecoach in the prairie were from the late 1970s exchanged for narratives on certain historical periods and on famous co-workers of Wells Fargo. With this turn to more precise historical narratives the distance between the past and the future became less clear. This helped to assure clients that the introduction of new technology would not change their relations with the bank.

Especially during the 1990s and the early 2000s the distance was abandoned leading to the slogan “then as now”. A singular narrative was introduced in which the past still applied unchanged today. Through this a nostalgic view of the past was delivered to customers and coworkers alike. This made the integration of many of thousands of new coworkers during the merger wave of the 1990s much easier. They could also attach to this ‘nice’, and ‘interesting’ but especially comforting and nostalgic past of the bank. The turn to history to establish a feeling of ‘grounding and safety’ is the last element which is strongly developed at Wells Fargo. In times of crises like the recessions of 1990-1992 and the financial crisis of 2008 management turns to history to assure its staff and customers that ‘we’ve always managed to survive’ and that every crisis had made the bank stronger.

This may be comforting and effective from a marketing standpoint, but this will lead to misrepresentation in the end. The usage of undistanced timeless singular historical narratives goes against the fundamental core of good academic history and neglects the essence of history: historical difference and change.

Notes

[1] Search via Lexis Nexis in category “All English news” with dates from January 1 2000 up until January 1 2013 with search terms “wells fargo stagecoach”.

References


**Sources:**


