



Storyboard

Chapters for Change

*Businesses seeking to make the shift from a successful heritage to an uncertain future require not only the backing of the board but a compelling story to coalesce the culture. Criticaleye interviewed **Andrew Powell** to uncover how Colt's tale of transition was told and sold in six succinct chapters*

Writers and marketers have long understood that if you want to connect with your audience, you should incorporate a story. A first-hand account based on familiar examples can have a deep emotional impact, serry management and employees and actually change thinking.

This was the power behind Colt's use of storytelling when trying to engage employees and engender trust in its ambitious change management programme. The transformation of Colt Technology Services from its entrepreneurial origins to its pan-European present has been a story of speed, skill and ultimately success. And Colt's COO, **Andrew Powell**, has provided much of the fuel and fecundity to drive the programme forward.

Between September 2010 and January 2011, Colt reorganised itself in order to create a cohesive, customer-orientated culture over 16 countries globally. By putting 'storytelling' at its heart, the programme was able to engage employees around tangible experiences detailed by the passion of its people. It was a story about the need to adapt to survive.

CHAPTER 1 THE NEED TO CHANGE...

In September 2010 Colt announced plans to simplify its structure in order to improve customer intimacy, drive growth, increase efficiency and improve service effectiveness. It needed to shift from its Telco past towards an information delivery future, so it organised into three new customer-facing units supported by two service units and rebranded from COLT telecoms to Colt Technology Services.

"The business model was hampered by too much complexity and bureaucracy and we simply weren't leveraging our pan-European assets for our international customers," says Andrew. "So we needed to reshape the operating model and underpinning processes. The brand was mired in history linked to the telecoms-era and the look and feel needed refreshing. Our ambition was, and is, to be recognised as a pan-European 'information delivery platform' rather than a staid Telco, because the 'business to business' market

is now all about 'integrated network and compute services delivered seamlessly, with a world-class customer experience'."

CHAPTER 2 COMMUNICATING THE SHIFT...

Having been a successful telecoms enterprise, the tone of the conversations with those who had built that space was crucial. "We had to explain to Colt employees why we needed to take the business into the integrated network and compute services space," says Andrew. "But we had to balance the need for change while celebrating our Telco heritage."

Naturally, it was a tricky conversation with the board and it needed a brave CEO to embark on this journey: "When we started the transformation we thought the business might go backwards for a while. Boards generally don't like to hear of negative growth, not least when it can be avoided. But we had built trust with the CEO and we were coming from a position of solid business performance, despite the economic downturn. We chose

our timing very smartly and in the end, we were in a strong position to make a play for the business' long-term sustainability.”

The unknown quantity was how to get everyone engaged and focused around the new direction: “In fairness, we struggled with this part in the early stages. We weren't sure what the best mechanism would be for winning hearts and minds.”

CHAPTER 3 CHANGE IN PRACTICE...

Andrew and the team had been doing some research about the ‘power of storytelling’ and stumbled upon a small company, ‘The Storytellers’, that employ clever mechanisms to help companies engage employees by articulating the business’ story.

“Their premise was to help us create a connected organisation, united behind a common purpose, where employees understand and believe in the journey of the business and the personal role they can each play in its success,” says Andrew. “We looked at using their simple tools and techniques for creating ‘sticky’ messaging that could get our people excited about the future while recognising the achievements of the past.”

Colt developed a cornucopia of brochures, story adoption guides and face-to-face workshops designed to help tell the changing story of Colt and how it translated for everyone involved.

“Between December 2009 and June 2010 we rolled out a series of workshops for all employees, with the aim of turning the story

TIPS FOR AN ENGAGING STORY

Scientists believe that we are hard-wired to pay attention to stories. Colt used some common techniques to apply when engaging in one:

Listening...

1. Create an informal atmosphere
2. Follow your curiosity
3. Be appreciative
4. Be generous with your time

Telling...

1. Identify the story hero
2. Identify the challenge they faced
3. Identify what they did that distinguished them
4. Identify what they achieved or learned

[We gave people] the forum to explore why they were passionate about [their success stories] and how their stories related back to the values of the business

of the business into something practical. These were run by their managers and began by articulating Colt's new values and strategic actions, then building the stories of success around them. Personal stories brought to life what individuals and teams did well and where they needed to change or continue in order to meet the needs of customers and colleagues.”

A funky fold-out brochure brought the story of transition to life while a ‘story wall’ outlined the values and vision in one easy reference point. Meanwhile, concrete strategic actions centred on integrated network and ‘compute’ offerings, new leadership and talent development and management programmes and the implementation of more efficient business management tools.

“The Story Wall conversations were ‘key’ to the process,” says Andrew. “They enabled managers and their teams to openly discuss their successes, gave them the forum to explore why they were passionate about it and how their stories related back to the values of the business. Each workshop was centred on four conversations that involved working in teams and individually. Participants were encouraged to challenge each other on whether the team's decisions fully serviced the story, and to demonstrate how they were living the story and breathing the values.”

CHAPTER 4 EMPOWERMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY...

Keeping tabs on how change manifested itself were individuals known as ‘Colt Ambassadors’. Their task was to shape some tactical priorities for the business and challenge the executives on the story, the values and the strategy.

“Combined with a three-day leadership event which gathered together the top 120 managers from all countries in the organisation, we also charged around 50 ‘Colt Ambassadors’ with the task of engaging the leadership team with the story, to educate them on the art of storytelling and to articulate how to take the story out to their parts of the organisation,” says Andrew. “These champions of the programme could stand up and talk about, say, the first chapter, The Spirit to Succeed, and it would come across as genuine. It wasn't the executives pushing a directive; it was, essentially, the masses talking to the masses.

“‘Being empowered and accountable’ is one of Colt's values that I'm most passionate about because we often have to make brave decisions. We published results on the intranet, being transparent and open about the risk associated with the change process at the very top level.”



Andrew joined Colt in 2006 and he, along with his team, was ultimately accountable for making the whole programme work. “This is now my day job,” he admits, in a role which has changed markedly from where he started five years ago.

At a cost of some €35 million, Colt has collapsed its business from 16 countries into a centralised, five-unit business model. “We were introducing cross-border management to our offices in places where they simply weren’t used to it and which wasn’t part of their culture,” says Andrew. “Of course, it has been a transition on a massive scale. But the €35 million one-off restructuring charge has resulted in a net year-on-year €20 million opex run-rate saving to Colt.

“For six months some of our enterprise customers might have said we are tough to deal with. We hadn’t consolidated the customer service centres so we were unable to ensure consistent delivery of service. We’ve now achieved manageable unit costs and remuneration has changed for our new IT sales-orientated executives.”

The operating model is now nine months old and Andrew believes it is starting to work. “Our Q3 results were year-on-year growth (un-audited), which is an amazing achievement,” he says. “The underpinning messaging is fresh, consistent and effective, reflected in our recent company-wide survey which found 85 per cent of Colt employees understand our strategy and 81 per cent feel they are part of a team. As a business, we’re only just starting to realise the potential benefits.”

The whole process has raised Colt’s profile in the market, which has been brought to life by a unified story of change. Andrew says: “This, in turn, has been a huge enabler for bringing in the new talent we need. I’m delighted we did it with integrity, transparency and speed. We rolled out the tough conversations quickly and stopped the ‘fear’ culture from taking root.”

“Our ‘Story Map’ reassured everyone in the organisation that we were on the same journey with the same destination and the way we reorganised internally has really brought us closer to our customers. Storytelling is now firmly embedded into our engagement process and internal communications.”

Commenting on the success on the scheme, Rakesh Bhasin, CEO at Colt Technology Services, said: “I’ve never seen the organisation so energised. To see

Storytelling is now firmly embedded into our engagement process and internal communications

change happening in such a short space of time - and in such a consistent, aligned way across the whole organisation - is a remarkable achievement. Our story has become a guiding light for everyone. I couldn’t be more delighted with how people have responded to this call to action.”

CHAPTER 6 KEY LESSONS LEARNED...

Tone from the top: This had to be owned and driven by the CEO. Ours showed the courage to back the strategy while the board trusted his judgment and the ability of the management to deliver.

Create champions: Brand champions can make or break a campaign. Our Ambassador community were empowered to run over cynical middle management, creating a tidal wave of advocacy that allowed speed of decision making at local level.

Engender trust and belief: The executive team have to be 100 per cent engaged and walk the talk. Those responsible for driving the change must ensure their leaders know the value the brand can bring to an organisation. Everyone must live and breathe it, every day, so make use of people across the organisation to keep your proposition grounded. You should be prepared to be quite ruthless when attitudes are not aligned.

Encourage interaction: Some of the guiding principals of our workshop sessions were that ‘people find meaning in things through their interaction with others’ and ‘people respond to change by seeing and experiencing the changes they need to make’ – we created those opportunities for employees to

experience the new Colt style of engaging with customers, partners and colleagues.

Execute with speed: The programme was launched to every single Colt employee, face-to-face, by country, within two working weeks. It was an aggressive plan. We had 56 priorities initially, distilled into five or six targets, which were ambitious but achievable. We had to decide quickly whether we could deliver it that year – or decide not to roll it out and launch the new brand next year.

Storytelling works: Stories shape people’s beliefs and their beliefs shape their behaviours. Personal stories brought to life the things that individuals and teams did well and where they needed to change or continue in order to meet the needs of customers and colleagues.

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As Chief Operating Officer at Colt Technology Services Andrew’s primary responsibility is in leading the embedding of Colt’s new operating model, leading alignment across both the business and service units. He is also accountable for the delivery of all internal change that spans the ‘end to end’ Colt business. Prior to his career at Colt, Andrew held a number of executive leadership roles across varied market verticals working primarily in private and venture capital investment. He started his career in the British military where he spent twelve years with the Royal Signals and five years serving with the Special Forces.

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