Building a Corporate Image through History

Corporate History as a Genre

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This paper aims to demonstrate the relevance of the notion of genre in analysing the form, the content, and the use of corporate history. It emanates from some of the results of our research project “Corporate History, Narrative, and Business Knowledge,” one of 12 ESRC-funded research projects on the Evolution of Business Knowledge. Over the course of this collaboration, we have systematically surveyed the use of history by 88 Fortune 500 companies, paired by industry. We have analysed, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the historical content of their websites and 2002 annual reports, as well as the nature and quantity of their official histories and the context of their publications. Here the term “corporate history” thus defines the series of representations a company will produce or endorse over time and across the variety of media at its disposal, to communicate with staff, shareholders, and the general public. It refers to the type of corporate discourse that claims to be of an historical nature. It is at work on companies' websites under the interchangeable categories of “history,” “heritage,” “background” or “story,” and is the stuff of illustrated booklets and prospectuses distributed to staff and the general public during company anniversaries or commemorative exercises.

We understand genre as an analytic tool for investigating the use of history and historical discourse in corporate communication. It describes a “distinctive type of communicative action” (to give a representation of the company’s past) “characterized by a socially recognized communicative purpose and common aspects of form.” Corporate history is identifiable by all through its title (history, story, heritage, roots, background, etc.), its readily observable features, or form (narrative and/or chronicle, use of iconography, references to founders or leaders, use of dates and chronology), and its communicative intent, i.e. to tell something about the company’s past. It is a rhetorical strategy enacted within a community—here the corporation’s communicative environment and the publics it includes—associated with a pattern of regularity which includes

1 http://ebkresearch.org
repeated features in multiple texts, regularities in the production and interpretation of those texts and in the social relations of writers and readers.³ The representations produced in corporate history are identifiable as being of a historical nature, and thereby carry with them values such as endurance, longevity, stability and reliability. These values pertaining to the company’s identity and reputation, as well as the political dimension of historical representations—companies publishing their past can be held accountable for the events they describe—indicate that corporate history is to be included in the larger domain of public relations.⁴

Because of the variety of media and styles at work within the genre of corporate history, it is best apprehended through comparison. The case under study here is that of British retailing, through a comparison between the uses of history by competitors J Sainsbury and Tesco, over the last 15 years. After choosing opposite directions regarding their treatment of their past, both organisations are now content with mere statements of longevity and of compliance to today’s consumers’ needs. Previously antithetical, their narrative strategies are now converging. In the case of Sainsbury’s, there has been a dramatic renunciation of previous portrayals as a family business and a national institution. On the contrary, at Tesco, the founder has very recently (June 2005) regained some degree of legitimacy after years of anonymity. The evolution of corporate history at Tesco and Sainsbury’s shows how closely representations of the past are linked to the building of a corporate image, in the context of sectorial competition and the demands of public relations.

Why a genre of corporate history?

The notion of genre has been extended widely to cultural and social studies in recent years, but it is still seldom used in organisation and business studies. At first hand, the concept seems uneasy to use,⁵ but it does provide a method for analysing historical constructions systematically. The young and dynamic field of genre studies in North America and Australia has successfully answered the

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⁵ David Duff accounts for the lack of popularity of genre in Britain as a cultural and linguistic phenomenon: “In Britain, the tyranny of Neoclassicism was somewhat milder, and those who would defy it could always appeal to the supreme example of Shakespeare, who mixed genres as freely as most people mix metaphors. By the same token, it is not altogether facetious to observe that English resistance to the law of genre, or non-acceptance of the theory that upholds it, is expressed by the word ‘genre’ itself, which is virtually unpronounceable in English—which is to say we are reminded of its alienness every time we utter it.” David Duff, ed. (2000) Modern Genre Theory, London: Pearson Education Ltd, p. 6.
call for a more socially-oriented definition of genre, which inserts the conventions of form and content traditionally associated with the concept within the social and cultural context of their production. The new term “genre” “has been able to connect a recognition of regularities in discourse types with a broader social and cultural understanding of language in use.” So understood, the notion thus enables us to relate the form and content of historical corporate discourse with the purposes that it serves in the context of its production, both inside and outside the corporation. Genre has been used in Organization Studies of an anthropological nature, to analyse the link between communicative actions and organizing structures of community or the nature, role and evolution of professional writing in organizations. Yet, such a method is not adapted to the study of corporate history, as the communities it is intended for are numerous and varied. Its readership is not restricted to the members of the organization: the web is the most accessible medium in the Western world and it is now the preferred means of communication of most large corporations; company histories published in book form are often distributed to staff, but are also available to the public in libraries and bookshops. Because corporate history thus potentially reaches a vast and diverse amount of people, it is best apprehended from the vantage point of its production, not reception. The narrative, structural and iconographic choices at work in each version of a company’s publicly available history are where the strategy behind the construction of such representations is most obvious, and, analysed systematically, are also the features whose degree of recurrence signals the existence of the genre.

A genre is a type of text or a communicative practice defined by structural, thematic and functional criteria. Structurally, corporate histories begin with the origins of the business and progress chronologically towards the present. Although of narrative form, they do not follow a pattern of disruption and restoration and are thus open-ended: the story, or arch-narrative, of “how we have become what we are today” often shifts from the past tense to the present tense and from narrative to description. Authorship is usually problematic (the histories are often “compiled” or “designed” rather than composed) and plurivocality is the norm—many voices are conjured up through anecdotes, and quotes by management or employees come in to bring legitimacy to the arch-narrative. They combine textual content and iconography and often use contemporary and archival

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7 Wanda Orlikowski and JoAnne Yates (1994).
9 On the web this shift from past to present, from history to profiling, is illustrated by the encouragement to the reader to move from the history page onto the media centre for “recent developments.”
sources indiscriminately.

Thematically, the range of strategies is immense, but the broad categories are those of the founder-focused narrative, in which the founder has put an enduring mark on the firm’s identity and culture; the entrepreneurial story, in which the company’s leaders carry it heroically through various trials; the family business, in which members of the founding family seem to be the only ones making decisions; and the product-based story, in which the evolution of the firm is marked and measured by each of its innovative products—the preferred mode of industries such as pharmaceuticals and IT, where innovations are the key to competitive advantage. History from below is rare, as the vantage point of the narrative is almost always that of management and leadership, not of labour or stakeholders. Founders and leaders are represented as caring deeply for their staff, who only appear on pictures and through brief quotations, mostly as foils or as illustrations of the firm’s enlightened labour policies. These broad categories are then adorned with themes and references pertaining to business culture (masculinity, innovation, flexibility, etc.) or the culture and lore of the country in which the firm is based or to which it wishes to appeal. Hence the recurrent theme of the American Dream in American corporate histories, or the importance of the World Wars and the social changes they brought to British firms.

Functionally, corporate history is extremely complex. As it deals with the past and mobilises archival sources, it is entitled to historical claims. Yet, its story lines are often simplified and apologetic, and are rarely critical. Its choice of sources is often limited and highly selective, and the paratext minimal (no index or bibliography). The interaction between image and text can follow either an illustrative strategy, in which images adorn the narrative and echo its contents, or can function the other way around, giving iconography precedence and asking the reader not to read but to recognise signs, as on the interactive timelines now to be found on company websites. It clearly aims at constructing a familiar and positive image that serves PR strategies—to build the firm’s reputation and cultivate a corporate personality. Because corporate history analysed here is the one that emanates from, and is cautioned by, the firm, which seeks to control it, the truth of “what happened” is not what it seeks to present, unless under threat, in which case a more scientific historical approach is needed to fend accusations of dishonesty or malpractice. Corporate history, as

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12 When the flash technology actually does work and enables the viewer to pause on certain dates and bring out the data attached to them, it subordinates the image to the text and reduces the informative intent to almost nothing.


14 We will follow Marchand’s method: by referring to “the firm”, we “do not imply a unified or organic entity but rather refer to the dominant voices within the company at a particular moment or the outcome of internal debates.” Roland Marchand (1998), p. 3.
we understand it, thus pertains more to memory than history.\textsuperscript{15} It is also distinct from the discipline of business history, whose investigative intent, historical methods and clear authorship render the issue of the firm’s control secondary to the production. Thus, corporate history is a malleable form of discourse that uses historical traits and attributes to assert claims of corporate longevity, reliability and efficiency. It is also part of a firm’s social memory, as it contributes to creating proximity and familiarity between a firm and its stakeholders. Its functional attributes vary slightly according to the strategy devised and the communicative intent driving the publication. As for all genres, corporate history is best apprehended through comparison: across media, over time and across sectors or regions. Divergences are as meaningful as similarities, and both form and content pertain to the specificity of the genre and the purposes that it serves.

### The cases

The two companies chosen here to illustrate these issues are rival retailers Tesco and J Sainsbury. They have been competing directly for half a century, with a twist in the tale since 1995, when a rejuvenated Tesco overcame its old rival and became the uncontested market leader, after forty years of Sainsbury’s domination. Today, Tesco continues to grab the lion’s share of the UK grocery market (30.3%), while Sainsbury’s is now third (15.9%) behind discounter Asda (16.4%).\textsuperscript{16} Both companies are part and parcel of Britain’s retail landscape and have undergone the same transformations as the rest of the sector, from town-centre small shops to edge-of-town supermarketing, and more recently back to town-centre convenience shops (Tesco Metro and Tesco Express vs. Sainsbury's Local) and the development of online shopping. They compete on the retail and property markets across the nation, and wage a ruthless advertising war against each other to be Britain’s favourite grocery chain.

In spite of the changes they have undergone over the years, both firms have a distinctive identity which can be related to their history. Although they are increasingly similar, especially when it comes to Internet shopping, their customer bases still reflect the initial styles with which they were founded.\textsuperscript{17} Sainsbury’s dates back to 1869 and has expanded through Victorian North London from a shop that served “quality and value for money”. Its Victorian founders targeted the increasingly

\textsuperscript{15} Corporate histories could be identified with Nora’s definition of a lieu de mémoire, as “a significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community.” They are textual entities who contribute symbolically to the heritage of the organization. Pierre Nora (1996) *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past. Vol. 1. Conflicts and Divisions*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer, New York: Columbia University Press.

\textsuperscript{16} *The retail bulletin*, June 26, 2005.

\textsuperscript{17} *Convenience Retailing 2003*, Market Report by the Institute of Grocery Distribution, p.251: “Remote shopping is seen as a natural fit with Sainsbury’s customer base”; p. 303 “It is Tesco’s long-established policy to invest any cost
well-off market of the London middle class and based their selling strategy on the idea that people were always willing to pay a premium for quality food. As the firm grew, shops became supermarkets and giant edge-of-town centres, but quality and value are still the advertising motto, recently updated to define quality as local or organic produce and endorsed by quality-food spokesman, celebrity chef Jamie Oliver.

Tesco was also started in the poorer boroughs of London, although not from a neat and conservative dairy shop. Clearly more American in style than its Victorian counterpart, Tesco's founder Jack Cohen began as a market trader in the East End in the early 1920s, and expanded his business rapidly with the *motus vivendi* “Pile it High, Sell it Cheap.” Although buying and selling techniques have changed since the founder's death and Tesco is now the largest and most efficient British retailer, high turnover, low margins and low prices are still the firm's main strength. Their “Every Little Helps” campaign has been advertising Tesco’s low prices successfully for 13 years. The firm also boasts its own national celebrity, an irate Naomi Campbell smashing and trashing the price pop-ups exposing how cheaply she is dressed in Cherokee, Tesco's clothing range.

In spite of this continuity in identity or image, these two firms have had over the years opposite ways of dealing with their past, as shown by the availability of official historical sources.

**The sources**

Corporate history is a representation of the past that can be published in print, generally in short, illustrated booklets or prospectuses occasioned by an anniversary or commemorative exercise, on the Internet as a separate webpage on the company’s official website—and those are very often excerpts from a previous book—and in abbreviated versions, such as a timeline, in periodical publications like company magazines, annual reports or company profiles. It is easy to sum up, as the narrative is the result of a selective and limited choice of salient events, illustrated with images, quotes or anecdotes. These choices, their symbolic value, and the style with which they are presented, reveal the communicative intent behind the production of corporate history. Through semiotic analysis, the image conveyed is uncovered and the endorsement by the firm can be contextualised and interpreted, politically, socially, or with regards to the firm’s economic situation. The issue of control is paramount, because it determines the nature of the image thereby constructed and links the narrative to other communicative strategies emanating from the firm.
To seize the intent behind the production of corporate historical discourse, one needs to compare similar sources. Those need to be deemed official, i.e. the sources through which a firm stands by its history. In our case study, Tesco v. Sainsbury, there is a great discrepancy in the availability and nature of the accounts. In 1995, Tesco had only endorsed one narrative of its founding and expansion, and had done so indirectly. Indeed, Maurice Corrina's “authorised biography of Jack Cohen”\(^\text{20}\) is the only insider's account into the history of the firm since its inception. Largely an hagiography of the founder, it told an American-style rags to riches story of trials and tribulations, overcome by the business acumen, bravado and exuberant personality of Jack the Slasher, from his humble beginnings in Hackney to his formidable success in the early 70s, as Britain was entering the age of giant superstores and the end of price maintenance, thanks largely, as the book claimed, to the efforts of customer-focused Cohen, a man of the people and the consumers’ champion. Almost 20 years later, the founder-focused narrative was overturned by an outsider's account of the transition of the firm from Cohen-style discount practices and entrepreneurial culture, to scientific management and true retail efficiency. Explicitly revisionist, Powell's account detailed the ailing state to which the founder's conservatism and “hands-on” running of the firm had driven it, and how a new generation of modern managers had been able to take over after the founder's death and rescue Tesco from near bankruptcy, before driving it to its later, and only true success, by rationalising buying practices—Cohen’s main talent—and developing Clubcard, a sophisticated customer information and loyalty system. Other historical accounts of Tesco's history are either focused on one single event or are part of marketing studies in which history is not the focal point of the narrative, and they abide by Powell’s version making the founder largely irrelevant to the success of the organisation.\(^\text{21}\)

As opposed to Tesco's obvious lack of an elaborate official history, Sainsbury's in 1995 boasted a series of commemorative publications that made the Sainsbury's story a readily available one for all to read and learn from. It had published *JS 100, The Story of Sainsbury’s* in 1969 for its centenary, and in 1994, it issued *The Best Butter in the World*, written by the company's archivist, Bridget Williams. The 125\(^{\text{th}}\) anniversary was also commemorated by a special issue of *SuperMarketing* full of praise and memorabilia celebrating the firm’s longevity and the endurance of its founding company is highly visible. In the case of Microsoft, for example, the story of the firm and its founder Bill Gates had been written many times before the publication of the 20-year anniversary history in 1995, in which there is no narrative but 1000 stories, or anecdotes, spoken by employees lauding the geek culture Gates had been so disparaged about in earlier accounts. *Insideout. Microsoft – In our own words*, Penguin (Warner Books), 2000.


values.\textsuperscript{22} They are different in size and form, and in the depth of the research involved in their composition, but all accounts combine narrative and images taken from the firm’s archives (ads, packaging, photos), and they carry essentially the same message:

“Sainsbury’s is a family business. It was founded in 1869 by a young man and his wife. On this modest foundation four generations have built. This book is a brief account of the first century of growth from the first, single, small dairy to the modern multiple chain of supermarkets and shops and the vast and complex organisation that supplies and services them. Each new generation of the family, as it has come into the business, has had to meet the changing social needs and commercial conditions of its time; each has made changes that have transformed the style and structure of the business. So the story is one of constant adaptation and re-shaping of the Company’s methods of trading and management. Although the changes have been radical, the basic principles established by the Founder a hundred years ago remain unaltered.” \textsuperscript{23}

Both \textit{Best Butter} and its predecessor follow the history of the company since its founding as the succession of 4 and 5 generations of leaders through the rule of primogeniture. The company grows and evolves, but the vision remains, as does the nature of leadership.

What makes those publications interesting is not the history of the firm as such (dates and facts and numbers about size, sales and distribution) but the skilful contextualisation of its development, which makes it an integral part of British society and culture. Through Sainsbury’s one learns about Victorian Britain and its obsession with hygiene and order, about London’s courage during the Blitz and the changes brought to labour relations and the role of women in society during WWII, about the consumer revolution through self-service, and finally about the emerging new tastes for environmentally and socially responsible supermarketing. The choice to insert the history of the firm so closely within its social and political environment, as opposed to its actual business environment, which is rarely mentioned, transforms Sainsbury’s into a national icon and creates a proximity between the firm and its stakeholders not dissimilar to that of an actual institution. This strategy is prolonged on the Internet through Sainsbury’s Virtual Museum, in which the firm is the educational platform through which pupils and teachers can explore British society from Victorian times to the self-service era. The goals of the virtual museum project and the history pack that accompanies it are as follows:

- To tell something of Sainsbury’s history since 1869.
- To relate that story to the way people’s lives have changed.
- To make archival material available and encourage research through primary sources.\textsuperscript{24}

There is no denying the link between a firm’s management of its archive and the extent of its

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{JS 100. The Story of Sainsbury’s}. London: J. Sainsbury Ltd, 1969 ; Bridget Williams (1994) \textit{The Best Butter in the World. A History of Sainsbury’s}. London: Ebury Press ; “SuperMarketing Celebrates 125 years of Quality and Good Value at Sainsbury’s,” \textit{SuperMarketing Supplement}. Reeds Business Publishing, 1994. The latter is not the work of Sainsbury’s itself but an outsider’s voice corroborating the firm overall message of consistency and endurance: “But what is perhaps most unique to Sainsbury’s is this 125-year-old vision which founded the company and drove the business forward. I know my staff have all found the levels of corporate awareness in Sainsbury’s mind-blowing. All the more shocking because SuperMarketing’s ultimate publisher Reed International and Sainsbury plc are similar sizes on the London stock market.” Tracy Forrest, editor \textit{SuperMarketing}, p. 112

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{JS 100}, p.5.

\textsuperscript{24} \url{http://www.j-sainsbury.co.uk/museum/teach_zone}
historical consciousness. Sainsbury’s not only cares well for its archives, it also makes them available as primary sources to the general public. The firm’s insertion into the nation’s history is thus more complete, and it can claim to be an actor of history, as it does in Best Butter:

[Sainsbury’s wartime communication system was so good that] many local food offices discovered that it was quicker to telephone Sainsbury’s rationing office to obtain advice on the regulations, than to go through their own complicated official channels.  

During the confused wartime years, Sainsbury’s served the public better than the actual government institutions to which it thereby substitutes itself through the narrative.

In the 1990s, Sainsbury’s was thus using history, through publications and through its archives, to legitimate its threatened position in the British retail landscape. Its claims to longevity and endurance were built on the intimate confusion between the firm, its successive leaders, and the social changes in British society brought about by historical events, such as the World Wars, or by the progress of retailing in general. Ultimately, the strategy was as much focused on branding as it was on asserting the identity of the company as a family business and as a national institution.

The stress on the continuity of the vision since the founding of the firm gave its motto resounding strength, and the insertion of the firm’s history into the national landscape and culture brought it closer to the memory of its customers and stakeholders, as outsiders’ echoes of the history signify.

Outside voices confirm the depiction built in the official histories by adopting the same vantage points, chronological lines, and thematic contents, thereby promoting both the firm and its brands—a crucial factor, as own-label products represent 40% of Sainsbury’s product portfolio. History and promotion merge into a cohesive depiction of a business which becomes an agent and a landmark of the nation’s history.

The genre as a competitive platform

Although their treatment of history is different, Tesco and Sainsbury’s nonetheless understand their

26 John James the founder is the archetypal Victorian, John Benjamin the tough, robust single-minded businessman that carried the business through the difficult 20s-40s, Alan and Robert the progressive thinkers ideally suited to the changes brought by the Beveridge Report, and “Just like Margaret Thatcher was right for the 80s, so Lord Sainsbury thrived on the growth at that time. What David Sainsbury brings in the 90s is a conciliatory approach more suited to a period of experimentation.” SuperMarketing, p. 60.
27 “I still feel my name is over the door and my family’s name of every product. When I was chairman of the company I felt personally responsible that those were products I needed to be proud of, otherwise I felt very unhappy.” Lord Sainsbury, SuperMarketing, p. 60.
28 The entire team of SuperMarketing salutes the firm for its “mind-blowing” “corporate awareness,” “the strength of its brands, the passion of all employees, the endurance of the vision, and the overwhelming presence of Sainsbury’s in the retail sector.” “As a new recruit, trawling through Sainsbury’s archives was the equivalent of a travelogue through the history of British food retailing, passing developments which have come to represent supermarket shopping as we now it today.” SuperMarketing, p. 114.
29 The Food Retailing Industry. Market Review 2002. Key Note Ltd, Hampton, 2002. The figure is even higher for
evolution through the retail sector along the same development, and consequently follow the same narrative structure. By comparing Corrina’s biography of Cohen and Williams’ illustrated history of Sainsbury’s, fundamental similarities emerge, which confirm the fact that a company’s official history combines the fundamentals of business knowledge in historical perspective, with social, cultural and political elements meant to convey to the organisation its longevity and legitimacy.

Indeed, both firms are presented as the product of their founder’s skill, passion and business acumen. The history of the business becomes one with that of its leaders, and the firm acquires human qualities metonymically and synecdochially. Through Cohen’s buoyancy and enthusiasm, Tesco is depicted as a dynamic and informal organisation, a happy family where hard work is the key to success and individual interests are surpassed by the love of the business. At Sainsbury’s, the family is even more paternalistic and is completely fused with the business. Women do not exist—the five Sainsbury daughters are never mentioned—and deference and hierarchy are the pillars of a well-organised and disciplined business which benefits from its leaders’ social standing and assent in British society and politics.

In both cases, the story is told as a success story, for both businesses had modest beginnings and grew beyond their founders’ wildest dreams. From humble beginnings to nationwide custom, both firms proceed through the rigor of the interwar years and the Depression, are driven to fundamental organizational changes during WWII, and thrive in the post-war era through the gradual introduction of self-service and progressive labour policies. The sixties and early seventies are the most profitable era, and the histories at this point focus more on the business and its success than on the context of its expansion. As Sainsbury’s history continues into the 1980s and early 1990s, it maintains its cohesive portrait of an enduring and resilient organisation, whose modernity and talent for innovation render it seemingly invincible.

A closer reading of this periodisation reveals more subtle strategies. Indeed, few corporate histories tackle their competition directly and openly, but they do assert the firm’s superiority through a series of mechanisms and rhetorical devices that are meant to give each company the competitive advantage. One obvious strategy consists in asserting the firm’s precedence, or “pioneering” qualities. Tesco and Sainsbury’s thus both want to share in wartime innovation and claim more or less discreetly to have invented the point system later used by the Ministry of Food to rationalise and organise rationing. According to *Best Butter*, the “fair shares” scheme using points devised by the Sainsbury’s to manage rationing and reduce the queues “was noted by the Ministry of Food” which then introduced its own. For Corrina, the point system was a rather general phenomenon in

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Tesco (50%).

retail, but grammar serves to put Tesco at the forefront of the innovation:

“Jack himself saw the benefits of controls [by the necessary bureaucracy of the Ministry of Food], and Tesco was among the first retail organisations to introduce their own points rationing system to see that customers had a fair deal in their weekly shopping. Eventually, the government introduced a comprehensive point system.”

It is interesting to note that neither account makes a direct claim to the innovation, but is content to suggest it. Some readers of these accounts were not so scrupulous and turned a suggestion into an assertion, and a probability into a historical fact. Carol Kennedy in her summary history of Sainsbury’s, largely borrowed from official accounts, leaves no doubt as to Sainsbury’s role:

“Sainsbury’s invented the so-called ‘points system,’ later adopted by the Ministry of Food, to share out non-rationed but scarce items such as sausages, cakes and custard powder, on an equitable basis.”

Powell in his account of Tesco’s history is as clear about Tesco’s contribution:

“It was a pioneering venture that not only did much to establish Tesco’s reputation as a fair dealer but was also to find an imitator in the points system introduced by the Ministry of Food in 1941.”

This evolution of the narrative from company-controlled discourse to critical non-commissioned work shows that corporate histories are indeed used as primary sources by subsequent researchers, and as such, must be considered as sources in their own right. Where the official writers were prudent because they were unable or unwilling to try and verify the veracity of their suggestion, subsequent and supposedly more critical writers fail to recognise the strategy behind the assertion of pioneering, and thereby prolonge its effect—Tesco and Sainsbury’s are in competition in the narrative as much as they are in retailing.

The fundamental mechanism of the narrative strategy is to present each company as the first to have created, adopted or imported the products, methods and techniques that carried grocery retail to its modern and contemporary form. Among the crucial innovations were the production of own-label goods (Sainsbury’s Selsa is sold in 1933; Corrina says Tesco Tea begins in 1924 and other own brands “in the early thirties”) and the opening of a modern food factory (1936 for Sainsbury’s and Corrina mentions the opening of Tesco house in 1935 “with space for a future factory”). Yet the turning point of retailing in the UK in the last century clearly was the introduction of self-service, as it truly revolutionised the sector, from the size and lay-out of the stores to the turnover and the modes of distribution. As neither firm is actually responsible for the opening of the first self-service store in England, a fact which Corrina acknowledges openly, the struggle focuses on the idea of self-service itself, not its actual introduction. Thus both narratives try to attribute some degree of participation in the innovation to the organization they praise. Corrina claims Jack had gone to America in 1935 and 1939, tells the story of the aborted self-service attempt in 1947 at St Albans.

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34 The innovator was Harold Wicker, of the London co-op, “the father of British self-service” as Corrina calls him, in
but confirms the opening of 20 self-service branches by 1950. In *Best Butter*, Alan and Robert’s 1949 trip to the States is the founding moment, which takes on extra credibility as it was sponsored by the British government. It is immediately followed by the opening of the first Sainsbury’s self-service store in Croydon in 1950. The dates are very similar and the chronology slightly confusing, so the story focuses on the motivation behind the introduction of the system, which at first was quite unpopular with customers. As with own-label goods or the modern factory, the precise date of the first self-service stores matters less than the successful construction of an image of retail pioneers, in tune with their times and their environment. In both cases, the innovation was the fruit of the leader’s vision: Alan Sainsbury intuitively understood that the progress was inevitable, while Jack Cohen wanted it for the people.³⁵ Read separately, one gets the impression that each story is one of innovation and precedent under the inspired leadership of visionary chairmen, but when read conjointly, they simply show that the positive effect created by the choices at work in the narrative matters much more than the actual facts. Both stories show the firms actively introducing the revolutionary shopping method as the only way toward modernity and progress. Yet, when it becomes necessary, for the sake of verisimilitude, to discuss how slow this progress actually was, the active forms become passive ones, and the blame is laid on customers, suppliers, and local planners.³⁶ A second, more political dimension in this narrative competition usually accompanies the statement of precedent, which consists in presenting the firm as the most progressive (innovating in labour policies) or the strongest consumers’ champion and advocate.³⁷

Reversals and convergence: corporate history on the web

Sainsbury’s historical offensive in the mid-1990s did not prevent its rival from taking over as market leader. The stress on branding and the image of the company as an enduring business had failed to support the firm’s struggle against a rejuvenated and modernised Tesco, free of its

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³⁵ “What was to mark Jack out from others was a vision of the future, and of an alternative to the austerity which the new Labour government warned the public to expect.” He “saw a picture of customers wanting relief from drabness, and of opportunity for whoever was willing to meet their demands.” Maurice Corrina (1971), p. 116


³⁷ “Having themselves grown up in humble circumstances, Sainsbury's founders believed that the poor had as much right to quality food as the rich.” “A high turnover at low prices, combined with a product range equal to that of the most exclusive high class provision merchants, meant that the poor of Stepney were as well served as the wealthy of Kensington.” Bridget Williams (1994), p. 89; “There was a pent-up demand among consumers and [Jack] had seen great social changes wrought on British society by the war. As Jack saw it, the liberation of the working-class consumer and the latent desire for a fairer sharing of wealth expressed by the return of Labour Government gave Tesco the opportunity to spearhead a new kind of customer service. His operations might seem cheap and unconventional to some of the 'high-class' provisioners, but Tesco had been built on the custom of the poorer sections of the community, and in particular of the same women to whom war had brought greater equality and a recognized voice in public affairs.” Maurice Corrina (1971), p. 118
discounter image and empowered by an innovative customer loyalty and market research tool called Clubcard. As Tesco continues its apparently unstoppable assent in the retail industry, now on a global scale, Sainsbury has been struggling to recover from the blow and to reinvent itself. In its 2002 Annual Report the then-Chairman was congratulating himself on “the huge, tangible change in the culture of the company over the past two years right across the business” (3) and in 2005, the Annual Report was still aspiring to making the firm “great again.” Tesco on the other hand rarely if ever mobilises nostalgia and rather speaks of “continuity” as if its whole history was one of continued, uninterrupted success. As neither has published an official history in the last ten years, our main contemporary source is their history webpage. As the web changes frequently, one needs to record and save the page during each visit, in order to assess the evolution of the narrative here in its most malleable form.

Until last June, Tesco simply did not have a history page. It has been added shortly before the summer, and it is extremely minimalist and highly efficient. The history section is part of the corporate information section and consists of five separate chapters/pages, which together form a timeline, beginning in the present and working its way back decade after decade until its first entry, the first day of Jack Cohen’s market trading in 1919. The choice to proceed retrospectively conveys a very modern and global image, confirmed by the minimalist illustrations (one store front for each chapter) and the matter-of-factly chronicle of a mixture of success (record-breaking revenue, awards), landmark events (openings of new generations of stores, innovations such as Clubcard or specific food ranges), and market changes (entries on the international market). The further away one clicks into the past, the fewer the entries, as if to signify the clear difference between Tesco’s past as a second-class UK retailer and Tesco’s recent assent as the UK’s #1 retailer and a global corporation. The founder is clearly relegated into an ancient and pre-modern past, but his beginnings with “£4 sales and £1 profit” serve as a foil for the present corporation’s staggering £2 billion profits in 2005.

Sainsbury’s history web page is almost the exact opposite of Tesco’s. It proceeds chronologically from past to present, following the chronology and the narrative themes adopted in Best Butter, with the chapter before last ending in 1994, as in the book, and the last chapter being a description of “Sainsbury’s Today” in the present tense; it is a fully written text, with very few dates and many comments; it mentions events and developments outside the company and how they affected it; it introduces the idea of success immediately and directs the readers in their appreciation of the company, with emphases, congratulatory remarks and many claims of innovation and leadership. The most interesting fact about Sainsbury’s web-based history, however, lies not in the text itself, which has remained unchanged over the last two years, but in the paratext and the links to which it
used to refer, which have completely disappeared. History at Sainsbury’s used to be linked to both corporate information and the education section, which has gone from the site, as well as to the Virtual Museum, which is now advertised through one, unobtrusive link. The timeline and family tree have disappeared with the education section and from the Virtual Museum, making the identity of the firm as a family business a thing of the past. There is no biography of Lord Sainsbury available, although the site says he is still president and offers a blocked or disused link to his name. His name and those of the founders (twice mentioned on the site) are now the only reminders of the strong tradition of family management, discarded in 1998. The family business is gone and the branding strategy now bares a very little relation to the family name that was central to the firm’s identity only 10 years ago.

Competition is still at work in Tesco’s timeline and Sainsbury’s narrative. Tesco compensates its relatively young age by stressing its modernity and the size of its expansion (one entry for each new country conquered), while Sainsbury’s must be content with a description of products and recent awards. Both companies now clearly compete on new grounds, such as healthy eating and environmentally-friendly products and charitable contributions, which in fact are there as an echo of the much larger, more attractive, and ever-so-popular, Corporate Responsibility section. As Tesco seems to have innovated faster on all these recent fronts, it can proudly date each innovation, while Sainsbury’s remains vague in that regard—in earlier pages, it is the other way around, with Sainsbury’s dating its innovations clearly and Tesco avoiding the issue. When Sainsbury’s tries to assert some degree of superiority, it does so inefficiently, as in its mention of its loyalty programme:

“Nectar, our customer loyalty programme, is the UK’s largest loyalty programme with more than 50 per cent of UK households currently participating.” Sainsbury’s Today

Most UK readers will realise that this is in fact partial, and thus erroneous, information, as Nectar is a coalition loyalty programme operated by Loyalty Management UK—not Sainsbury’s? which includes large non-food retailers such as BP, Debenhams, Ford and Vodafone. Not all Nectar customers are Sainsbury’s customers, they are simply encouraged to buy there as it brings them more points. All Clubcard members however, are Tesco customers, and the programme continues to bring Tesco its competitive advantage on the UK market and its reputation for thorough and innovative market research methods, which it now exports.

Conclusion

Although both companies stand by their history in publishing a history page on their website, they have in previous years treated the past completely differently. Sainsbury’s used it to support its
branding strategy in the mid-1990s, as the low prices policies of its unhistorical rival under modern management techniques were finally paying off. But Tesco won the battle for market leadership without claims of longevity, endurance or Britishness, and Sainsbury’s now has reversed its insistence on continuity to present a more contemporary, responsible face to the public. As the firm changes culture and identity, history is becoming less and less relevant to its success.\textsuperscript{38} Tesco, on the other hand, has again endorsed the existence of its past as it supports and enhances its present success. In both cases, corporate history is but one element of a marketing and public relations strategy, whose content changes with the demands of competition and public scrutiny. Their contribution to corporate history confirms the existence of the genre as a relatively set form with a malleable factual, symbolic and ideological content adapted to the political and communications needs it is there to fulfil.

\textsuperscript{38} Compare for example its 1995 and 2005 Annual Reports.