STORIES OF SUCCESS: NARRATIVE COMMUNICATION THEMES AND THE DIRECT SELLING INDUSTRY

by

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ain't noise pollution. It's too bad, though, that your definition of Rock & Roll remains a wee bit skewed. After all, it's not your fault The Beatles are overrated...

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ABSTRACT

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Despite the growing scholarly attention given to various aspects of narrative communication, little research has been conducted to identify and document narrative themes used in the storytelling efforts of successful direct selling and network marketing consultants to build their businesses. Such was the focus of this study.

This thesis utilized qualitative research, particularly the method of thematic analysis as developed by Owen (1984), to explore the theoretical perspective of Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm. For the purpose of this study, narrative is defined as a "sequential account of events, usually chronologically, whereby sequentiality indicates some kind of causality, and action-accounted for in terms of intentions and deeds and consequences and is commonly given a central place" (Grant, 2004, p.135).

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Data for this study consisted of a collection of first-person organizational stories present in *Eye on Arbonne* documents, which were written by Arbonne International's most successful independent consultants. For this study, "most successful" is defined as consultants who have reached the national vice president compensation level, which is the company's highest level and, subsequently, the most difficult one to achieve.

The study produced several key findings. First, the analysis of stories from *Eye* on *Arbonne* documents highlighted one primary narrative theme, Hope, which was supported by five narrative sub-themes: (1) Teamwork (2) Opportunity (3) Perseverance/Stay Committed (4) Believe in Yourself, and (5) Turn Dreams into Reality. Second, the data fully supported the theoretical arguments of Fisher (1978, 1987) and Weick (1995) in terms of affirming the relationship between sensemaking and the use of stories. Finally, in line with Boje's (1991, 2001) views on storytelling as the preferred sensemaking currency in organizations, the practical implications of this research include the possible creation of a replicatable model based on the theme and sub-themes identified in this study, which can be used as a powerful tool for other direct selling and network marketing organizations.

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CHAPTER 1

THESIS INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the Study

This is not your mother's direct sales business. Once stereotyped as strictly limited to the casual fancy of stay-at-home moms peddling kitchen containers and gadgets for the purpose of socializing and earning a few extra dollars, the direct selling industry now boasts a rapidly growing number of successful professionals who have left their traditional office jobs to build home-based, family business empires.

This perspective developed for me more than two years ago when my wife joined a company called Arbonne International in an effort to build her own direct sales business. Watching her experience all the ups and downs inherent with pursuing such a venture gave me an invaluable viewpoint regarding the basic nature of the social environment of Arbonne International in particular, and the direct selling industry in general.

By observing this social environment, I saw the overlap of Arbonne International's use of narrative communication and its relevance to Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm. This is not to say, however, that Arbonne relies solely on narratives for its organizational communications. Still, noticing the use of storytelling in the company's *Eye on Arbonne* documents encouraged me to examine this one communication channel to examine whether the stories told by some of Arbonne's most successful salespeople shared any common traits.

1.2 Background to the Study

During the past decade, interest has continued to grow regarding the role of narrative, storytelling and the pursuit of more effective communication with internal and external stakeholders by organizations (Denning, 2000, 2004, 2005, 2007; Sax, 2006; Schwartz, 2004; Coulehan, 2005; Curci, 2004; Blair, 2006; Gallo, 2007; McKee & Fryer, 2003; Grant, 2004). Theorists throughout the narrative field of study — such as Walter Fisher (1978, 1987, 1988, 1994, 1995), Mark Currie (1998), Wayne C. Booth (2004), M.M. Bakhtin (1981), Gerald Prince (1987), Fred E. Maus (1997), and Monika Fludernik (1996) — have proven instrumental in advancing a broad yet inclusive approach to studying narrative in the day-to-day interactions of individuals as well as organizations. From a methodological standpoint, such cross-borrowing of rhetorical figures and textual strategies has enriched other disciplines and can equally benefit studies concerning narrative and storytelling (Grant, 2004). Take for example, the proliferation of research related to the use of stories in business organizations and the field of health and wellness (Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Gargiulo, 2006; Borkan, Reis, & Medalie, 2001).

One approach to analyzing storytelling in the study of organizations has been in the investigation of sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Czarniawska, 2004; Sköldberg, 2002). For example, contemporary studies of rhetoric, or the technique of persuasion, have a more diverse range of practices and meanings than was the case of ancient, pre-Socratic philosophers. As a result, the concept of rhetoric has shifted widely during its 2,500-year history. Rhetoricians have argued recently that the classical understanding of

rhetoric is limited because persuasion depends on communication, which in turn depends on meaning (Horner, 1990). For the purpose of this study, I am approaching sensemaking from a business communication, or knowledge management, perspective. Sensemaking assumes that someone faces an unclear situation "and must retrospectively impose a sense of order on it" (Boland & Yoo, 2004, p. 381). In fact, Weick (1995) says the relationship between sensemaking and narrative communication is so intertwined that he writes the following:

If accuracy is nice but not necessary in sensemaking, then what is necessary? The answer is, something that preserves plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something which resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought, something that allows for embellishment to fit current oddities, something that is fun to contrast. In short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story (pp. 60-61).

What, then, constitutes a good story? From the broad perspective of his narrative paradigm, Fisher (1988) contends that "when any form of human communication is taken seriously...it should be viewed as a story" (p. 50). More specifically, Fisher (1987) defines it as when humans "experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends" (p. 24). In terms of stories within an organization, Gardner (1995) says that "stories of identity-narratives...constitute the most powerful weapon in the leader's arsenal" (p. 43). In this sense, stories are a part of organizational rhetoric, or the persuasive dimension of all language and other symbol systems (Burke, 1969a).

Rhetoric, then, is meant to persuade, and discourse is organized for that very purpose. It is through this approach to rhetoric that Grant (2004) refers to stories as rhetorical devices by which storytellers can increase the impact of their messages.

This thesis explores how one organization — Arbonne International — helps maximize the impact of its messages by equipping, empowering and encouraging its independent consultant sales force to succeed by utilizing narrative communication. In 2006, the company's most financially successful year thus far, Arbonne International celebrated the 25th anniversary of test marketing the first line of its initial 15 skin care products. In addition, the company's sales have skyrocketed since the turn of the millennium to the point of making it one of the direct selling industry's fastest growing companies.

Furthermore, Arbonne currently demonstrates a public embrace and application of storytelling that many other direct selling organizations do not. For example, in viewing the Web site design of 40 of the 211 member organizations of the Direct Selling Association (DSA), only four of the organizations — which include Arbonne — promote content via a tab or link on its home page that highlight company success stories or testimonials written by their independent consultants. Brad Wayment, Arbonne International's Senior Vice President of Marketing, has 16-plus years of experience with direct selling companies and earned his MBA from Brigham Young University. Wayment describes Arbonne International's use of narrative communication this way:

We exceed what anyone else does in the industry. While I think a lot of companies believe it's important, they don't put as much effort or resources behind it. We make a big investment into the structure of helping Consultants share their stories and to support the program we have. We're on the high end of [narrative communication] usage within the industry (Wayment, 2007).

In light of Wayment's comments, this study sets out to examine the implementation and use of storytelling within Arbonne's independent sales force.

1.3 Theoretical Perspectives of This Study: Narrative and Sensemaking

A principle objective of this study is to underscore the practical nature of storytelling and to highlight the elements of narrative communication shared by those using it to successfully grow direct sell businesses. When it comes to making sense of experiences, narratives play a key role in helping individuals do just that (Bochner, Ellis & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Weber, Harvey & Stanley, 1987). This is particularly true for people trying to make sense of difficult or traumatic experiences (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006). Narratives, according to Ricouer (1984, 1985, 1991), are written arrangements in which peoples' self-conceptions and experiences are interwoven.

These narratives facilitate self-understanding, the achievement of a mature identity and individuation (Grant, 2004). In addition, Vanhoozer (1990) says that stories unite "the power of the creative imagination and the concern with human temporality in order to explore specifically human possibilities" (p. 17). This could provide a key connection to how Arbonne's most successful independent consultants have risen to the level they have — perhaps they know how to turn stories about their

own circumstances into a relatable and sensemaking narrative about personal accomplishment that forms a bond between themselves and others.

Forming such bonds in a business environment via storytelling is as practical as it is theoretical. Kimberly Cooper, Director of External Communications and Corporate Responsibility at American Water in Voorhees, N.J., says this of her role: "I'm a storyteller. My job is to tell people exciting things about my company without putting them to sleep" (Cooper, 2007, p. 47).

In this thesis, narrative analysis is applied to investigating and identifying the storytelling themes common to Arbonne International's most successful independent consultants. Additionally, this study will examine the dynamics through which Arbonne consultants share personal stories as a tool to connect with others for the purpose of selling products, recruiting fellow business builders and becoming successful entrepreneurs.

This objective seeks to address a growing interest in the literature examined in this study, which traces the importance of the use of narrative communication within organizations and how related stakeholders use this form of communication for sensemaking purposes (Weick, 1995; Czarniawska, 2004; Sköldberg, 2002). Direct selling companies that sell similar products — such as Arbonne, Mary Kay and Avon, which all sell cosmetics and skin care products — not only have to compete with one another, but they must also compete with Internet and brick and mortar-based companies as well. For instance, how do companies like Arbonne that sell skin care and cosmetics, among other products, compete with well-established, heavily advertised

skin care and cosmetics companies that sell their products from behind the counters of large department stores in shopping malls across America? A possible answer may lie within the effectiveness of the stories that the independent consultants share with one another, with their customers and with potential business building recruits in terms of making sense to each audience.

In exploring the topics of sensemaking and corporate storytelling, the theories of Weick (1995), Czarniawska (2004) and Sköldberg (2002) complement those of Fisher (1984, 1987, 1988, 1995), Burke (1966, 1969a, 1969b) and Boje (1991). Foundationally, Boje (1991) notes that "storytelling is the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders" (p. 106). The importance of narrative communication in terms of connecting with those stakeholders is addressed by Weick (1995), who says sensemaking consists of attempts to integrate a new event into a plot, by which it becomes understandable in relation to the context of what has happened. Making things understandable, particularly in the constantly changing environment of business communication, becomes paramount. From there, the discussion can move to the exploration of shared sensemaking, or meaning, among more than one person. Put differently, "Another aspect of the articulated narrative is that it helps members avoid misunderstanding because they will work out 'implicature' from this coproduced narrative. Sensemaking may thus start from common ground" (Jönsson, 2004, p. 218).

It is this very kind of sensemaking common ground through storytelling that comes from successful business builders in the direct selling industry in general, and Arbonne International in particular, that is investigated in this study. For instance, do Arbonne consultants who are thriving in their businesses typically use narrative communication to establish a sensemaking bond with, and among, potential clients and business building recruits? And if so, do their storytelling efforts include shared narrative themes that can be identified and learned by other consultants?

Research states that providing clarity of understanding typically is made much easier when doing so with the help of a narrative (Polkinghorne, 1987). Put even more succinctly, "narratives *exhibit* an explanation instead of demonstrating it" (Polkinghorne, 1987, p. 21). It stands to reason, then, that it is of the utmost importance for researchers to explore the specific traits of storytelling in different environments. In terms of conducting these kinds of studies, Grant (2004) notes that the narrative perspective enables researchers to move away from "the traditional approach of studying the visual elements of an organisation's identity and image to a more *discursive approach* of examining texts in the form of narrative which illustrate how the organisation presents its self to its publics" (p. 4, emphasis in original).

The focus on narrative in this thesis is twofold: First, the narrative paradigm allows for a needed alternative when it comes to studying the connection between the lives and stories of both individuals and organizations (Czarniawska, 1997). Second, narratives provide a pattern, or model, for how people make sense of life and its experiences in a business environment. "Stories are exemplars of the messy process of human sensemaking" (Boje, 2001, p. 126).

1.4 Rationale for This Particular Analysis

1.4.1 Direct Selling and Multilevel Marketing

Direct selling, a method of non-store retailing, is a commonly used form of commerce that can trace its roots back for thousands of years (Biggart, 1989). The structure of organizations using this type of retailing, however, has changed to accommodate its environment. Direct selling companies "have adopted a form of organization that dates from this nation's colonial past and have shaped it to fit the circumstances and aspirations of contemporary Americans" (Biggart, 1989, p. 2). Despite these changes, though, the core characteristics of direct selling remain the same. Primarily, the key characteristic focuses on face-to-face interactions or personal presentations that create the foundation of the direct selling relationship between a seller and a buyer of products or services (World Federation of Direct Selling Associations, 2001). This process is distinctly different from direct marketing, "which is defined as a relational process where products are sold directly to the consumer using direct mail, telemarketing and direct response advertising such as television solicitation" (Kustin & Jones, 1996, p. 60).

Network marketing, which is also called multilevel marketing, is a form of direct selling and is recognized as first appearing in 1941 when William Casselberry and Lee Mytinger developed their C&M Marketing Plan (Gabbay & Leenders, 2003). Network marketing companies can be characterized as direct selling organizations that depend heavily or exclusively on personal selling, and that reward sales agents, who are oftentimes called independent consultants, for (a) buying products, (b) selling products,

and (c) finding other agents to buy and sell products (Coughlan & Grayson, 1998). Network marketing firms, due to their different structures, are described as hybrid organizations encompassing characteristics of both the formal classical bureaucracy and entrepreneurial elements (Gabbay, 1995). In addition to Arbonne International, some well known direct sell companies include Tupperware, Mary Kay, Amway, Avon, Pampered Chef, NuSkin, and Shaklee.

Specifically, these companies and other multilevel marketing organizations like them rely on retail selling channels that use independent distributors for two primary purposes (Coughlan & Grayson, 1998). First, these distributors, or consultants, buy and resell product at retail. Second, independent consultants also recruit new distributors into a growing network over time (Coughlan & Grayson, 1998). Commissions and markups on personal sales volumes, and net commissions on the personal sales volumes of downlines — which are the people from whose selling volume a consultant draws sales commissions — are the methods of compensation commonly used to motivate such distributors (Coughlan & Grayson, 1998).

Despite its long history, the direct selling and network marketing industry's rate of growth over the past decade indicates that something is spurring its popularity and acceptance during this timeframe. In particular, it's apparent that the network marketing environment today is not your mother's direct sales business. Once stereotyped as strictly limited to the casual fancy of stay-at-home moms peddling lipstick or food containers for the purpose of socializing and earning a few extra dollars,

the direct selling industry now boasts successful professionals who have left their traditional office jobs to build home-based, family business empires.

The Direct Selling Association (DSA), the national trade association of the leading firms that manufacture and distribute goods and services sold directly to consumers, reported that U.S. direct selling accounted for nearly \$30.5 billion in sales in 2005. That's up from \$16.55 billion in sales in 1994. In addition, as of 2005 the DSA reports that more than 14.1 million people were signed up as independent consultants for a direct sell company (Direct Sell Organization, 2007).

Seemingly, the industry's growth has been legitimized by the embracing of network marketing strategies and tactics by well-known, mainstream business entities. For example, IBM, Coca-Cola, MCI, Colgate-Palmolive, Chrysler, Rexall Drug and Gillette recognize the value of this distribution method and now actively use different network marketing methods, or use existing network marketing firms, to distribute some of their products (Gabbay & Leenders, 2003). High profile individuals who wield a great deal of influence could be accelerating the rate of multilevel marketing's acceptance among mainstream American financial communities as well. For instance, billionaire investor Warren Buffet generated headlines when he purchased Pampered Chef, a network marketing organization that is a member of the DSA, in 2002.

Direct sell companies also have taken steps recently to connect their organizations with pop culture celebrities, which could further lead to more mainstream acceptance for the industry in America. For example, Oscar-winning actress Reese Witherspoon signed a multi-year deal on Aug. 1, 2007 to become the first-ever Global

Ambassador for Avon, an international direct selling (although not a multilevel marketing organization) cosmetics company (Avon, 2007). In addition, Tupperware's corporate Web site links to the company-branded Chain of Confidence campaign for which actress Brooke Shields serves as the spokesperson. This campaign provides an online community for women to connect with one another and share experiences, nurture friendships and celebrate women — which carries with it a significant connection to narrative communication as well as sensemaking — all under Tupperware's long-time motto of "Enlighten. Educate. Empower" (Tupperware, 2007).

Part of the recent success of direct sell companies could also be linked to the industry making sure that consumers have some protection. Every member organization of the DSA pledges to abide by the organization's Code of Ethics as a condition of admission and continuing membership (Direct Sell Organization, 2007). The Code of Ethics speaks to both the consumer and the seller to ensure that member companies make no statements or promises that might mislead either consumers or prospective sales people. The DSA clearly separates its organizations from those entities that are using illegal business practices (Direct Sell Organization, 2007), such as pyramid schemes or Ponzi schemes.

Vander Nat and Keep (2002) note that both multilevel marketing organizations and pyramid schemes involve distributors as consumers, recruiters and retailers. However, pyramid scheme distributors "are recruiters first and focus considerably less on personal consumption and retailing. Some schemes do not even require the completion of a consumer sale before paying a reward for recruitment — a reward that

is further characterized as 'business income'" (Vander Nat & Keep, 2002, p. 141). State courts, according to Stockstill (1985), typically treat pyramid schemes as lotteries, which by definition is any scheme in which one pays something of value to another in order to receive a return based upon some formula of chance. "Its basic elements are: (1) an element of lot or chance; (2) a price; (3) a payment of consideration (Stockstill, 1985, p. 56).

Ponzi schemes generally refer to scams in which someone sells a risky investment opportunity and uses the proceeds to cover the expenses and payouts for a previous venture of the same sort. Doing so inevitably leads to a lot of hopeful investors losing the entire sum of their investment and receiving absolutely no return for the financial outlay (Gabbay & Leenders, 1997). The term was coined after Charles Ponzi "offered extremely high rates of return to investors supposedly by buying and selling international postal reply coupons at different rates due to the effects of the First World War" (Gabbay & Leenders, 1997, pp. 536-537).

1.4.2 Arbonne International

Wayment (2007) describes Arbonne as a network marketing, limited-liability company headquartered in Irvine, Calif., that manufactures Swiss-formulated skin care products. Although its primary focus since 1980 has been on skin care products, the company has since branched out into the personal care arena with aromatherapy, color, nutrition and weight loss products.

This growing company separates itself from many of its competitors by communicating that it does not use any mineral oils, dyes or chemical fragrances in its products. In addition, Arbonne's products are botanically-based and hypoallergenic; all of the skin care products are also dermatologist tested. Arbonne's products are certified vegan and contain no animal by-products, and the company does not conduct any testing on animals. To communicate the natural foundation of its products, the company's tagline is "Pure. Safe. BeneficialTM." Several of the product lines are U.S. Patent Pending (Wayment, 2007).

The vision to provide skin care products unparalleled in quality and effectiveness began in Switzerland more than 27 years ago, according to Wayment (2007), when an entrepreneur and a group of leading bio-chemists, biologists and herbalists developed Arbonne's first, basic skin care products. The company's original skin care and color products have grown from just 19 in 1980 — when the products were introduced in the United States — into a portfolio of more than 250 skin and body care, color, nutrition, weight loss and aromatherapy products. In addition, Arbonne offers more than 50 seasonal products, and more than 100 business aids and training support tools (Wayment, 2007). Arbonne is a member of the Direct Selling Association and its products are sold through a network of more than one million Independent Consultants in the United States, Canada, Australia and coming soon, the United Kingdom (Wayment, 2007).

The company underwent a leadership change in 1991 when Rita Davenport took over as Arbonne's president, a post that she still holds today. During that time

Davenport has led the sales force of independent consultants with motivation, training and recognition efforts (Direct Selling News, 2006).

Those efforts, in addition to some other subsequent savvy corporate moves, started showing huge benefits after the turn of the millennium. In 2001, annual sales jumped 13.5 percent from the previous year, followed by a 70.6 percent increase in 2002. Sales in 2003 skyrocketed by 111.8 percent, with 2004 sales jumping another 98.2 percent. The company's biggest increase thus far came in 2005, with a staggering 164 percent jump from the previous year. The trend continued into 2006, with annual sales rising another 88.3 percent from the amazing 2005 results (Arbonne, 2007).

Being a private company, Arbonne makes it a policy to not provide specific financial information (Wayment, 2007). However, business wire reports dated Dec. 1, 2004 communicated that Harvest Partners, a New York-based private equity investment firm, announced that day that the company had acquired Arbonne International. The news reports stated that Arbonne's combined net sales were \$200 million for that year (NPIcenter, 2004). In addition, a Citigroup document (2006) reported that Arbonne's 2005 sales totaled \$528 million. By applying the annual sales growth percentages posted on the company's Web site as noted above, computations show that Arbonne's annual sales went from an estimated \$25 million in 2000 to just shy of \$1 billion in 2006.

In the meantime, the same Citibank report (2006) noted that over the previous four years, Arbonne's annual sales, which currently take place almost exclusively in North America, "have increased at the astonishing average rate of 111 percent per year"

(p. 34), while Herbalife's U.S. sales grew just 1.3 percent per annum and Avon's North American sales *declined* at an average rate of 1.4 percent per annum over the same period.

Bob Henry is Arbonne's chairman and chief executive officer, who was installed by Harvest Partners following the 2004 acquisition. Henry attributes the company's dramatic growth to the organization's shift in business focus in 2002 and its subsequent introduction of Arbonne's NutriMinC® RE9 anti-aging skin care line, in addition to staffing the corporate office with executives who were needed to build the company's future (Direct Selling News, 2006). Arbonne's shift in business focus included stabilizing the compensation plan that previously had been modified regularly (Direct Selling News, 2006).

The company, however, is not the only Arbonne entity that is enjoying financial success. In 2006, Arbonne International distributed more than \$290 million in bonuses and overrides to its independent consultants in the United States and its territories (Arbonne, 2007). In August 2007, Arbonne had more than 420 consultants who had reached the company's highest compensation level, national vice president. In 2006, the average annual income for consultants at that level exceeded \$270,000 (Arbonne, 2007). This is an elite level to reach within the company. In fact, only .06% of all Arbonne consultants have ascended to this level of compensation (Arbonne, 2007). It is this information that leads to a key definition for my study. For the purposes of this study, I am going to use Arbonne's consultants who have reached the national vice

president level of compensation as the benchmark of "successful storytelling consultants."

Financial success for Arbonne consultants is by no means limited to those who have reached the national vice president level. At the next level down, which is regional vice president, Arbonne consultants received an average of more than \$57,000 each in 2006, as well as earning a stipend each month earmarked for them to buy or lease a white Mercedes-Benz automobile of their choice.

In addition, Arbonne consultants who are earning in excess of \$200 000 are doing so at a faster rate than those in other direct sell, multilevel marketing companies (Godinez, 2006). For example, in 2006 Dallas-based Mary Kay Inc., which began selling its products in 1963, publicly celebrated the accomplishments of Anne Newbury. In 2006 Newbury became that company's first independent sales representative to earn \$1 million in commissions in a single year. It took her 37 years as a consultant to reach the milestone (Godinez, 2006). However, that mark for consultants of Arbonne, which started selling skin care products and cosmetics in the United States 17 year after Mary Kay began, already had been met. "We've had several consultants earning that much for some time now and enjoying the benefits of succeeding with this business" (Wayment, 2007).

In addition to its consultants being rewarded through prosperous compensation plans, Arbonne also insists that its consultants abide by its formal Code of Ethics, a company-specific set of rules that uses terms such as integrity, responsibility and honesty, much like the DSA has in place for its member organizations (Arbonne, 2007).

It is important to note here that Arbonne's business is recognized as relying strictly on the legally recognized network marketing principles and practices introduced earlier in this chapter.

1.5 Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is organized in such a way so as to provide a background to the topics relevant to this study and then outline the theory used to guide the investigation and the method of research before moving into a discussion of the research findings. Chapter one introduces the study. Chapter two provides the reader with a literature review that explores the existing research pertaining to the overlap of narrative communication and storytelling, the direct selling and network marketing environments, storytelling trends in the health- and wellness-related industries, and the growing acceptance of narrative communication in the traditional business environment.

Chapter three describes the research design and method, explaining the descriptive thematic analysis process and detailing the narrative-sensemaking connection to the *Eye on Arbonne* documents. Here, the procedures used in the approach for the collection of document analysis data are presented. The advantages and disadvantages of each method are also discussed.

The findings of this research are presented in chapter four, where the key themes are identified and fully examined, with numerous examples. Chapter five details the theoretical and practical implications of these research findings and outlines lessons and useful insights for other direct selling and network marketing business organizations.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Narrative Paradigm

This review begins by examining the ideas of Walter Fisher (1984) who claimed that people use narratives to create meaning. To further develop his ideas, Fisher (1984) created the narrative paradigm, and thus the narrative theory of communication, as a new way to interpret and assess the concept of humans as storytelling animals. He contends that throughout history and across cultures worldwide, human beings have told and will tell stories as their primary form of communication. This comes across clearly in his statement: "I think that when any form of human communication is taken seriously...it should be viewed as a story" (Fisher, 1988, p. 50). This new paradigm — which describes narrative communication as an overarching and universal view of human communication (Fisher, 1987) — positions humans as storytellers who make decisions based on good reasons, as opposed to rational beings who make decisions based on arguments.

Sax (2006), who says that storytelling is arguably the most traditional of arts, places narrative communication in the context of a culture dominated by electronic media to help people and organizations better recognize and apply the influence of storytelling. In order to recognize the influence of storytelling, researchers first must fully understand the impetus for the person telling the story (Wallace, 1986).

"Motivation' is an essential feature of any realistic narrative...When we supply such missing links, we are doing essentially the same thing that the writer does in creating the story" (p. 65).

In addition to determining the motivation for each story the researcher should determine if the structure of a story and the underlying truthfulness of a story ring true for intended audiences. Fisher (1978, 1987) provides guidelines that can help measure narrative communications in terms of their narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. Narrative coherence questions a narrative's plotline consistency, the presence of needed details and whether characters behave in a reliable manner. Narrative fidelity addresses issues such as the values that are embedded in a story, the relevance between the story and the values it communicates, and the consistency between the values of the story and the values of the audience.

Ultimately, Fisher (1987) says that as humans we "experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends" (p.24). It is in the spirit of those life experiences, particularly as it relates to building a direct sell business, that this study examines the narrative communication of Arbonne International's most successful independent consultants.

2.2 Direct Selling and Multilevel Marketing

Biggart (1989) provided one of the first big-picture studies of America's direct selling environment, particularly as it relates to multilevel marketing. The industry's growth and popularity, she says, stem directly from the opportunity to try a non-

traditional method of earning a living that stresses new and liberating ways for people to control their own future. Biggart (1989) contends that, historically, direct selling organizations succeed by blending entrepreneurial success with elements of equality and individualism within their businesses.

According to some researchers, however, the direct selling glass is half empty. A big reason for a generally unsavory sense concerning multilevel marketing companies, say Vander Nat and Keep (2002), is the confusion about what distinguishes network marketing — which is legal — from pyramid schemes and Ponzi schemes, which are illegal. This confusion is intentional, particularly on the part of pyramid scheme promoters who use similar marketing plans to disarm and then attract investors illegally (Stockstill, 1985).

Still, multilevel marketing critics note other concerns as well. For example, Bhattacharya and Mehta (2000) note that opponents of network marketing organizations say that financial gain is very small for the vast majority of those who participate. In addition, critics say that direct selling is typically more social in nature when compared to other business models, which leads some to argue that network marketing organizations are cults that engage in various forms of mind control. A similar view is evident in the work of Bloch (1996) as well. Bloch maintains that while some consultants may indeed make large amounts of money, most will not. Instead, Bloch concludes that most consultants leave their network marketing venture when they receive repeated rejections after approaching people they are close to with the network marketing opportunity. Negative associations connected to the multilevel model of

direct selling are not limited to the U.S. borders. In a study that investigated consumer perceptions and concerns of multilevel marketing in Australia, Kustin and Jones (1995) noted that consumer responses point to a sour opinion regarding network marketing, while also holding a low positive view of direct selling.

But how do all these negative perceptions that surround direct selling and network marketing companies reconcile with the massive amount of growth associated with the industry as a whole? After all, Tupperware initiated its direct selling practices in 1948. Amway did so in the late 1950s, and Mary Kay began in 1963. All three companies, whose long-term success seems to have fully ingrained them into the fabric of American commerce, ultimately utilized the multilevel marketing model for compensation. With them, emerging companies such as Arbonne International report significant jumps in sales and are contributing to the continued high-powered growth of direct selling. Why does the skepticism that people hold about network marketing — such as those documented by Bhattacharya and Mehta (2000), Bloch (1996), and Kustin and Jones (1995) — result in seemingly little ill effects on the industry? After all, getting extensive coverage on Web sites such as www.quackwatch.com and mlmwatch.org certainly does not paint a picture that the DSA and its members want to promote.

As noted in chapter one of this thesis, it is hard to ignore the rapid rate of growth within the direct selling environment. According to Gabbay and Leenders (2003), one explanation for its success comes down to independent consultants developing trust through narrative strategies. Gabby and Leenders also go on to note that by using

narrative communication effectively, consultants can change peoples' perceptions of the evidence underlying the trust decision that allows recruits to hold different perspectives on what is and what is not rational. Such effective use of narrative communication complements this study's intent to identify the narrative themes common to the most successful storytellers — Arbonne consultants — in the direct selling environment.

In addition to getting to the heart of trust, Sparks and Schenk (2001) write that effective multilevel marketing leaders rely heavily on transformational leadership efforts. Essentially, this means successful leaders within multilevel marketing organizations effectively communicate their belief in the higher purpose of one's work as a mechanism to achieve positive outcomes. Sparks and Schenk (2001) note that transformational leadership does indeed transform followers by encouraging them to see the higher purposes of their work. It will be interesting to try and determine if this sense of higher purpose is communicated through the storytelling styles of Arbonne's most successful consultants.

2.3 Narrative Communication in Health and Wellness

Because Arbonne positions itself as a health and wellness company, health and wellness literature as it relates to narrative communication plays a crucial part in this study. For example, Coulehan (2005) notes that empathy is characteristic of humans and seems to be a generic aspect of healing practices. Likewise, he also asserts that we discover meaning in our lives and illnesses by seeing them embedded in narratives. Healers, Coulehan says, enter into the stories of their patients and thereby change them.

This provides an essential foundation regarding theoretical implications of this study's findings, which will be discussed more in depth in chapter five.

Curci (2004), in fact, confirms the establishment of a two-way bond during the building of a relationship in a healing environment by describing the concept of secondary social sharing of emotion. Curci writes that people who listen to a narrative concerning another's experience feel the urge to share, in turn, their own experience.

Working from a broad health and wellness perspective, Wood (2005) discusses the form and function of narrative-based medicine, writing that it aims to counteract the deterioration of effective listening by focusing on the narrative aspects of each medical interaction. Mingo, Herman and Jasperse (2000) studied how to increase understanding of women's midlife changes. They report that although women in the study said that menopause and hysterectomies are seldom discussed openly, they all participated freely in the storytelling focus groups. Borkan, Reis and Medalie (2001) examined the roles of narrative communication in a health-related environment with particular emphasis on the use of storytelling with primary care providers. The authors wrote of the transforming power of stories and their use in clinical work. They propose an organized model to utilize a combination of individual patient narratives, best evidence and provider narratives.

Physicians are increasingly encouraged to listen to patients' narratives in clinical practice environments (Steiner, 2005). Furthermore, doctors are using narratives more often during their own decision-making process. Steiner (1995) suggests that researchers and policy makers should develop methods to use stories to translate

research into policy. In his study on the role of physicians and nurses in palliative, or end-of-life, care, Weissman (2000) identifies the importance of narrative communication in a hospice environment as a vital skill that clinicians can use to assess their patients' pain as well as help manage it. And as Fisher (1984) explains when proposing his narrative paradigm, the storytelling concept is not confined to one particular race, culture or nationality.

Silver (2001) illustrates this by writing about a powerful usage of narrative communication in Uganda during successful efforts there to address the country's most serious health problems. American Indians, too, are utilizing traditional storytelling to promote wellness in their communities (Hodge, 2002). In terms of cultural sensitivity, Aull (2005) documents a compelling case for the importance of narrative competence in medical practice and training. She inserts culture into the narrative model of physician-patient interaction and argues that culture, the "situadedness" of physician and patient, influences telling and listening in important ways. Another cross-cultural implication for using narrative communication was explored by DasGupta, Meyer, Calero-Breckheimer et al (2006). The authors note that cultural competency and narrative medicine are perspectives that help medical educators and practitioners to teach effective communications and provide quality care to patients of a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Given that Arbonne was founded in Switzerland, it was interesting to find direct links between the storytelling concept and the Swiss perspective. First, Swiss classicist Walter Berkert (1996) used the model of Propp to trace storytelling roots to the

experience of hunting, saying that the chase would be recounted by hunters at mealtimes in prehistoric eras. Berkert refers to scenes of pursuit that take place throughout fairy tales, such as a jealous stepmother chasing her beautiful stepdaughter and a prince pursuing a beautiful woman he met at a dance, to further illustrate his point. In another link to the Swiss culture and narrative communication, three authors (Herbelin, Ponder and Thalmann, 2005), all part of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, present new high-tech options to facilitate training and therapy applications that are based on interactive storytelling. The new technology is meant to increase control over the story required by the trainer/therapist and interaction required by the trainee/patient. New technology is influencing journalists as well. Many of them believe since technology makes it relatively easy to convert and distribute any form of content into another, it is possible to produce new forms of storytelling and consequently do better journalism (Quinn, 2005).

No matter what country or culture, the connection between narrative communication and multilevel marketing does not have to be limited to a physical connection. Launer (2005) conducted a study related to a narrative-based approach in psychiatry and psychology. Clinically, he says, an understanding of the human drive to construct narratives and an awareness of his own narrative preferences are important because they can act as a useful corrective against excessive certainty or dogmatism. Also, Cahn (2006) wrote about ethnographic evidence that person-to-person marketing can be a spiritual response to conservative economic reforms. Calling the network marketing group Omnilife a quasi-religious organization, Cahn argues that the company

offers consultants a renewed self-image that restores the balance between individual interests and obligations to others. The link, then, is clearly visible between narrative communication and the health and wellness environment. Again, that goes to the very heart of the stories emanating from Arbonne's corporate office and its independent consultants.

2.4 Storytelling in Business and Corporate Environments

In the same way that narrative communication can elicit a bond via health and wellness stories, research suggests that it can do the same in business as well. Denning (2005) drives home the point that stories really do play a key role in the business world. He says that what business executives typically rely on when they communicate — such as analysis and facts — can oftentimes prove to be a weakness. Analysis might energize the brain, Denning says, but it almost never offers a channel to someone's heart. Effective storytelling, he writes, can translate lifeless and abstract data into visual pictures of an executive's vision.

Silverman, Gargiulo and Tyline King (2007) agree, noting that business communication traditionally describes events or changes instead of telling a story, which oftentimes dilutes the impact of the communication. In fact, Brown, Denning, Groh et al (2005) suggest that what is taught in business schools, as well as what is taught in corporate training and development classes, typically fails to address how organizations really work. Instead, the authors say, stories can provide much better

answers to questions concerning where knowledge exists within a company and how to understand what people know.

Barker, Rimler, Moreno et al (2004) conducted a content analysis that examined the stories of people involved with family businesses as the stories pertained to the values and succession of power from one family member to another. The authors concluded that the content analysis of the narratives suggests similar content themes regarding values and authoritative succession across family-owned businesses. Given these findings, it is not unwarranted to expect a possible collection of themes coming from stories told by Arbonne's most successful consultants.

It is also not unwarranted to expect that storytelling can cultivate more effective communication between the deliverer and the receiver of a particular narrative exchange in a business setting (Schwartz, 2004). Schwartz (2004) continues:

Oral storytelling...seems a niche to explore for fostering innovation, better understanding, and clearer communication in any workplace, whether in a homogenized or intercultural environment. Stated differently, a realm of sharing between and within cultures gets explored and communicated through oral storytelling (p. 54).

That kind of improved understanding, then, particularly in a business environment, can serve multiple purposes relevant to running an organization effectively (Gallo, 2007). Gallo explains, for example, how Ritz-Carlton utilizes storytelling to inspire and motivate within the company's culture, such as telling an especially impressive story about a team or team member's performance for the day during staff meetings and even sharing a particular story of success across hotels in 21

countries. Similarly, Nike links internal and external marketing by granting numerous senior executives the second title of "Corporate Storyteller" for the purpose of sharing stories with Nike employees that echo the company's ad campaigns, instead of focusing solely on financial results (Mitchell, 2002). A parallel to that tactic can be found easily by comparing it to Arbonne consultants sharing a particular success story across the company's entire slate of business builders to encourage one another.

Durrance (1997) says that the story is humankind's oldest, most proven motivational tool, and it is now being used in corporations large and small to motivate and educate employees and to consolidate corporate culture. Stories, she writes, help people bring the best of themselves to their jobs. "Moreover, it is a means of experiencing our lives. In a time of head-spinning change, we need our stories to hold on to who we are" (p. 26). Gargiulo (2006) emphasizes multiple purposes of storytelling within the business environment.

According to Gabbay (1997), narrative communication does not just convey a specific message; instead, it can also empower a speaker and create an environment conducive to good business. In fact, Gabbay (1997) says narrative communication plays a major role in how direct selling consultants set the mood for good sales and receptive business results. He goes on to assert that to overcome initial mistrust when entering new relationships, multilevel marketing consultants use stories to reconstruct advantages and disadvantages that are associated with direct selling or network marketing business opportunities.

Reconstructing advantages and disadvantages can be a useful tool in the traditional business environment as well. McKee and Fryer (2003) describe how success in the boardroom or with investors can be more successful by weaving an emotional story of a father's death and how more research capital could save lives than just posting market projections and business plans within a PowerPoint presentation. In addition to getting a story across to an audience, storytelling can be used to explore organizational members' sense of fit (Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones et al, 2005). Finally, Gargiulo (2006) contends that the stereotypes and limitations oftentimes placed on narrative communication, or stories in general, actually do not apply:

Stories do not always begin with the words 'once upon a time.' Stories can be as short as one or two sentences. They may not even be expressed in words...Essentially, stories allow us to model what we want to communicate instead of having to explain it (p. 5).

Krueger (2007) illustrates this notion effectively in her examination of a collection of images of children printed in cancer education and fund-raising materials that was distributed by voluntary profit health organizations, released by public relations departments and featured in popular magazines beginning in the late 1940s. Particularly, Krueger explored what narratives were embedded in the photographs and profiles of the children depicted on posters. The relevance of this rests on the work of Marshall McLuhan (1964). Specifically, McLuhan's "the medium is the message" concept applies asserts that generic forms of communication in general, and media specifically, provide as much or more insight to a message's meaning than the actual content that a medium expresses (McLuhan, 1964).

Speaking directly to McLuhan's "the medium is the message" concept, La Puma (1998) writes that "Nowhere is this more true than in direct-to-consumer ad campaigns. Last year, pharmaceutical companies spent \$1 billion on direct-to-consumer advertising. This year, they'll spend 50 percent more" (p. 72). La Puma says the money was well spent, citing sales of Claritin, the widely publicized antihistamine, increased 40 percent in the United States in 1997. All that took place, La Puma says, without discount coupons or shelf space at Wal-Mart.

"Patients have become desirous consumers, and the media fuel those desires by providing just enough information to bring customers to the door, or at least the phone" (La Puma, 1998, p. 72).

From another angle, applying McLuhan's principles to Howard Dean's cutting edge idea to use the Internet during the 2004 U.S. Presidential campaign for campaigning and fundraising purposes provides a perfect illustration that each communications medium has different characteristics and has to be used in different ways (Ginsberg, 2005).

Ultimately, Gargiulo's (2006) and Krueger's (2007) statements coincide with Fisher's (1995), who wrote that "all forms of discourse can be considered stories, that is, interpretations of some aspect of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character" (p. 170).

This study will seek to explore unanswered questions in the literature about the use of narrative communication as the preferred sensemaking currency in the direct selling industry, specifically at Arbonne International. The research question for this

study is: What are the narrative themes common to the organizational stories written by Arbonne International's National Vice President consultants in their *Eye on Arbonne* documents?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed the existing literature that pertained to narrative communication and storytelling, the direct selling and network marketing environments, storytelling trends in the health- and wellness-related industries, and the growing acceptance of narrative communication in the traditional business environment. This chapter outlines the methodological and conceptual framework used to investigate the connection between narrative and sensemaking in the organization's corporate discourse. The theoretical perspective adopted for this research suggests that sensemaking can be generated and maintained among internal and external stakeholders by direct selling consultants through the effective use of organizational narratives to build a successful network marketing business.

3.2 Applying Interpretivism

Interpreting textual narratives for the purpose of identifying particular themes used by Arbonne's independent consultants to "make sense" for prospective team members to join them and help build their businesses is central to the aims and objectives of this research. For this reason, the interpretive approach underlies the selected framework for this study. Grant (2004) notes that "Generally, interpretivism is

the active process of assigning meaning to something" (p. 120). Putnam (1983) characterizes the interpretive perspective by recognition of the "centrality of meaning in social actions. More specifically, interpretive approaches aim to explicate and, in some cases, to critique the subjective and consensual meanings that constitute social reality" (p. 32).

In examining the increased interest scholars began taking in interpretivism recently, history points to the beginning of the 21st century, when academics recognized there was a growing demand to illustrate how the practices of critical, interpretive qualitative research could help change the world for the better (Denzin, 2001). As for modern organizations, interpretive research focuses on the meanings and interpretations that organizational members attach to events (Eisenberg, 1986; Weick, 1983). However, those who practically apply storytelling within organizations note that the essence of a particular story could be different for each listener or group of listeners. "The object of the storyteller is to enable the listeners to discover the truth for themselves" (Denning, 2004, p. 33). In other words, because people must find, or interpret, the truth for themselves, each member of the storytelling audience could attach a different understanding and meaning to an organizational narrative.

Most central to the process of understanding, especially that of interpreting text, is the hermeneutic circle (Ricoeur, 1981). Hermeneutics, the study of theories of the interpretation and understanding of texts, serves a central role to this study. The hermeneutic circle essentially communicates that understanding text as a whole is established by moving from part to whole, then going back to move from parts to

whole. Neither the whole text nor any individual part can be understood without reference to one another. As Littlejohn (1996) describes it, "one may look at the composite meaning of a text and then examine the specific linguistic structures of that text. Then, the interpreter returns to the overall meaning, only to go back to the specifics again" (p. 211). Ultimately, the meaning of text must be found within the context of its culture, history and literary background. In conducting this kind of research, "each movement from part to whole increases the depth of understanding" (Grant, 2004, p. 121).

Even though it serves a valuable function for the organizational narrative researcher, it can be argued that interpretivism brings with it some limitations as well. Specifically, interpretivism can foster relativism, which critics argue can keep the dedicated researcher from making value judgments about meanings, or present a bias in studying certain narratives. The primary issue is that the interpretive approach, in general terms, does not account well for the relations of power that may well produce and shape narratives themselves (Mumby, 1987, 1988; Jameson, 1981). McKinney (1995) recommends that the organizational researcher needs to engage more than just interpretation of organizational symbolism — or of uncovering the shared meanings that drive organizational actions — to reveal their interests. Therefore, in this thesis the narrative texts are also examined from a critical theory perspective in terms of the broader political and social-cultural contexts that influence the social identities that are produced through discourse (Grant, 2004).

When interpreting organizational documents, then, researchers can begin by analyzing the 'common-sense' procedures that led to creating the document in the first place. The document may be situated within the wider social and political context. The interpretation of texts can also include an analysis of the intentional persuasive features of the *Eye on Arbonne* documents collected for this research. For instance, even though Arbonne consultants are independent salespeople for the company, the *Eye on Arbonne* documents are "situated examples of a corporate rhetor's intentional effort to influence... and to motivate particular actions" (Livesey, 2002, p. 118).

The rhetorical communication that takes place between an organization and its stakeholders, particularly the communication that is expressed through corporate narratives, mandates that the role of the corporate rhetor be examined as well. This is necessary primarily because rhetorical communication differs from other forms of communication in that its intent is to "influence the choices an audience makes" (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991, p. 2).

3.3 Defining Narrative

In this study, narrative is referred to as a "sequential account of events, usually chronologically, whereby sequentiality indicates some kind of causality, and action-accounted for in terms of intentions and deeds and consequences and is commonly given a central place" (Grant, 2004, p.135). From a company's perspective, however, narratives such as those communicated via *Eye on Arbonne* documents serve a more significant purpose than just official historical documents. Organizations use these and

other kinds of collective storytelling to help create the organization via its image and identity. "Identities of organisations are narratives, that is, idealized accounts or stories about organisations and their self-perceived role in the marketplace" (Christensen & Cheney, 2000, p. 256).

In terms of studying narrative in areas such as organizational storytelling, researchers view it as human communication that combines the persuasive properties of argumentation and the aesthetic properties of literature (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). Keeping in mind these powerful ramifications of organizational narratives, critics using this approach are encouraged to examine the story and how it is told, and "to consider how the story serves an audience as a good reason for belief and behavior" (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991, p. 127).

The Arbonne narratives collected for this study denote written, first-person accounts of text that consist of "complete sentences linked into a coherent and integrated statement" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 6). Miles and Huberman (1984) note that "the most frequent form of display for qualitative data in the past has been *narrative* text" (p. 21, emphasis in original).

3.4 Examining Narrative Rationality

Due primarily to academic disciplines jockeying for dominance, researchers tend to encounter challenges when they try to employ formal logic to better comprehend communication (Fisher, 1984). In making these assertions, Fisher notes that such conflicts have contributed to confusion due to representing the realization of a holistic

sense of self. Specifically, scholars have too often marginalized the formulation of a humane concept of rationality and the practical application of it by lowering the importance of rendering personal and public decision making and action, and placing too high an emphasis on 'experts' regarding topic such as knowledge, truth and reality. In doing so, Fisher notes that academics oftentimes elevate some classes of persons and discourse over others. As a result, Potter (1996) insists that scholars not grant more prestige to philosophical (and subsequently technical) discourse than rhetorical discourse. Rather, researchers are encouraged to note that individuals truly do use more informal rationality when conveying stories and that recognize the need to employ a 'narrative rationality' to understand communication.

When considering that discourse and action take place within 'the human story,' scholars can better document human behavior in ways that theories and methods of the social sciences do not allow, particularly those social sciences that try to mimic the paradigm of the natural sciences. This narrative logic is based on the principles of coherence and fidelity. Fisher (1984) breaks down the narrative logic concept by advising that the persuasiveness of a narrative is determined by its ability to be accepted by an audience as good reasons to change belief or behavior, and not by its form (Fisher, 1984). Put another way, a narrative needs to provide a dependable and attractive structure for addressing belief and behavior. Fisher (1984) explains:

Narrative rationality is its logic. The essential components of this logic are the following. Human communication is tested against the principles of probability (coherence) and fidelity (truthfulness and reliability). Probability is whether a story "hangs together", is assessed in three ways: by its

argumentative or structural coherence; by its material coherence, that is by comparing and contrasting stories told in other discourses (a story may be internally consistent, but important facts may be omitted, counterarguments ignored, and relevant issues overlooked); and by characterological coherence. Concern for this third type of coherence is one of the key differences between the concept of narrative rationality and traditional logics. (p. 47)

Fisher's ideas provide insight when examining corporate discourse, such as the *Eye on Arbonne* documents written by the company's independent consultants. For example, using Fisher's concepts allows researchers to determine the success of these personal, yet corporate, narratives by studying the reliability of the characters or rhetors, the coherence or motivations of the messages, and the truthfulness of the messages. The values fixed into a narrative, values that listeners or readers accept as good reasons to change belief or behavior, are what make that narrative persuasive. Fisher (1987), who explains the logic of good reasons used to test narrative rationality, says the appropriateness of the reasons communicated in any narrative can be measured by applying the following questions:

- 1. Questions of fact: What are implicit and explicit values in the rhetorical act?
- 2. Questions of relevance: Are the values in the message appropriate to the kind of decision, change in belief or behavior, asked of the audience? Are values omitted, distorted, or misrepresented?
- 3. Questions of consequence: What is the result of adhering to the values in the narrative? What happens to concepts of self, behavior, relationships, society, and the process of rhetorical action? How are the values operationalized? What is the morality of the story?
- 4. Questions of consistency: Are the values confirmed or validated in the personal experience of the audience and the life stories or statements of credible others? Does the narrative make its appeal to some ideal audience?
- 5. Questions of transcendent issue: Do the values reflected in the story constitute an ideal for human behavior?

When testing narrative rationality based on the questions above, researchers strive to understand why audiences accept a story as true, a good reason for belief or behavior, judged on the basis of its completeness. It must also be judged on its competitiveness with other competing or rival (corporate) narratives (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). However, because audience research is not the focus of this study, I adhere to my overarching research question: What are the narrative themes common to the organizational stories written by Arbonne International's National Vice President consultants?

3.5 Reviewing Thematic Analysis

This research intends to create an accurate explanation of the interpretive narrative accounts that individuals use to make sequences of events in their lives and/or organizations meaningful. After all, Reissman (1993) asserts that "narratives are interpretive and, in turn, require interpretation" (p. 22). Therefore, "narrative themes are identified to examine the central ideas illustrated by the key narratives under investigation" (Grant, 204, p. 158, emphasis in original). I have defined themes, for the parameters of this study, as frequently occurring topics in organizational communication (Johnson, 1977).

The models that researchers have used to analyze written documents for their narrative content generally focus on the identification of narrative themes (Owen, 1984; Labov, 1982; Polkinghorne, 1988; and Mishler, 1986, 1997). This study used Owen's (1984) method of examining three criteria to determine common themes found within

Eye on Arbonne documents, because "the goal of analysis is to uncover the common themes or plots in the data" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 177). Even though Owen (1984) utilized thematic analysis in a study of interpersonal relationships, its application is also suitable for a much wider range of applications. The first of Owen's (1984) criteria is repetition. With this, researchers document "key words, phrases, or sentences" (p. 275) that appear explicitly and repetitively in the text. The second criterion, recurrence, is identified when the "same thread of meaning" (p. 275) occurs throughout a text. Finally, forcefulness cites "the underlining of words and phrases, the increased size of print or use of colored marks" in written texts, or "vocal inflection volume or dramatic pauses" (pp. 275-276) in spoken accounts. When combined, these criteria indicate that the multiple appearances of interconnected ideas compose themes.

Written documents are analyzed for themes or points of the story that recur as underlying patterns in the narrative texts. In studying the texts, researchers review them individually and collectively. When it comes to studying these narratives and identifying common themes within them, "the researcher's skill stands in the interpretation and sensemaking of the narratives, adopting all the available theoretical clues from traditional management to linguistic and literary theory" (Mazza, 1999, p. 7). This applies to my examination of the *Eye on Arbonne* documents. Employing intertextual analysis across texts supports the hermeneutic issues of looking for new patterns when considering the hermeneutic circle and moving back and forth between part and whole (Barry & Elmes, 1997).

In addition to just analyzing the written text, a commentary on the graphic elements found within the *Eye on Arbonne* documents as they relate to supporting the narrative and themes that are identified within the stories was provided. Each *Eye on Arbonne* is designed to include various graphic elements that complement the consultants' stories. For example, the front of each *Eye on Arbonne* document includes a large, formal portrait of the consultant, with the rest of the document including colorful headlines, stylized quotes pulled from the story, and numerous photographs of the consultant with family members and Arbonne team members. These photos typically include snapshots of the consultants' family life and their experiences at Arbonne functions that illustrate the consultants' overall fulfilment resulting from reaching the vice president level within Arbonne. Wayment (2007) places an especially strong emphasis on the role that the photographs play.

That's key. The visual images used with *Eye on Arbonnes* tell a thousand words. It's fun for people to see themselves, their family and their Arbonne team in a great publication as they reflect on where they were at that point and time (Wayment, 2007).

It is by no means a radical idea to consider that photographs in particular, and graphic design in general, can contribute to narratives by delivering their own messages. Newark (2002) says it this way: "Almost all graphic design has a narrative, a sequence, pacing, it tells a story. It articulates different kinds of material, as dependent on all its parts for effect as any film or poem" (p. 60). With this in mind, it makes logical sense to fully examine, analyze, interpret and comment on the graphic design elements that exist on each and every *Eye on Arbonne* document. For example, what do the

photographs in each document depict? How does the synergistic use of images and written accounts contribute to the narrative themes identified in the documents?

3.6 Understanding Eye on Arbonne Documents

The organizational use of the current *Eye on Arbonne* narrative documents began in 1995 (Wayment, 2007). Part of Arbonne's communications efforts during the 1990s included publishing a monthly magazine called *Eye on Arbonne*. This magazine was utilized to communicate stories about consultants who were building their businesses to the point of reaching the regional vice president and national vice president levels within Arbonne International's compensation structure. These stories included first-person accounts by the consultants who reached the vice president levels — both regional and national — and allowed them a forum to share how they built their businesses, who helped them do it, and what the company has meant to them (Wayment, 2007).

That monthly magazine format, however, presented several challenges. First, it limited the number of consultants who could be recognized each year due to a fixed amount of available space. Second, it prompted difficult decisions concerning who to feature on the cover when more than one consultant was promoted to the vice president level in one particular month (Wayment, 2007). In 2001, primarily for the purpose of accommodating the growth in promotions to the vice president levels, Arbonne executives phased out the magazine version of *Eye on Arbonne* and replaced it with a

document (Wayment, 2007) version in 2001 that only told one consultant's story per at a time.

The current sell sheet document, which retained the *Eye on Arbonne* name after the magazine was phased out, constitutes two different kinds of documents. First, a two-page, four-color document printed on high-gloss paper is created for all consultants who build their businesses to reach the regional vice president compensation level. Second, a four-page, four-color document printed on high-gloss paper is created for consultants who reach the national vice president compensation level.

All the *Eye on Arbonne* documents are currently distributed via outgoing orders sent to all consultants, from those who have just joined Arbonne to those spanning the compensation levels that lead up to the regional vice president and national vice president. In addition, electronic versions of each *Eye on Arbonne* document are posted as PDF files on Arbonne's official Web site, as well as hard copies for the new vice presidents themselves to share with their team members and prospects (Wayment, 2007). Wayment (2007) describes the content of the present-day *Eye on Arbonne* documents this way:

Specifically, these stories share the journey the VP has been on to get to the rank and level they achieved. Everyone's journey is different, but there can be a lot of common themes throughout the stories, as well. Teachers, lawyers, nurses, business executives; people can relate to these different backgrounds, which can serve as an inspiration to others. Most of them at one point ask themselves, "Can I really do this?" The *Eye on Arbonne* story gives confidence to each person who is trying to determine if they want to pursue this business (Wayment, 2007).

The stories within the documents serve many purposes, but two of them stand out to Wayment (2007). First, *Eye on Arbonne* documents are produced for people who want to share the business with someone who is not yet signed up as a consultant with Arbonne. With *Eye on Arbonne* documents, active consultants have a full portfolio of stories of people who are similar to the ones with whom they are sharing the business. "It helps people who read the stories to realize, 'I can do this.' A big part of succeeding is having the belief that they can do something" (Wayment, 2007).

The other piece to the *Eye on Arbonne* documents is that as consultants work to grow their business, a lot of people have helped them reach the national vice president or regional vice president levels (Wayment, 2007). Plainly put, Arbonne consultants want to acknowledge all the people, from spouses to family members to fellow business builders, who have supported them in building their businesses through their *Eye on Arbonne* story.

The great thing about this business is that you don't have to do it alone. People are always reaching a hand down to pull someone up. Consultants in Arbonne are not about trying to push others down. That's a great message. And it's not just about helping others succeed financially, which is a core belief within Arbonne. We can also affect people by helping them achieve personal development and growth that they didn't know they had within themselves (Wayment, 2007).

The *Eye on Arbonne* documents analyzed in this study were produced for consultants who reached the national vice president compensation level. Because the current *Eye on Arbonne* document's two-page and four-page format began in 2001 (Wayment, 2007), the stories that I analyzed from *Eye on Arbonne* documents were

selected from all those produced and posted as PDFs on Arbonne's corporate Web site, www.arbonne.com, between 2001 and 2007.

In this research, 40 *Eye on Arbonne* documents were selected for analysis. Analyzing this number of texts, which accounted for almost 10 percent of the available *Eye on Arbonne* documents, provided confidence that an appropriate amount of data was collected. In fact, 40 *Eye on Arbonne* documents provided a good saturation point for the research.

3.7 Conducting Thematic Analysis

An initial exploratory stage involving document analysis allowed for the identification of basic descriptors and values of Arbonne International's ranks of national vice presidents from the perspective of the company's most successful independent consultants. It was my belief that the *Eye on Arbonne* documents, which provided the national vice presidents' official, first-person accounts of how their personal lives and direct selling business building efforts meshed, would give me a clear idea of the successful consultants' storytelling themes that were incorporated into each of their narratives. I analyzed the documents using thematic analysis. The *Eye on Arbonne* narratives that I analyzed were pulled from the PDF versions that were posted on the company's official Web site. Here, the three criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness were used to identify the themes as explained above.

During the period of analysis, *Eye on Arbonne* documents were read and reread over the course of several months. This process identified the *repetitiveness* and

recurrence of those themes relevant to this study. For example, the word "dream" was used repetitively as a descriptor in many of the documents examined. However, associated words such as "opportunity," "freedom," "no limits," and "succeed" were also used to describe the types of dreams in the selected corporate narratives. Therefore, these words were identified as recurrent descriptors of achieving dreams. The analysis of themes was facilitated by careful record keeping of themes as they were identified throughout the research process.

The third criterion of *forcefulness* was identified where words were set apart as headlines or quotes, or otherwise underlined, capitalized, bolded, or colored within the main text of *Eye on Arbonne* documents. The visual nature of forcefulness by Owen's (1984) application to interpreting written text means that this criterion was immediately apparent in almost all cases.

Once the themes were identified, I then compared the results intertextually to discover themes that transcended individual texts and appeared in multiple *Eye on Arbonne* documents. Subsequently, I applied the process of the hermeneutic circle of going back between the parts and the whole as I examined the discourse intertextually.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an explanation of the theoretical and methodological assumptions that establish the foundation for this study. On par with an interpretive perspective, the research set out to identify the themes and possible meanings found within the narratives written by Arbonne International's most successful independent

consultants. In addition, the chapter detailed the key features of the research design, and showed how the research strategy addressed the specific aims and objectives of the study. Also, it outlined the theoretical issues relevant to the research and explained the theoretical implications of the conceptual framework designed for the study. Finally, this chapter provided an account of the steps taken to collect and analyze the empirical data, as well as identified the limitations encountered throughout the research process. The findings that were obtained were examined closely and are presented in the analysis chapter that follows.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Primary Theme

The primary theme identified by the thematic analysis of *Eye on Arbonne* documents comes down to a four-letter word: Hope. In every document that was read, the prevailing sense of the message invariably left the reader with a definitive sense of optimism that building an Arbonne business can provide a Hope that could very well be held universally among modern cultures. Hope offered for a future with more freedom to spend your time the way you want. Hope offered for a future with the foundation of financial security and free of related worries. Hope offered for a future that allows for more time with family and loved ones. Hope offered for a future that enables professional and personal fulfillment.

The primary theme of Hope emerged during the analysis due to the identification of sub-themes used most often with *Eye on Arbonne* documents that, when viewed collectively, were discovered in this study.

The five sub-themes most commonly shared among national vice presidents via their *Eye on Arbonne* stories are: (1) Teamwork (2) Opportunity (3) Perseverance / Stay Committed (4) Believe in Yourself, and (5) Turn Dreams Into Reality. These five sub-themes, when viewed collectively, connect with each other to build the primary theme of Hope. In fact, with these five sub-themes emerging as the most commonly used by

Arbonne's national vice presidents, they oftentimes do more than just connect with one another. Many of the five sub-themes overlap within different *Eye on Arbonne* documents. For example, one *Eye on Arbonne* document which incorporates all three of the indicators of a theme — repetition, recurrence and forcefulness — oftentimes would also include two of those criteria for another identified sub-theme.

4.2 Sub-Themes

4.2.1 Teamwork

The first sub-theme identified by this study's thematic analysis was Teamwork. Teamwork was a sub-theme that emphasized to all the readers that succeeding in Arbonne — or, as previously stated for the purposes of this study, reaching the national vice president compensation level — is by no means a task that consultants can reach on their own. As already stated, the very nature of network marketing organizations, or multilevel marketing companies, is to recruit and build a broad team of consultants. In addition to earning commissions on their own personal sales, consultants generally earn the bulk of their income based on commissions that are determined by the personal sales volumes of people they have recruited to their downline, or team of consultants.

The story in Juli Urevick's *Eye on Arbonne* document hammers home the point of Teamwork (please see Appendix B). Her headline reads, "Teamwork is the Key Ingredient," and in her Success Strategy quote she encourages readers to "Make 'teamwork' your motto." When telling her story, Urevick goes on to say:

If I had to sum up, in one word, what has contributed to our success, it would be teamwork. I have approached this business as a coach who trains and motivates the players, and who, every once in a while, has to give a half-time speech...usually around the 15th of the month. I have discovered that people are much more productive when they act as a team. In the case of an Arbonne business, for example, each person focuses on their SuccessLine's volume or goal for the month. By following this mentality, everyone wins. When you work as a team, problems or issues are resolved quickly and in a positive manner.

Urevick obviously attributes Teamwork to having played a huge role in reaching Arbonne's highest compensation level, and a number of her comments contribute to the overall theme of Hope. First, she says people produce more effectively when they are part of a team. By saying so, Urevick generates optimism that simply being part of a team can help a prospective business builder succeed. She does not insist that all new consultants must come with terrific sales skills or in-depth knowledge of the health and wellness industry. Urevick simply says that being part of a team — which Arbonne includes as a standard part of its structure — is one of the key tools needed to succeed. This can easily instill the Hope in people who are considering joining the business that they will have a built-in team of colleagues and mentors to guide them during every step in building their own Arbonne business. Second, Urevick notes that challenges and obstacles are resolved quickly and positively due to the team structure. This, too, can provide a stirring sense of optimism by eliminating concerns that new business builders will feel left hung out to dry when encountering obstacles. Instead, Urevick assures new prospective business builders that tenured, experienced team members will be available to help them at every turn.

Pam Guyer focuses on Teamwork as well. Her *Eye on Arbonne* headline tells readers that "Teamwork Makes the Dream Work." She begins her story by telling how her husband was laid off from a high-paying job shortly after she began her Arbonne business. With three young children and suddenly feeling the motivation to generate a needed income quickly, Guyer writes, "Building this Nation [a term used to describe a primary business builder who reaches the national vice president level and his/her downline] was nothing but the result of a team pulling together and demonstrating the following Six Success principles, which were cultivated and duplicated on our team."

Teamwork: This business is about working in partnership to succeed at the level you desire. Working together toward team goals is something that we focused on this past year. Just as there is no "I" in team, there is also no "I" in Arbonne. This business has nothing to do with you, but everything to do with your team and helping others achieve their goals.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the overlap of themes is not uncommon. For example, Carleeta Nelson, whose *Eye on Arbonne* document focused primarily on the theme of Turn Dreams Into Reality, weaves in a reference to the importance of Teamwork as well (please see Appendix A). For her Success Strategy quote found within her *Eye on Arbonne* story, Nelson writes: "Until you have helped others succeed, you do not win the prize of being NVP [national vice president]." It is easy to understand how messages such as these contribute to the overall theme of Hope, which emanates from *Eye on Arbonne* documents.

The overriding idea about the Teamwork structure in Arbonne is that people are in place to give new consultants all the tools, data, training, resources, encouragement and insights necessary to build a successful business of their own. This stems from the organizational idea that no one can realistically reach the national vice president compensation level without first making it a priority to help someone else. For someone looking to make sense of the possibility of starting their own business, this message provides a very clear reason to be hopeful.

The graphic elements found within *Eye on Arbonne* documents certainly contribute to the Teamwork sub-theme as well. Particularly, all the documents include color photos of the team members working and/or celebrating together. In Juli Urevick's *Eye on Arbonne*, one photo shows her and three of her teammates standing next to their white Mercedes-Benz cars. Each consultant who reaches the regional vice president compensation level, which is only one step below the national vice president level, earns a monthly \$800 stipend on top of their regular commissions that they must use to buy or lease a white Mercedes automobile of their choice. By depicting herself alongside three other consultants who had just earned their Mercedes at the same time, Juli is reinforcing the Teamwork sub-theme that she underscores throughout her story. She's not celebrating her achievement alone; three other Arbonne consultants are celebrating with her.

Zoe Jones, another consultant who emphasized the Teamwork sub-theme, uses photos in her *Eye on Arbonne* to reinforce the message as well. With a headline that reads, "The Spirit of Teamwork," Jones includes a photo in the layout of her story that

depicts her with her sponsor, Casey Simmons, and one of Jones's rising sponsors, Susan Armendariz. Another photo shows Jones celebrating at a party with new managers on her team, and yet another image shows members of her team that specifically highlights district managers and area managers, which are the first levels of compensation reached by consultants who are trying to build a business.

Again, the photos included in *Eye on Arbonne* documents such as the ones described in the stories told by Juli Urevick and Zoe Jones provide an undeniable supplement to the theme of their documents — Teamwork.

4.2.2 Opportunity

In building upon the first sub-theme of Teamwork, the second sub-theme identified via my thematic analysis of *Eye on Arbonne* documents written by the company's national vice presidents is Opportunity. The Opportunity sub-theme presented the prospect of building a business through Arbonne International as an occasion to take advantage of the untapped personal and professional potential. The essence of the sub-theme is found within the Success Strategy quote of the *Eye on Arbonne* story written by Emily Alexander: "Spread the word because you have a lifechanging opportunity to offer so many others."

Interestingly, Alexander writes that she and her husband, who own a large orthodontic practice, viewed network marketing with a very skeptical eye at first. Seeing the confidence of others involved with the company and being unable to sleep the night she was asked to consider becoming an active consultant compelled Alexander

to give it a shot. After her business took off, she writes of a particular time of realization:

A light bulb moment for me was when I realized this was so much bigger than me, that I was not asking others to invest in my business, but I was offering them a life-changing opportunity. This business is truly about helping others and I love that.

For Alexander, the sub-theme of Opportunity contributes to the primary theme of Hope by sharing how her experience with Arbonne allowed her to see the lives of numerous colleagues change for the better as she rose quickly to each new compensation level. "This is proof positive that sticking to our proven system, leading with the opportunity, attaching yourself to activity, sharing the incredible pure, safe, and beneficial products with everyone, and have a will-not-quit attitude works!"

Barbara Beaty's headline for her *Eye on Arbonne* document establishes an immediate link to this sub-theme as well. It reads, "A Golden Opportunity." In boldly getting right to her point, Beaty talks up Arbonne as providing a chance for consultants to seize upon unrealized opportunities. Beaty lists such opportunities as a healthy lifestyle, spending time with family, helping other people, living a debt-free life, owning your own home, having plenty of retirement savings and taking vacations or having the freedom to live whatever kind of life someone chooses to live. After laying out these opportunities, Beaty states definitively: "Whatever it may be, it is possible with Arbonne."

Who would not be made to feel even a little bit hopeful about the sub-theme of Opportunity, which Beaty and Alexander say Arbonne can provide? "Eighteen months

ago, I would not have believed I could start a home-based business for \$29 and have a lifestyle that many only dream of. I see Arbonne as a business investor's dream," Beaty writes. She includes a bit of a warning, however, cautioning readers that not taking advantage of the right timing could limit the possible benefits of the Opportunity subtheme. Beaty writes, "Opportunity comes to everyone, but waits for no one." The implication, obviously, is that action is needed on the part of people to become consultants when told of the Opportunity instead of putting Arbonne on the back burner. The sooner someone pursues the Arbonne Opportunity, Beaty asserts, the higher the odds of increasing the size of downlines, which in turn improves the chances of reaching higher compensation levels.

Just as they did for the Teamwork sub-theme, the Opportunity sub-theme, too, is fully supported by the photographs that are included within *Eye on Arbonne* documents. In this case, numerous national vice president consultants included color photos in their *Eye on Arbonne* documents that portray the consultants embracing the Opportunity afforded them by building an Arbonne business.

In Jessica Thionnet's *Eye on Arbonne*, one photo shows her and six other smiling women, with this cutline: "Jessica with fellow NVPs at a leadership retreat in Maui." Combined with the recurrence, repetition and forcefulness of the Opportunity sub-theme found in Jessica's *Eye on Arbonne* (her success strategy pull-quote reads, "Follow your upline, grasp the opportunity, and embrace personal growth"), readers can easily associate this photo and its cutline with illustrating the point that numerous people are succeeding with this Opportunity. Remember, Brad Wayment, Arbonne

International's Senior Vice President of Marketing, says that most people who consider the possibility of starting their own Arbonne business at one point ask themselves, "Can I really do this" (Wayment, 2007)? The *Eye on Arbonne* story gives confidence to each person who is trying to determine if he or she wants to pursue this business" (Wayment, 2007). By illustrating through photos that other people who appear to be just like them and seem to come from similar backgrounds can succeed with the Opportunity described in various *Eye on Arbonne* documents, potential business builders gain Hope — again, the primary theme that is supported by the five sub-themes — that they can succeed with the Opportunity as well.

The photos that Ann Forrester includes in her *Eye on Arbonne* story accomplish the same thing. On the last page of her document Forrester includes three photos at the bottom that are accompanied by these three cutlines: "Ann with members of her Texas team." "Members of Forrester & Co. Tulsa team." "Ann with members of her Iowa team." The Tulsa photo shows 25 smiling members of Forrester's downline posing all the way up a broad staircase. The picture of the Iowa team includes 16 team members, and the Texas team photo shows eight more team members. Why is this important? It goes back to the point made by Wayment. Including photographs that show large numbers of people who are pursuing the Arbonne Opportunity can help provide potential Arbonne business builders with the confidence that they can and should do the same.

It is even easier for readers of her story to associate Opportunity with Arbonne when the use of recurrence, repetition and forcefulness of the Opportunity sub-theme

work so well in conjunction with the photographs used in her *Eye on Arbonne* document. For example, as part of her story, Forrester writes:

"I have been able to see my son's first smile, hear his first word and see him take his first steps. My husband is able to stay home more often with us. All of this is due to the Arbonne opportunity and to my absolutely amazing team."

By linking the Opportunity of building a home-based Arbonne business with the Opportunity to not sacrifice the ability to experience the wonders and joys of motherhood, Forrester and other national vice presidents like her effectively communicate the Hope-filled message that hinges on taking advantage of the Opportunity has to offer.

4.2.3 Perseverance / Stay Committed

After identifying the very inspiring and encouraging sub-themes of Teamwork and Opportunity that are communicated within *Eye on Arbonne* documents, the next one was refreshingly unexpected. In essence, by emphasizing this message in their *Eye on Arbonne* documents, a number of the national vice presidents inform potential business builders that getting to Arbonne's top level of compensation is by no means guaranteed to be an obstacle-free road to easy riches and enviable lifestyles.

Gina Ballew writes about a lot of the negative feelings and skepticism she harbored even after becoming a business builder with Arbonne. Her Success Story quote reads, "Decide to believe, commit, develop and improve." It is easy to make the connection to the sub-theme of Perseverance / Stay Committed to building an Arbonne

business after taking in a portion of the second paragraph of her *Eye on Arbonne* story.

There, she writes:

"My Arbonne story began 11 years ago in 1992. I must admit that for the first 10 years, I really did not see the big picture of everything that Arbonne had to offer. I was skeptical about finding success with Arbonne and believed the promises of unlimited income potential and financial freedom were too good to be true... As a result, I let my excuses keep me from establishing any type of business growth or momentum."

Providing this kind of insight into her *Eye on Arbonne* story helps build a connection with those who read it. Ballew's pessimism is certainly shared by many others who hear about network marketing opportunities in general; the literature review documents this well (please see chapter two). Still, sharing this kind of background establishes a sense of trust that the person writing the story is being truthful and can be counted on for full disclosure and transparency in terms of her experiences. By setting the stage this way, Ballew earns credibility and lays a believable foundation for the rest of her story. In continuing, she writes:

In June 2002 I made a commitment to treat my Arbonne undertaking as a business and follow in the footsteps of the women driving the white Mercedes-Benz. I did everything that ENVP [executive national vice president] Cecilia Stoll coached me to do...I opened myself up to the possibility of personal growth and development, changing what I needed to change and sticking with what worked, until I was sure that I was on the right path to success."

By specifying her decision to rededicate herself to growing her business, Ballew clearly hammers home the Perseverance / Stay Committed sub-theme as an essential part to her success. Ballew underscores for readers the importance of not giving up

when forces — be they internal or external — lead consultants to consider abandoning their Arbonne business.

Jennifer Simon uses her *Eye on Arbonne* story to do the same. With a Success Strategy quote that reads, "Once you decide to get committed, the doors of opportunity open," she clearly is emphasizing that the Perseverance / Stay Committed sub-theme is needed for consultants to achieve the kind of success that is available through building a business with Arbonne. In other words, casual involvement and superficial interest will not lead to effective opportunities to grow an Arbonne business.

In providing an account of her journey of building an Arbonne business, Simon lays the foundation for the Perseverance / Stay Committed sub-theme this way:

My success did not come without its share of challenges. There have been rejections, disappointments, no shows, starting over in another state and moments of complete chaos with phones ringing, babies crying, laundry piled up, and so much more. However, the greatest obstacle in my path was 'me.' To reach my goals, I had to overcome my own self doubt and fears.

In spelling out the frustrations she encountered as she tried to build her business and eventually reached Arbonne's highest compensation level, Simon clearly tells readers that becoming a national vice president is not easy. By using words such as "challenges" and "obstacles" in her story, Simon is providing a clear association for the reader that links a successful Arbonne business with the Perseverance / Stay Committed sub-theme. In fact, Simon says as much in her closing paragraph: "Being successful in Arbonne is really as simple as making a choice. It is about deciding to make a

commitment, putting our business system into action and most importantly, believing in yourself!"

Finding a connection as to the Perseverance / Stay Committed sub-theme and how it supports the overall, primary theme of Hope in *Eye on Arbonne* documents appears to be a clear one. By emphasizing that this sub-theme is vital to reaching the national vice president level, those who have already reached the position are saying that succeeding is well within the control of anyone who is interested and serious about building their own Arbonne business. It is a matter of control, and many Arbonne national vice presidents say in their *Eye on Arbonne* documents that the control needed simply comes down to having the will to Persevere / Stay Committed during the ups and downs of building the business. Hearing that they may already have control of their own success could certainly instill a sense of Hope for anyone wondering if they should pursue the opportunity.

The photos included in Brook Robertson's *Eye on Arbonne* complement the application of the Persevere / Stay Committed sub-theme very well (please see Appendix D). First, let us get a brief background to her story. In her *Eye on Arbonne* document, Robertson, who was a trainer for barrel racing horses, said she reached a breaking point during her divorce when she knew she needed to start an Arbonne business. Doing so, however, required that she make some difficult decisions. "To make time, I would have to send some horses home. This would also mean I would have to suffer financially for a little while. Despite these sacrifices, I took the leap and never looked back."

By sharing this history about how she had to let go of some horses that she really cared about in order to be able to fully commit to her Arbonne business, Robertson drives home the point of the meaning of this Perseverance / Stay Committed sub-theme by including a picture of two beautiful horses. The cutline beneath the photo reads: "Brook's pride and joy, Libby and Holly." By combining the visual of her now having her own "pride and joy" horses with the repetition and recurrence of the Perseverance / Stay Committed sub-theme, readers can easily associate a dedication to Arbonne with sacrifices really paying off. Robertson's Success Strategy quote provides the forcefulness of the sub-theme in her story: "Dare, dream, persevere and succeed."

The headline for Kim Kearns's *Eye on Arbonne* document reads, "Perseverance Leads to Success," and the photos she includes support the sub-theme completely. In her account, Kearns thanks a number of people who have helped her build her business so that she could achieve the national vice president level. She writes:

"My sister-in-law, RVP Lisa Auen, is the root of my Nation. Her perseverance and commitment has built her an incredible team...An enormous thank you to Lisa and her team for all of their commitment, I love you all so much!"

To provide a visual connection to her repeated sub-theme of Perseverance / Stay Committed, Kearns makes sure to include a photo of Lisa and her as they pose together at Arbonne's Annual National Training Conference in 2004. Reinforcing the written theme of Perseverance / Stay Committed with a graphic element such as Kearns has done allows the reader to make a strong connection to the importance of the sub-theme

and seeing positive results stem from that kind of dedication to building an Arbonne business.

The combination of photos and words provide *Eye on Arbonne* readers with a very strong structure supporting the Perseverance / Stay Committed sub-theme. By doing so, Arbonne provides a glimpse of what could be possible for each reader if they are willing to weather the challenges and obstacles that come with building a home business. The consultants whose *Eye on Arbonne* documents I analyzed did not shy away from sharing the challenges and obstacles faced by almost everyone who decides to build their own Arbonne business. It should be noted, too, that Arbonne includes on each copy of the *Eye on Arbonne* the following boilerplate text: "The testimonials in this story reflect the actual experience of an individual, are anecdotal only, and may be atypical." Despite this cautionary phrasing, however, seeing what could be possible in the photos, and reading what could be possible in the first-person accounts of those who have already become national vice presidents, can serve as a powerful source of Hope to those considering building a business of their own.

4.2.4 Believe in Yourself

The fourth sub-theme I identified in the *Eye on Arbonne* documents was Believe in Yourself. In the same way that it appears national vice presidents felt compelled to gird potential business builders for ebb and flow of building a business by encouraging perseverance, it also appears that numerous national vice presidents felt compelled to

encourage those same readers to truly be convinced of their own ability to succeed with Arbonne.

Jill Brown is one national vice president who is a big believer in the importance of Arbonne consultants believing in themselves. In her *Eye on Arbonne* document, Brown writes that from her perspective, "So much about this business is dependent upon a belief in yourself and your determination to succeed, no matter what obstacles might come your way. It is about expecting nothing less than success (please see Appendix C)." She provides the forcefulness of the sub-theme (and repetition as well) by basically restating an abridged version of this very message in her Success Strategy quote. "Believe in yourself, be determined to succeed and expect nothing less than success."

Essentially, successful Arbonne consultants attribute a great deal of their achievements to the power of their positive thinking. This sub-theme, together with the first three sub-themes, supports very well the primary theme of Hope. Almost anyone who is interested enough in reading about the success story of Arbonne's national vice presidents is at some level at least a little curious as to how those consultants got to that point. For those who are considering the business, hearing these people whose backgrounds sound just like their own talk about how just believing in themselves — and having teammates believe in them as well — played a key role to their success must sound like a liberating message. Hope can certainly spring from the knowledge that you are just as equipped, via a belief in yourself, as any of the national vice presidents that are affirming the reader's capabilities to succeed in the same way that they have.

Marita Barthuly's *Eye on Arbonne* document relays that very sentiment. With the headline reading "Decide, Take Action and Believe," Barthuly's story fully supports the Believe in Yourself sub-theme. When her husband's irrigation business suffered frightening financial losses several years in a row following the September 11 terrorist attacks, Barthuly knew she had to find a way to provide income for the family. But, she had been a stay-at-home mom for many years after initially working as a Master's level social worker. When someone shared the Arbonne business opportunity with Barthuly, however, she writes that right away she knew her circumstances required that she fully believe she could make the business work:

"...but once the decision was made that this was our Plan B, there was no turning back. I believed with all my heart that this business would work, if I worked the business. And, my stubborn, "I will not quit" mentality has helped me persevere through the touch times any business owner experiences as they grow a business.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, my thematic analysis noted that the *Eye on Arbonne* documents provided numerous examples of themes that overlapped. Barthuly's document is one such example. In the quote above, she clearly emphasizes her complete belief that she can successfully grow her Arbonne business. As part of that Believe in Yourself sub-theme, however, she includes a mention of her "I will not quit" attitude that helped her "persevere." This, of course, links directly back to the Perseverance / Stay Committed sub-theme described earlier. While there was not an element of forcefulness to make it a second theme within Barthuly's document, the overlapping of ideas comes across clearly.

Again, hearing stories directly from people whose life events made them consider a network marketing business when they never would have before — and then experience undreamed of financial success — could very well help others who read the stories to believe in themselves as well. Once that belief is formed, Hope can grow.

While negative life events did not compel Donna Bradley to consider building an Arbonne business, she had spent years venturing into other forms of self-employment. Bradley had created her own house-cleaning business and subsequently formed a bookkeeping enterprise, but she writes that she knew she had not found the right fit. When a friend told her about Arbonne, Bradley knew it was right. Her Success Strategy quote reads, "Share your vision, believe in yourself, dream big, work through your fears and always focus on the positive." A turning point for Bradley came when "I realized if Linda could start a business in Pennsylvania where Arbonne was virtually unheard of, with her sponsor located in Oklahoma, I could do the same thing in New Jersey." That kind of recurrence supports her Believe in Yourself sub-theme.

As with the other *Eye on Arbonne* documents, Paula Winter uses photographs throughout her story to help communicate the message of her sub-theme as well. Winter, whose *Eye on Arbonne* document is titled "Develop Your Belief," writes this in her story:

Your success in Arbonne and life is completely dependent upon one very important ingredient — belief! You will only have what you believe you can have. I had to build, strengthen and develop my belief system in every aspect of my life. I developed unwavering, passionate, focused and consuming belief.

Key to the connection between the photos and the sub-theme within her story is a line from her quote above, saying, "You can only have what you believe you can have." By including this sentence in a paragraph that is underscoring her sub-theme message of Believe in Yourself in terms of succeeding with Arbonne, she draws a direct link to two particular photos that can help readers associate the pictures and the message.

First, Winter includes a photo of herself and her husband sitting in the back of a large white boat with the name Winter Dream scribed on it. Second, she includes a photo of herself and her daughter-in-law. In the picture, two shiny, new white Mercedes-Benz cars are parked side-by-side, and Winter and her daughter-in-law each are standing up through the sun roof of their own Mercedes with arms raised high. After reading Winter's *Eye on Arbonne* story and clearly getting the Believe in Yourself sub-theme from the headline on down, seeing the photos helps potential business builders consider the fact that they, too, could find themselves owning a boat with their own name on it and be standing through the sun roof of their own white Mercedes-Benz.

The photos in Kris Mouser's *Eye on Arbonne* serve a similar purpose in helping the document communicate the Believe in Yourself sub-theme. Her Success Strategy quote reads, "Realize your vision and believe you can make it happen." To support it from a visual perspective, Mouser includes a photo, just like Winter did, of a white Mercedes. The image shows Mouser at a Mercedes dealership with her sponsor and a high-ranking member of Mouser's downline. They are all standing next to a white

Mercedes that is decorated with a large red bow. Again, readers can make a seamless connection to the Believe in Yourself sub-theme message from the story, which is then reinforced by the photos that consultants include in their *Eye on Arbonne* documents. That, in turn, can easily translate to Hope as readers wonder if they, too, could develop for themselves a future that includes all the things described and depicted within these stories.

4.2.5 Turn Dreams Into Reality

The first sub-theme identified within the *Eye on Arbonne* documents is Teamwork. The second was Opportunity. Perseverance / Stay Committed came next, followed by Believe in Yourself. Finally, the fifth sub-theme identified is Turn Dreams Into Reality. In this sub-theme, national vice presidents communicate address that fact that many people pass up the chance to build an Arbonne business because they are afraid to acknowledge that their current life is nowhere near the dreams they have or once had for themselves and their family.

Carleeta Nelson articulates this very notion in her passionate *Eye on Arbonne* story, which is headlined, "A Dream Realized in Cancun" (please see Appendix A). As a busy pediatric nurse with two children and a husband who worked excessive amounts of overtime at his job, Nelson began to feel restless, unsatisfied and frustrated that life was "stealing" her family's time together. After using Arbonne products for years but constantly declining to become a business builder to "sell lipstick," Nelson finally decided to launch her own business with Arbonne. She experienced a meteoric rise

from one compensation level to another. In five months she had reached regional vice president status and earned her white Mercedes, and ten months later became a national vice president. She writes about her dreams this way:

Sometimes having dreams is so painful that we stuff them away in some dark corner so as not to have them staring at us every day. Throughout my nursing career, I always said I never wanted to be a stay-at-home mom. I now realize, I said that to protect myself from the pain of that dream. I knew I was a huge contributor to my family's income. It was never going to be cheaper for me to be a stay-at-home mom than it was for me to work. Even when I became an RVP last year, I did not let my mind entertain the idea of quitting my job. It was not until my first month qualifying for NVP that I turned in my notice to quit. It was not until then that I new I was going to be able to live the dream of being home...the dream that had been there all along.

Sharing the history of her family's life and her own personal struggles in such a transparent manner provides an easy way for readers to connect the frustrations and unrealized dreams of Nelson's life with those of their own. By reading about the transformation that building an Arbonne business made in her life and how it led to the realization of her deepest dream, potential business builders are encouraged to gain Hope that Arbonne can help them Turn Dreams Into Reality as well.

Jennifer Townsley focuses on this sub-theme, too. Amazingly, Townsley reached the national vice president compensation level just a month after turning 22. Early in her *Eye on Arbonne* document she writes, "Thanks to what is behind the title of being an NVP with Arbonne, it is possible to make any dream a reality." Townsley discusses at length that Arbonne has provided her with the tools to actually Turn

Dreams Into Reality despite the world at large becoming accustomed to pushing the notion of dreams aside.

Society has taught us to stop dreaming. It was only cute for me to say that I was a ballet dancer until I turned 7 years old. After that, it had to be explained to me that not everyone is talented enough to become a professional ballet dancer, and that it would not realistically put food on the table for me.

Succeeding with her Arbonne business, Townsley goes on to say, has equipped her to help others think more about the dreams they have for their own lives and encourage people to make them happen. She writes that it is not until consultants reach the "top of the mountain," or the national vice president level, that they can see the rest of their journey. "From there, you can tell others about the view and encourage them on their climb to the top. Then, they, too, can find their journey to making their dreams a reality."

Hearing about dream realizations from people with such varied backgrounds and in different life stages is an effective way to enable potential business builders to find ways that Arbonne can help them realize their own dreams.

Lynn Puana encourages *Eye on Arbonne* readers to pursue the realization of their dreams as well. With her Success Strategy quote reading, "...and do not let anyone, or anything, get in the way of your dreams," she goes on to reinforce the possibilities of using Arbonne to help do just that. Interestingly, Puana, who is also a physician, discusses how earning a six-figure salary in that role and working overnight shifts in the emergency room still left her feeling as if her dreams were going

unfulfilled. Still, with no intention of leaving the field of medicine, Puana writes that she began her Arbonne business simply to help fund her "horse hobby."

Throughout her medical training, Puana writes that she always felt it would come to feel like a rewarding career. Changes in society and health care, however, have come to pressure more and more doctors by turning medicine into a corporate environment. The rewarding feeling she was looking for came from helping others become effective leaders and achieve a feeling completeness. She writes that equipping others to Turn Dreams Into Reality was the key to doing so:

Many have dreams of staying home with their children while still earning a great income. Others dream of allowing their husbands to work less so they can be together as a family more. Then there are those who dream of early retirement, while others dream of sending their children to the colleges of their choice. Whatever the dream is, Arbonne has the potential to provide for those who have a positive attitude, an unwavering determination and are willing to work hard to reach their dreams.

Puana, Townsley and Nelson all emphasize the importance of people realizing their dreams and not settling for a life of wishful thinking and lack of fulfillment. Each one of them shares how her life came to a point when she knew Arbonne could help them reach Turn Dreams Into Reality. Those kinds of stories speak effectively to readers who can identify with each of the stages that the women described, engendering Hope that the dreams held by possible business builders could be achieved as well.

In supporting the sub-theme of Turn Dreams Into Reality with photographs, Christy Aldrich's *Eye on Arbonne* does an effective job of reinforcing the message. With an *Eye on Arbonne* headline of "Making Your Dreams Your Reality," Aldrich

writes about already having a bookkeeping job she could work at home and being busy enough to not take on anything new, such as Arbonne. However, she says hearing about the Arbonne business underscored how someone else still had control over her financial future. If Aldrich's current bookkeeping job ended, her family's entire lifestyle would have to change dramatically.

I realized this was the Plan B I had been praying for. It gave me an opportunity to have everything I ever dreamed of. A life spent with my family; a life with the potential to live free of financial worries; a life where I was in control of my own destiny and a life defined by helping others achieve the same thing.

To complement this message, Aldrich includes photos of her husband spending time with their children by riding motorcycles and fishing on their boat, and pictures of Aldrich with her children on vacation. In addition, Aldrich adds photos of herself celebrating achievements with her uplines and downlines that have helped her enable others to Turn Dreams Into Reality.

Debbie Neal's *Eye on Arbonne* does the same. With a headline that reads, "The Life You Dreamed About," she fills her *Eye on Arbonne* document with snapshots showing Neal spending time with friends and family on exotic vacations and celebrating with her team as five consultants are shown in their new Mercedes.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

As previously stated, this study analyzes the depth and breadth of Arbonne's use of storytelling as the preferred sensemaking currency of its relationships among internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders are identified as Arbonne consultants and staff who can benefit from the stories communicated in *Eye on Arbonne* documents. External stakeholders are those potential business builders who are still considering the opportunity of joining Arbonne.

The results of the thematic analysis of *Eye on Arbonne* documents indicate a very distinct set of narrative sub-themes that, when viewed intertextually also support the primary theme of Hope. As discussed in chapter four, these themes appear regularly throughout the documents as more and more consultants utilize this form of discourse. Arbonne's consultants use this form of discourse, obviously, after achieving the highest level of compensation available to them to communicate the message of Hope to other consultants and potential business builders. This chapter presents the theoretical and practical implications of the study's findings, as well as the implications for future research.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

In presenting the theoretical implications of this study's findings, the significance of the findings in relation to the theory introduced earlier in this thesis will be discussed. In chapter one, sensemaking was introduced as an integral part of this study. Further, for the purpose of this study, sensemaking was approached from a business communication, or knowledge management, perspective. Sensemaking assumes that someone faces an unclear situation "and must retrospectively impose a sense of order on it" (Boland & Yoo, 2004, p. 381). In addition, Fisher's Narrative Paradigm theory was introduced together with the assertion that when it comes to making sense of experiences, narratives play a key role in helping individuals do just that (Bochner, Ellis & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Weber, Harvey & Stanley, 1987). This is particularly true for people trying to make sense of difficult or traumatic experiences (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006).

The focus on narrative in this thesis is twofold: First, this paradigm allows for a needed alternative when it comes to studying the connection between the lives and stories of both individuals and organizations (Czarniawska, 1997). Second, stories provide a framework for understanding how narrative is a basic form of coherence for an organization's realm of meaning, just as it is for a person's realm of meaning. Consequently, in the understanding of human existence — both individual lives and organizational 'lives' — narrative has a central role. Indeed, "stories are exemplars of the messy process of human sensemaking" (Boje, 2001, p. 126).

It is important to examine the first focus — how the narrative paradigm allows for a needed alternative when studying the connection between individuals and organizations — in this chapter. The study's findings tie in seamlessly with two areas presented in the literature review: the use of narrative in business communication and the use of narrative in health care communication.

In order to be successful, the narratives such as the ones the *Eye on Arbonne* documents present to impart the primary theme of Hope, must be believable. Fisher's (1978, 1987) guidelines help measure narrative communications in terms of their coherence and fidelity. While coherence questions the consistency of a narrative's plotline, the presence of needed details and the reliability of the character's, narratives, fidelity addresses issues such as the values that are embedded in a story, the relevance between the story and the values it communicates, and the consistency between the values of the story and the values of the audience.

The findings of this study fully support Fisher's theoretical assertions concerning narrative coherence and fidelity. The rapid expansion of Arbonne's growth, together with the findings of this study which show a direct connection between successful consultants and the use of five shared sub-themes, the believability of those sub-themes is essential. Without the narrative fidelity and coherence identified by Fisher, the impact of the sub-themes would have never played a part in Arbonne's commitment to narrative communication to grow the company.

By establishing narrative coherence and fidelity, the national vice presidents of Arbonne have subsequently used the openness and truthfulness of their own stories to create the very kind of trust that Gabbay & Leenders (2003) said was crucial via narrative strategies. The authors note that by using narrative communication effectively, consultants can influence peoples' perceptions, specifically securing the trust of possible business building recruits so that the recruits can hold alternate perspectives on what is and what is not rational in making sense of the Arbonne opportunity.

The effective use of narrative communication as discussed by numerous authors fits very well with my findings. For example, the stories communicated via *Eye on Arbonne* documents from consultants such as Carleeta Nelson (who acknowledges that she kept denying her real dream of staying home with her children) and Brook Robertson (who revealed that the end of her marriage forced her to make difficult decisions and accept some sacrifices), among many others, provided a sense of transparency that helped potential business builders connect emotionally with them and begin to think along the same lines as the national vice presidents. With that trust connection firmly established, the *Eye on Arbonne* stories resonated with a sense of realism and believability that plays a natural part in the sensemaking process that potential business builders go through.

In line with this study's illustration of Fisher's ideas, the findings also fully support the work of Weick (1995), who says the relationship between sensemaking and narrative communication is intricately interwoven. According to Weick, stories preserve plausibility, can be reasonable and memorable, embody past experience and expectations, in addition to being constructed retrospectively but also can be used

prospectively. Furthermore, as demonstrated in chapter four, stories capture both feeling and thought, allow for embellishment to fit current oddities, and are something fun to contrast. "In short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story" (Weick, 1995, p. 61).

Because Arbonne positions itself as a health and wellness company, health and wellness plays a significant role in the sensemaking process for potential Arbonne consumers and business builders as well. Coulehan (2005) notes that empathy is characteristic of humans and seems to be a generic aspect of healing practices. The results of this study support his assertion that we discover meaning in our lives and illnesses by seeing them embedded in narratives. Healers enter into the stories of their patients and thereby change them (Coulehan, 2005).

As Arbonne consultants meet with people who consider themselves overweight, feel constantly fatigued or generally unhealthy, become unhappy with their wrinkles or dislike having to endure unsightly skin conditions, a similar healing bond is formed. Arbonne consultants share stories about themselves or their loved ones encountering these same issues and overcoming them by using Arbonne's weight loss formula, antiaging serums and day-to-day skin care applications. The results of this study also reinforce the work of Curci (2004) who confirms this two-way bond when she describes the concept of the secondary social sharing of emotion. Curci writes that people who listen to a narrative concerning another's experience, in turn, feel the urge to share their own experience. In this sense, it is easy to trace the storytelling cycle of Arbonne consultants. A potential business builder reads an *Eye on Arbonne* document that

connects with her. Subsequently, she launches her own business and perpetuates the narrative communication by building her own business through storytelling via selling and recruiting efforts. Eventually, the consultants who reach the regional vice president and national vice president compensation levels get to write their own story in an *Eye* on *Arbonne* document.

Finally, from a theoretical standpoint, my findings also align with narrative business communication works discussed in the literature review. Specifically, narrative communication can elicit a bond between people in a business setting in much the same way that it occurs in a health and wellness environment.

Denning (2005) drives home the point that what business executives typically rely on when they communicate — such as analysis and facts — can oftentimes prove to be a weakness. Analysis might energize the brain, Denning says, but it almost never offers a channel to someone's heart. Effective storytelling, however, can translate lifeless and abstract data into visual pictures of an executive's vision (Denning, 2005). The primary theme of Hope, as well as the five sub-themes identified in this study, bears this out. In other words, the same can happen when Arbonne consultants paint a possible future for a potential business builder by telling their own stories of seizing a perfect opportunity, persevering with the help of teamwork to reach goals, and thoroughly believing in themselves to the point that they actually turn their dreams into reality.

This study's findings also validate Durrance's (1997) views, which state that the story is humankind's oldest, most proven motivational tool, and is now being used in

corporations large and small to motivate and educate employees and to consolidate corporate culture. Stories, in turn, help people bring the best of themselves to their jobs. "Moreover, it is a means of experiencing our lives. In a time of head-spinning change, we need our stories to hold on to who we are" (Durrance, 1997, p. 26). In other words, people within Arbonne use the storytelling efforts, as well as the themes identified in the *Eye on Arbonne* documents, to make sense of their identities, their personal histories and their business building efforts.

By engaging in the narrative communication-based sensemaking efforts specific to Arbonne's national vice presidents, the results are proving Boje (1991) to be right on track when he says that "storytelling is the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders" (p. 106).

5.3 Practical Implications

The literature available on the topics relevant to this study — narrative communication, the direct selling and network marketing environments, storytelling trends in the health- and wellness-related industries, and the growing acceptance of narrative communication in the traditional business environment — provided a strong foundation for the examination of key issues relevant to the research question.

In addition, research has contributed to our understanding that trust remains an issue when consultants visit with possible business recruits. Research also indicates that storytelling has become a valued form of communication and is being embraced by

those who help others with health and healing, as well as by those in the corporate environment, to better motivate and inspire improved business performance.

Prior to this study, however, researchers had not identified the storytelling themes or sub-themes common to the most successful independent consultants within a particular network marketing or direct selling organization. As a direct result of this study, my research has done just that.

Incorporating my study's findings with the work of Boje could lay the foundation for extensive research into the application of a replicatable model that helps other network marketing and direct selling organizations improve their financial strength.

Narratives provide a pattern, or model, for how people make sense of life and its experiences in a business environment. "Stories are exemplars of the messy process of human sensemaking" (Boje, 2001, p. 126). By introducing Boje's idea, it stands to reason that the primary theme of Hope and the five sub-themes identified in this study — 'teamwork', 'opportunity', 'perseverance/stay committed', 'believe in yourself' and 'turn dreams into reality' — could be searched for in the narrative communication of other growing network marketing and direct selling organizations. By doing so, the idea of a practically applied storytelling model incorporating these themes could be considered as to whether the model could help companies — perhaps even those outside of the network marketing and direct selling environments — to grow their consultant ranks and, consequently, significantly increase organizational revenue and profit levels.

Why is this important? Brown, Denning, Groh et al (2005) contest that what is taught in business schools, as well as what is taught in corporate training and development classes, typically fails to address how organizations really work. In addition, a "hybrid" (Biggart, 1986) organization such as a direct selling company could be even more difficult for traditional business school graduates to grasp.

On top of that, Barker, Rimler, Moreno et al (2004) conducted a content analysis that examined the stories of people involved with family businesses as the stories pertained to the values and succession of power from one family member to another. The authors concluded that the content analysis of the narratives suggested similar content themes regarding values and authoritative succession across family-owned businesses. Given these findings, it is not unreasonable to expect that effective communication themes and sub-themes can be passed along from one direct selling company to another.

This is significant in light of Arbonne's recent track record. The fact that Arbonne's sales have skyrocketed (from \$25 million in 2001 to nearly \$1 billion in 2006) and that the number of consultants has jumped to more than one million speaks to the success of these storytelling methods. While Citigroup (2006) reports on the amazing successes of Arbonne, it compares the company very favourably to other direct selling organizations whose year-over-year sales have remained nearly flat or even trailed off.

5.4 Limitations

While the identification of the primary theme and the five sub-themes provided clear and definitive findings, it is important to identify several limitations of this study.

First, this study only analyzed one particular channel of organizational communication – the *Eye on Arbonne* document – within the company. National vice presidents within Arbonne utilize numerous other communication channels embedded within the organization. Indeed, analyzing those other channels, which oftentimes utilize narrative communication as well, could either further support or negate the identification of the themes documented in the national vice presidents' *Eye on Arbonne* stories.

Second, because this study focused strictly on the narrative themes of successful Arbonne International consultants, the findings are by no means generalizable to the direct selling industry at large. While this research focuses on one case study organization, Arbonne International, it is important to note that similar direct selling business organizations may or may not attribute their success to the specific tool of storytelling.

Finally, the study does not account for the multiplicity of voices within Arbonne International and how these are included or excluded in the company's communication. Additionally, the study does not address those less successful in the organization in an attempt to better understand why they have not been able to reach higher levels of financial success.

5.5 Future Research

The limitations identified above serve only to highlight opportunities for future research. For instance, other forms of corporate communication such as websites, and newsletters could also be analyzed to test the image-identity gap and consistency of themes. In an attempt to contextualize the data, it would also be interesting to examine media reports on the company to further test the fidelity and coherence of Arbonne's narrative. In fact, future research could also include interviews with employees at Arbonne to determine whether or not these stories ring true for their experiences in the company.

Within Arbonne itself, researchers can conduct personal interviews with a number of the company's 400 national vice presidents to help provide a more in-depth understanding of the reasons, techniques, philosophies and perceived results of telling the stories in the manner that they do. By doing so, the findings could very well provide a richness of data to support the primary and sub-themes identified in this study. It may also uncover hidden meanings that these executives may have in their stories. For instance, one may ask, how are issues of power and control embedded in these corporate stories and what do they reveal about the cultural life at Arbonne International? In exploring the issue of power and control, the stories of other less successful Arbonne employees may also be examined to determine why these employees have not excelled in the company.

In addition, researchers could expand this kind of study to analyze the storytelling efforts of other network marketing and direct selling organizations. Do

similar themes emerge within the industry as a whole? By conducting such a large scale, industry-wide study, researchers could gather a wealth of knowledge by addressing questions such as:

- 1) Aside from Arbonne International, do other network marketing and direct selling organizations utilize storytelling as a key form of organizational communication?
- 2) Do the themes identified within Arbonne's storytelling communications match with those of other network marketing organizations that are reporting similar financial growth?
- 3) Overall, do network marketing and direct selling organizations utilize and support narrative themes in an integrated method throughout their Web sites, press releases, executive speeches, internal newsletters, etc.?

Organizational stories are of such importance to researchers because in all their different versions, they can capture organizational life and communicate vital messages to key internal and external audiences in a way that that is distinctly different and uniquely effective. Ultimately, understanding the future research questions listed above, and others like them, could possibly lead to making a significant impact on the nation's economy via the application of improved storytelling efforts that significantly improve the financial health of American businesses within both direct selling industry and the more traditional corporate environment.

APPENDIX A

EYE ON ARBONNE, P. 2, CARLEETA NELSON

carleeta neison

A DREAM REALIZED

IN CANCÚN

Nation: Challenge Seekers

Norman, OK

Arbonne has been an inaredible journey for me these past 19 months and has certainly made my dreams come true! Imagine this ... standing on a white sand beach with all your friends and family present, with the full moon reflecting off of the ocean in the background while Arbonne's Founder, Petter Merck presents you to a crowd of Arbonne peers as the newest NVP. That is exactly what happens to me while in Cancún this past September ... on an Arbonne-paid vacation! I feel as though! am living in a dream world that only the "lucky ones" get to dream about.

I was introduced to the Arbonne products 14 years ago and fell in love with the results that only Arbonne products can produce. I attended an Arbonne Presentation hosted by my sister, AM Kim Barton; I had never heard of Arbonne and certainly had not intended to buy anything. All I bargained for was good food and a good time. What I ended up with are the best skin care products I have ever used on my face ... with visible results. When I moved away to Norman, my biggest problem was finding a regular supplier to fulfill my Arbonne needs. Now, just 19 months later, the city of Norman has several Arbonne Consultants. It is my friend and neighbor, ENVP Martha McIntyre. She met my skin care needs and gave my family the best gift anyone could have ever given us: Freedom of choice.

Rita always says, "Success is living life the way you choose." I always thought my family was a success until I found myself becoming more and more restless, having to ask for permission to attend my children's activities. I realized someone else had the ultimate control over how much time and which advities I got to enjoy with my family. I loved my job description; I just wanted it on my own schedule and terms. I was working as a pediatric advanced practice nurse.

When I met Martha, I wanted the products but nothing to do with the opportunity she kept offering me. I knew that she was successful as a stay-at-home mom in her Arbonne business, but could not see myself as a professional with a full-time career benefiting from this business. It wasn't until I went to a car presentation for ERVP Jackie Mammen, that I saw other former healthcare professionals, such as ENVP Joyce Owens and ENVP Dearna Herrin. They shared their stories of success that had allowed them to retire and be home with their children. I cought the vision that right and will be forever grateful to Jackie and the other NVPs that shared their story with us that evering. As Rita says, "You don't get into Arbonne, until Arbonne gets into you." Boy, did it get into to mel I was so excited about the endless possibilities and shared my excitement with everyone. That same excitement built me an Arbonne business at a record pace!

My goal was to become an Area Manager to help alleviate the massive amount of overtime my husband worked that stole time away from our family. Little did I know that my enthusiasm, and commitment to that goal, would push me to RVP in just five months from my start date! At the time, I had no due how I got there.



Phillipe and Carleeta in Cancún, Mexico



The Nelson's and McIntyre's on vacation in Cancún, Mexico



Lyndsey, Carleeta, Blake and Phillipe in Cancún, Mexico.

APPENDIX B

EYE ON ARBONNE, P. 3, JULI UREVICK



Juli with RVP Rena Gamiley.

I have discovered that people are much more productive when they act as a team. In the case of an Arbonne business, for example, each person focuses on their Successitine's volume or goal for the month. By following this mentality, everyone wins. When you work as a team, problems or issues are resolved quickly and in a positive manner. Teamwork has contributed to our success and I have so many team members to thank.

First, our phenomenal upline has had a lot to do with our leam's success. Angle Lyle has proven to be the epitome of a leader and our team has her to thank for our accomplishments; it is also thanks to Jill Griffin, Kim Jetton and Krista Cheslock, too. Jill: You are such a sweet person, who adways seemed to inspire me on the last day of every month. Your words of encouragement were just what I needed. Kim: Thanks for your smile, great laugh and positive attitude. Krista: You introduced me to this great product and wonderful opportunity, and for that, I will be forever grateful.

To Anita Dresen: Thanks for taking a chance with me. You were my first business builder and I appreciate you and your energy. To Kris Ruane: I am so glad that you came on board. Your smile and calmness have been great. To Kim Ratner: You are going to make it. I have enjoyed your friendship and I cannot wait to be there when you reach NVP. To Vickle Priessman: I know your competitive nature will drive you to the top and when you get there, I will buy you as many crab legs as you can eat.

success strategy:

6 6 Make 'teamwork' your motto. 9 9



Four RVPs and their Menædes-Benzes.

To Rena Gormley: You have been a joy to be around, since the moment that we met. I love our friendship and I cannot wait to see you reach your goal. You are a champion. To Kathy Harless: Thank you for trusting me and for helping me keep things in perspective. To Laura Poellt: You are an amazing leader and businesswoman. I love your energy and I truly believe that you will be a Nation before my Eye on Arbonne story is even sent out.

To RoseAnne Cohen and Heather Records: Thanks so much for being supportive, even before you came on board. I know that you both will do amazingly well in this business. To Joan: We need to get you going. You can stay home and we can workput every day while doing Arbonne logether!

continued ...

Juli and ENNP Krista Cheslock, with the Mercedes-Benz,



APPENDIX C

EYE ON ARBONNE, P. 4, JILL BROWN



Jill's Tennessee keam. **FRONT Lif**: EVP Jayae Reese, Jill, AM-in-qualification Pam Gregory and AM Angie Langford. **BADC Lift:** Any Bradford, DM Lynn Branner, DM Dee Stoffer, DM Carin Wollace, AM-in-qualification Deborah Puraley, Dana Bandy, AM-in-qualification Shell in Eard and AM-in-qualification Beth Cabbo.

you, too, have learned you can do anything you set your mind to. Remember when you dream big, anything is possible.

To my mom, RVP Joyce Reese: I knew you could do it! It is so awesome to have you on my leam. You are on your way to Nation.

To ERVP Melissa Jackson, RVP Deborah Ryan and RVP Megan Leonard: You are simply incredible leaders. I am so blessed to have you on my team. It has been one crazy year with all the kids but it brought excitement to our business and we did it together. There is nothing like working with friends while our kids play with each other. We all have accomplished so much in just one year. I am so proud of each of you.

To AM Lauri Eason, AM Jennifer Broussard, DM Marcus Corona and the rest of our Area Managers, District Managers and Consultants in my Nation: This is your year for Region. Let us set goals and go for it. I am so proud to have you on my team.

Jill's Nation in front of her dream have and Mercedes-Benz.





RVP Melissa Jackson, DM Linda McNeice, AM Lauri Easan, Jill and DM Regan Sandifer at NTC 2005 Las Vegas.

To my Tennessee team: You all are amazing! You came together and along with my mom, achieved Region in four short months. It is your turn now to leave the nest for bigger achievements \dots a Region of your own. I am so excited to be working with so many family members and friends. Thanks for joining my leam.

May God abundantly bless you and your family. I have been amazingly blessed. Thank You, God! I encourage you to accept the Arbonne gift and you, bo, will be blessed in so many ways.



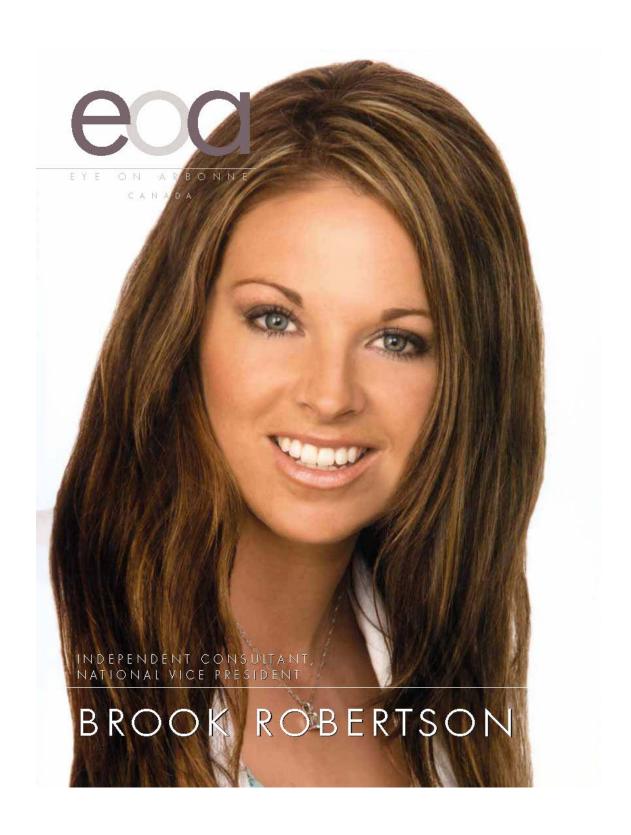
AM Angre Langford, AM Pain Gregory, RVP Joyce Reese, Connie Laisen, DM Julia Shook and AM Beth Gibbs.



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APPENDIX D

EYE ON ARBONNE, P. 1, BROOK ROBERTSON



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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Allen Victor earned his B.A. in Journalism at Louisiana Tech University and completed a year-long Graduate Marketing Certificate program at Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business. He carries with him a dedicated interest in the application of storytelling as his primary passion in communications research. Allen continues to draw upon his work experience as a communications manager in the health care sector to further examine and apply the use of narrative communication in various corporate environments that can utilize this time-tested form of communication effectively. His future plans primarily include using the time previously budgeted to complete this Master's program and write the thesis to loving his family (shout out to ya, Christi, Cameron and Alaina!!) more richly and thoroughly than ever before. Allen also envisions attending an open tryout for the Kansas City Royals in an attempt to fill the longstanding void of the club's elusive, next-generation Hall of Fame third baseman. Where have you gone, George Brett? Sigh.