



The balancing act of building character

Successful brand icons are conceived with the right mix of creative and strategic thinking

By DAVID ALTSCHUL

VIRTUALLY EVERY BRAND character is originally created as a tactical, short-term effort to solve a specific advertising problem. But if the character strikes a chord with its intended audience, then the CMO faces an awkward challenge: Can this tactical accident be turned into a strategic asset, or will it become just another empty icon, stuffed and mounted, gathering dust while researchers try to determine if it can be "contemporized" to recapture its "relevance"?

Consider the California Raisins, one of the all-time blockbusters in the world of character-based advertising. The first 30-second TV commercial, a conga line of Claymation raisins dancing to Marvin Gaye's "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," swept through popular culture like a hurricane in October of 1986. Within two days of the initial broadcast, noisy bars went silent when the spot appeared on TV. Within two weeks, trick-or-treaters all over the country were sporting big plastic garbage bags and trying to dance like raisins.

The essence of the California Raisin story was that these characters—like the product they represented—were unexpectedly cool. It is important to note that unexpected was every bit as important as cool. Lots of brand characters pretend to be cool—and most fall flat on their faces for the pretense. The Raisins were innocent and naive, cool almost by accident. The contrast between their ridiculous, practically repulsive appearance and their genuinely engaging performance was right at the heart of their story.

The California Raisin Advisory Board and its agency, Foote Cone & Belding, managed

that story fairly well in subsequent rounds of TV advertising. What killed the California Raisins were not missteps in the creation of advertising. What killed the Raisins was a licensing program that ran wild. Within three years you could not turn around without tripping over some kind of Raisin paraphernalia. At that point, the California Raisins were not remotely "unexpected." "Cool" took a pretty big hit as well, since much of the merchandise was very poorly executed and did nothing to reflect the engaging duality of the TV spots.

What's a CMO to do when faced with an embarrassment of riches like the initial popularity of the Raisins? In my experience, there are two common reactions: Some marketers try to let the magic fly free, hoping that the energy thus released will sweep them to fame and success. Others attempt to capture the magic and bottle it, hoping to preserve whatever value has already accrued to the brand.

For the California Raisins—a sad example of the let-the-tiger-run-loose approach—the story was built around the conflict inherent in the notion of unexpectedly cool. But the licensing program was not grounded in that story, and as a result, the story actually experienced by consumers was closer to annoyingly ubiquitous. Once the story had deteriorated to that point, the characters had little residual value for the brand.

A DEAD STATUE ON A PEDESTAL

On the other hand, many marketing managers, afraid of making a mistake and diluting their equity in the character, go to the opposite extreme. They catalog all the visible attributes of the character and try to freeze them in place, hoping to turn the character into an icon. What they forget is that an icon is only valuable to the extent that it reminds consumers of a story to which they were

emotionally attached in the past.

Betty Crocker is a cautionary example of a character who—although fictional—used to have a deep emotional relationship with her audience and who is now a pale shadow of her former self despite a very expensive and ongoing effort on the part of General Mills to contemporize her. The hip-hop animated Colonel Sanders represents another expensive attempt to contemporize a brand icon without reference to its underlying story. Viewers connect emotionally with char-

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acters whose struggles are familiar to them, not with characters who superficially look or act like them.

These tactical approaches fail because they don't address the fundamental strategic questions: What is this story about? What are the flaws, vulnerabilities and sources of conflict that connect the character to the brand in a deep, intrinsic way? What human truth is revealed through the story that audiences can relate to? Every effective brand character is built on this kind of story framework.

The process of articulating such a framework for a brand requires a delicate balance of creative and strategic thinking. But it is the only way to be sure that the brand character will continue to add value to the equity bank for a long time to come.

What do I mean? Take, for example, the fascinating Aflac Duck, a character poised at a strategic inflection point in the development of its story. At first glance, it would seem that

the Duck is one of those purely tactical characters: An insurance company with an odd sounding name wants to increase consumer awareness, so it makes a series of funny TV commercials about a very intrusive duck that quacks the name of the product. Awareness goes through the roof. So far, so good. But if that were the whole story, then the character would have begun to fade after a few spots. The interesting thing about the Aflac Duck is that not only has the character stuck harder in this culture than one would expect, but it has also become very popular in Japan. Such a phenomenon hints at some deeper emotional resonance than meets the eye.

In order to sort out the deeper story framework of Aflac and its mascot, you would need to understand who the character really is. Does the duck represent the company? Or is the character perhaps a metaphor for that small voice in the back of the consumer's mind that says, "You really should attend to your insurance even if you would rather ignore the issue"?

The answer to that question will have a big impact on where the story goes next and, ultimately, whether the character becomes a long-term source of emotional connection with consumers or simply another icon gracing the corporate Web site with a slowly diminishing presence.



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