

Top of Mind

Perspectives and Commentary

Keeping Your Brand Icon Alive and Well

Brand characters are puzzling creatures. Characters like the Maytag Repairman and the Mars M&M's gang thrive for decades as the living, breathing heart of their brand story. Others, like Speedy Alka Seltzer, the Wrigley Spearman, the Taco Bell

Chihuahua—just as popular in their day—are now ghosts haunting the collectibles section on eBay. Times change, brands change, marketing methods change. But does this adequately explain why some characters endure and others don't?

By their very nature, brand characters straddle the worlds of marketing and entertainment. They are created to sell a brand, but they also live in a consumer frame of reference that includes characters from television, movies, games and novels. To survive, a brand character has to be as engaging to the audience as any entertainment character, while also carrying the freight for its brand. It's a tough balance to maintain over time.

So how do you do it? Here are four key principles. Living characters...

1. Refuse to be the ambassador for the brand.

The M&M's characters were created at the dawn of television, and for most of their life existed as little more than salesmen disguised as cute and cuddly characters. Seen literally as ambassadors for the brand, they were limited to directly espousing the benefits of M&M's. Ambassador characters have to project a flawless image and offend no one because every action will be perceived as a direct reflection of the brand. This constricts their ability to do anything legitimately entertaining or emotionally involving.

In the mid-1990s, M&M/Mars finally gave some real depth to the characters, creating

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the fun-loving, irascible crew that is now among the world's most popular icons. The people at parent Masterfoods don't consider their brand to be rude, dopey or conniving, but today's M&M's characters often act that way. That's because they are no longer managed as brand ambassadors; instead they are seen as the embodiment of the brand proposition - "colorful chocolate fun." Red, Yellow and the rest convey the benefits of the brand through both positive and negative behaviors that make them fun, unpredictable and entertaining.

2. Have problems.

Characters are boring if they are perfect. We relate to characters through their struggles. Imagine Superman without Lois Lane and kryptonite. There would be no point in watching him because every story would be a foregone conclusion. Vulnerabilities, flaws and conflict are the windows through which we connect to characters and come to care about them. They make stories worth watching.

Conflict in stories can be external, as in man vs. man or man vs. nature, and internal, as in the struggle between two opposing aspects of a character's nature. Effective characters usually have several layers of conflict, and truly compelling characters embody at least one deep source of internal conflict.

Perfect characters without flaws may warm the heart of the brand manager, but they tend

to leave audiences cold. If you want your character to connect, give him some problems, preferably the self-inflicted kind.

3. Have problems tied to their brands.

The best character problems are ones that revolve around a brand truth. When a brand character's inner conflict is tied to something authentic about the brand, then the character's story and the brand story work together.

The Maytag Repairman, a fixture of the advertising landscape for over 30 years, has such an internal conflict. He is driven by pride and a sense of craft to work for the very best appliance company - Maytag - but because Maytag machines are so dependable, he never gets to do his job and perfect his craft. His dilemma has allowed Maytag to own dependability in a much more powerful way than direct statements of the brand's positioning could hope to.

4. Follow principles, NOT rules.

Marketers often attempt to sustain a character's initial success by formulizing or codifying what they think is working so that no deviation can take him off course. The problem is that such rules often squeeze the life out of the character by eliminating surprise. Surprise is the very essence of what makes a character feel alive to an audience.

Living characters don't follow rules, they follow principles. Here's the difference:

A principle guiding the Maytag Repairman story might be that striving to be the best can make you lonely, while a rule might be that he is never allowed to interact with consumers. The rule simply limits behavior, while the principle creates possibilities for rich, engaging stories by illustrating a fundamental human truth.

Characters like the M&M's and the Maytag Repairman reinforce product messages, inspire consumer loyalty and ultimately help build powerful brands. Unlike character icons that are usually grafted onto the end of spots, they live at the center of the brand story. They are juicy. They are enduring. They form authentic emotional connections that tie us to them even after they have left the screen.

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