

Top of Mind

Perspectives and Commentary

The Mystery Of The Missing Ad Icons

SCANNING the list of nominees for the Advertising Hall of Fame, I'm struck first by the omissions—and by what they tell us about brand characters. Mickey Mouse, for example, probably the best-known character icon in the world, isn't on the list.

Of course, some may claim that Mickey does not belong in this group because he is an “entertainment” character, and Disney would probably agree. But think about how Mickey Mouse has been used in recent memory. He is almost exclusively employed as a brand icon for the Walt Disney Co. In fact, I would guess that the limitations the company has imposed on Mickey as a brand icon have helped to undermine his career in the movies.

The distinction between icon and living character is useful. Many of the icons on the list—the Jolly Green Giant, Speedy Alka Seltzer, California Raisins, among others—were once characters engaged in active storytelling. But many have now been stuffed and mounted, set on a pedestal to remind us of a story we enjoyed in the past. (Consumers got to vote for their favorites over the past month with the tally due this week.) For a brand, a character icon can be a valuable mnemonic device—but only as long as the audience retains a fond memory of the story the brand is trying to evoke. As the story fades, so does the character.

Mickey's resonance with his audience has diminished as he has made the transition from living character to nostalgic icon. Witness the unfortunate results of the Disney/Kellogg alliance, in which Mickey did not play as well on cereal boxes as Buzz Lightyear, a living character.

By David Altschul



Characters are valuable only as long as the audience retains a fond memory of the brand's story.

Another striking omission is Betty Crocker, who would have won this competition hands down in 1950. At that time she was the author of the country's most popular cookbook and the host of its longest-running syndicated radio show. Homemakers wrote to her for cooking advice—even though most of them knew she was a fictional character. But over the decades she has so completely transformed into an icon there is now not much left beyond a signature and a spoon.

As with Mickey Mouse, Betty's use in licensing and merchandising now far outweighs her role in storytelling.

The stewards of such valuable intellectual property never set out to deliberately undermine the equity they are sworn to protect. The problem is that there are dangerous reefs to navigate. On one side, marketers are inclined to try to lock the character in place with rules that end up squeezing the life out of the character.

On the other side, salesmen are inclined to exploit the character for tactical advantage in any number of markets, diluting the equity and muddying the story.

Interestingly, the most glaring omission from the list represents an ironic twist in the discussion of characters and icons. Although I've never been a smoker, I believe the Marlboro Man deserves a place of honor. Arguably the

most powerful, effective and universal brand character in advertising history, the Marlboro Man acts like an icon, partly because he is a type, not a specific cowboy, and partly because most of us have only seen static images of him. But he is resonant and enduring because even in static images he strongly projects a story: the lone cowboy, the rugged individualist, doomed by his nature to social isolation. As cigarettes become less acceptable, his story actually grows even more resonant for people who smoke.

Of the characters that made the list, the best of them still play an active role in an ongoing story, tied by their own internal conflicts to something intrinsic to the brand. The colorful M&M's, for example, are desperate for attention but, because they are delicious candy-covered chocolate, can never achieve their desire since once you notice them you want to eat them. Mr. Peanut, as he has appeared in packaging for decades, is a toff with the body of a peanut, his gourmet aspirations forever at war with his common origin.

The Energizer Bunny would probably like to be a real bunny, a universal symbol of fertility and renewal, but he is only a toy, forever fighting an uphill battle against the forces of entropy. The conflicts provide consumers with a means of connection.

Most brand characters are born out of good creative intuition, usually to solve a specific advertising problem. But if a character has survived, it is usually because the character's personal story has proved deeply congruent with the brand's story, and has suggested something universal and meaningful for the audience. The characters that have endured somehow connect us to a deeper human truth and so transcend their role in advertising to find a place for themselves in the larger cultural zeitgeist.

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