Licensology: Character Principles

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Pay close attention to the foundational elements
that make a character emotionally engaging.

In marketing, the most important function of a brand character is to serve as a point of emotional connection between the brand and its audience. When an existing character is licensed, close attention to the foundational elements that make the character emotionally engaging will increase dramatically the likelihood that the licensed merchandise will connect with its intended audience and also is the best way to ensure that the licensing program will continue to actively build the character and the brand. To transform brand character licensing from an afterthought or secondary revenue stream into a long-term strategic asset, apply these four principles from the world of entertainment.

Tips

> Connect the character to a story.

> Keep in mind that the more difficult a character's struggles, the more compelling and emotionally involving it is.

> Focus on internal conflict—character vs. itself—to connect to your audience.

> Center the character's story around a truth about the human condition.

1. Character is story. A character and its story are two sides of the same coin. Pick any story you love from books, movies, or television, and replace the lead character with the protagonist from some other story. The story would begin to diverge from its course almost immediately. Every use of a character should reference its story. Unfortunately, many licensed characters are used without regard for their story. They're presented as a collection of physical attributes, like pictures of characters rather than actual characters. Emotionally engaging characters don't exist outside of stories. This leads directly to the next principle.

2. Stories are about conflict. Strip the conflict out of any story, no matter how good, and that story will fall apart. Characters' aches, desires, imperfections, and flaws—their vulnerabilities and sources of conflict—engage us and allow us to identify with them. The more difficult their struggles, the more compelling and emotionally involving they are. This truth is as significant for marketing communications as it is for entertainment and licensed properties. Identifying the key conflicts of the story is important to help focus any use of the character to maximize connection with the audience.

3. Internal conflict is key. Three basic types of conflict generate stories: character vs. character, character vs. environment, and character vs. itself. It's the last of these—the inner struggle—that is the key to emotionally engaging characters. It is through the internal conflicts that we learn who characters are, connect with them, and recognize ourselves in them.

With entertainment characters, internal conflicts simply can be invented to best illustrate whatever meaning the storytellers wish to convey. This kind of invention is less useful for licensed characters because they represent products and companies that exist in the real world. If the character's conflict is based on something inherently present within the brand it represents, then the character will authentically connect to the reality of the brand and will allow consumers to connect with the brand, as well.

4. Effective stories are based on a fundamental truth about the human condition. Such stories can be both timeless and universal because they reinforce what the audience knows to be true about the human experience. When a brand story centers on such a truth, consumers across a wide spectrum of ages and backgrounds can see themselves in the brand and connect with it on an emotional level. That kind of recognition is priceless because it creates an emotional bond between the licensed character and the viewer. ©