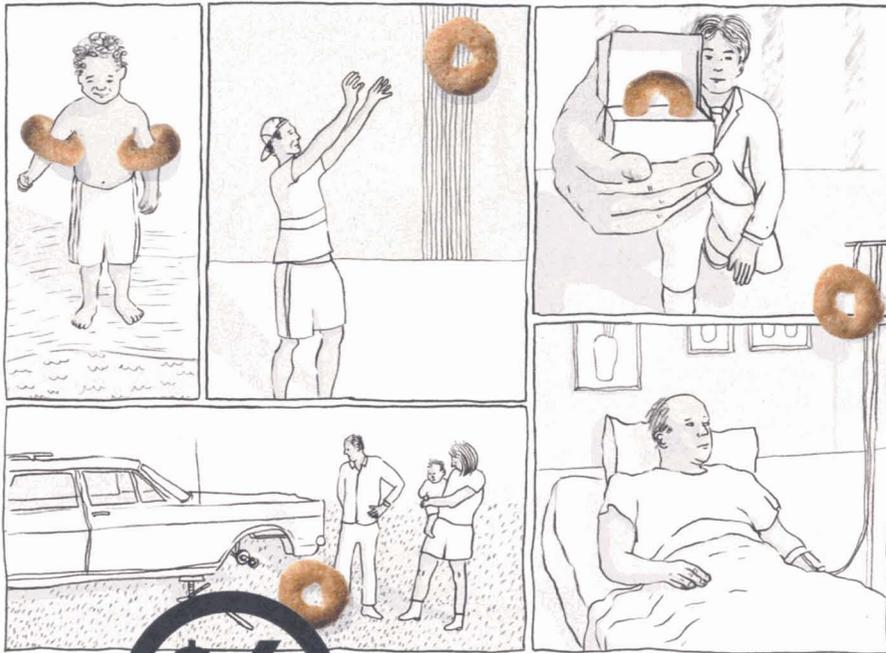


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CONSUMED BY ROB WALKER

The Story of O's

Why families are 'loyal beyond reason' to a breakfast cereal.



Cheerios

More than 60 years ago, CheerioOats were introduced to a cereal aisle far less abundant with choices than the one we know today. Cheerios — the shortened name, as of 1945 — remains a powerhouse. In a recent 52-week period, more than 95 million yellow boxes of Cheerios were purchased, to the tune of \$288 million, making it one of the best-selling cereals in the United States, according to Information Resources, a retail data firm.

Can such numbers be explained by mere force of habit? David Altschul does not think so. “I think there’s some deeper emotional resonance,” he says. Altschul is the president and founder of a Portland, Ore., firm called Character, which does something called “story frameworks” for brands. This includes what Altschul calls “critter work” — helping marketers understand why a brand mascot is or is not working. A few years ago, after deconstructing the Honey Nut Cheerios bee, Altschul was asked to apply his methods to Cheerios itself, which made sense to him. To Altschul, character and story are at the heart of every brand that has an audience.

“Some marketers,” he says, “think that ‘story’ is whatever they choose to say. People who understand story from an entertainment point of view would say ‘story’ is whatever your audience takes away from it.” Everybody knows marketing stories frequently fail to connect, but the quest to solve this problem has tended to revolve

around how best to study consumers — focus groups? Ethnography? Brain scans? Altschul’s interest is on the storytelling side. For Cheerios (as for other characters and brands), the process involved “Character Camp.” This three-day exercise, led by Altschul and his colleagues, is attended by marketers and ad-agency people who work with the brand. The guiding idea is to set aside the consumer data and learn to think of a brand as “a character.” Crucial to this, Altschul says, is the idea of motivation: “What does this brand want? Not ‘What does the brand manager want from it?’ But if the brand were a character, what would it want?”

What *do* Cheerios want? Analyzing reels of old ads for the cereal led to discussions about how the brand was depicted in relationship to family members, particularly moms — who were curiously underrepresented, almost as if, like Clark Kent and Superman, they could never be seen together. Cheerios, it seemed, wanted to be Mom. “I think the brand actually wants to enable family connection,” Altschul says. “Every brand that we’ve looked at that has any emotional traction is based on some fundamental human truth,” he adds, and in the case of Cheerios this truth is: “Families are built on small, intimate moments of love connection.”

Becky O’Grady, the General Mills vice president who oversees the Cheerios brand, says this process “evolved our thinking.” Needless to say, she believes that Cheerios taste great and so on; yet even General Mills refers to Cheerios as enjoying “loyalty beyond reason” in fending off far cheaper store brands. But despite focus-group references to it as “the national cereal,” there was still a certain caution to its advertising — the inevitable cutaway to the pure-rational sell of an arrow indicating cholesterol going down. The Character Camp vision of a heroic, beloved Cheerios, O’Grady says, “gave us courage to go to the next level.” More recent advertising has dropped the cholesterol arrow in favor of more blatantly emotional vignettes about . . . family connections. Most strikingly, the ad agency Saatchi & Saatchi produced a one-minute spot that made its debut in theaters about a couple adopting two children from another country; it shows the new family bonding by playing with Cheerios on the plane trip home.

The shameless movie-of-the-week tone verges on melodrama — but that’s kind of the idea. After all, Altschul points out, the adoption ad’s story line was borrowed from letters that consumers wrote to General Mills. Nobody would have written to a grocery chain about the amazing emotional experience they had with its store-brand circular oat cereal, he says, “and even if they did, nobody would believe it.” That, in fact, is the real key to a brand’s character: it’s not what marketers can imagine their product doing, but what consumers apparently believe. As Altschul says, “We’re not making this stuff up.” ■

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