

# FAST COMPANY

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## Brands With Character

By Fara Warner

AS SHE STRUGGLED to revamp Georgia-Pacific Corp.'s Angel Soft toilet tissue in 2003, Jill Mattos had to reckon with the angel problem. It seemed like a no-brainer: Use angels to sell Angel Soft, right? But for Angel Soft, angels had always been off-limits. "How do you make them not religious?" asks Mattos, Georgia-Pacific's senior director of brand marketing. "How do you make them inoffensive but still entertaining?"

For better and, often, worse, characters have become a staple of consumer marketing. A great one—the Pillsbury Doughboy, for example—can help tell a brand's story, sparking interest and long-term loyalty. But how to bring that character to life?



### 1. DON'T BE A SHILL.

Prior to a makeover by BBDO and Vinton Studios, M&Ms did little more than appear on screen. "Once they gained human traits," says Character president David Altschul, "they gave the brand more appeal."



### 2. CREATE A LIFE.

Mattos got her angels—two irreverent higher beings named David and Larry, who debuted in television ads earlier this year. The characters have distinctive personalities—David is the overbearing bathroom guru; Larry is more, well, cherubic—that reflect detailed, carefully conceived biographies. Mattos knows as much about their lives as she does about some of her friends'. This "backstory" helps keep marketers honest as they struggle to make characters work with new generations of consumers.



### 3. MAKE THEM VULNERABLE.

Every great superhero has a flaw; it makes them appealing. But admitting weakness isn't easy. "Our character has to be perfect," is how Maytag's Kristi Lafrenz describes her company's attitude before it put "Old Lonely," its repairman, through Character Camp in 2000—which led to a new character, the Apprentice, who showed Old Lonely a thing or two.

Photograph by David Lawrence (mints)

Mattos turned to Character, an aptly named Portland, Oregon, company incubated inside the Will Vinton Studios, famed for its California Raisins animation. Character helps companies create new characters and update old ones via three-day Character Camps that employ improvisational acting, hours of honest wrangling, or sometimes just quiet time to reflect.

The camp forced Mattos to set aside the marketing and branding buzzwords that defined her world. Character's executives, who hail from the animation, entertainment, and marketing industries, talk about storytelling and character development, not cost per thousands and upfront markets. Here's what they've taught Mattos and other character campers.



### 4. IMAGINE THE LONG RUN.

Doug Moore has worked at General Mills just two years as VP of advertising and branding. Some of his characters, like the Green Giant, have been there 50 years. So he won't fire one of them just to shake things up. Taking hard, honest looks at characters, he says, "reminds us that these characters are part of us."



### 5. DON'T ASK TOO MUCH.

Some characters work best with simple missions. The Foster Imposters—a pair of chickens—helped Foster Farms drive sales of naturally grown fowl. Character persuaded the company not to dilute the impact by using the Imposters for line extensions.