

The Ghost of Jared's Pants

I was in a Subway the other day—the restaurant, not the train. I like Subway. I feel good about myself (read: healthy) when I eat there. But just as I was getting ready to order my usual ham-and-cheese, the counter guy asked if I wanted to try the new Subway Feast.

I'd never heard of this sandwich, which turned out to be a rather portly affair of salami, turkey, pepperoni, roast beef, ham and cheese. That's right, five kinds of meat *plus* cheese. Gazing at the menu board, I was awed by the sheer abundance of the titanic sandwich.

It was then that I noticed the little cartoon man standing right beside it. Actually, it was a *big* cartoon man—the Family Guy (from the animated show of the same name)—TV's consummate overweight American schlub.

I could see the connection between the character and the sandwich right away, but my mind wrestled: Why would Subway, with its mantra of “six grams of fat or less,” choose a butterball like Family Guy as a mascot? Beyond his contradicting a brand identity Subway marketers have carefully crafted for years now, Family Guy's presence

was wrong in a far more profound sense I couldn't put my finger on. I couldn't, that is, until I glanced at the other side of the menu board. And there, wearing his familiar grin, stood Jared.

Remember Jared Fogle? A fixture in Subway ads for years, Fogle was the college guy who proudly held up an elephantine pair of pants—pants he no longer had to wear because he'd allegedly shed 240 pounds after confining himself to a diet of (guess what?) Subway. The two mascots side-by-side, one human and one cartoon, looked uncannily similar—same haircut, same glasses even. They were almost like those dubious “before” and “after” photos you see in weight-loss ads. But it was all in reverse: Subway appeared to be *starting* with the thin guy and rounding out the allegory with this porcine counterpart.

Perhaps some of my confusion came from the fact that it was Jared who'd first brought me to Subway, years ago, when I decided it was time for a healthier diet of my own. I'd duti-



By Jim Hardison

What's a 'healthy' restaurant chain doing with an overweight schlub for a mascot?

fully ordered a six-inch chicken-and-nothing sandwich. It felt good at first. But soon enough I began a moral slippage into the dark side—first moving to the Sweet Onion Chicken Teriyaki (which, I found later, tasted better with cheese), then from the six-inch to the 12-inch size. One small step more took me to the point of no return: The steak-and-cheese sub.

My fellow consumers on the line, it seemed, had also fallen from grace, ordering Double Meatball Marinara, an eight-inch Sausage Pizza Sub and, of course, the new Subway Feast.

My gaze bounced between Jared and Family Guy as I pondered the contrasts—between Subway's new sub and its guilt-alleviating apple slices, between the America's obesity epidemic and the 1,500-calorie Double Six Dollar Burger from Carl's Jr. It was then I realized that with Family Guy, Subway hadn't, in fact, added a second character to its marketing. Instead, Jared and the Family Guy were simply two halves of a single character—and that character was me. Jared and Family Guy were like the light and dark sides of The Force, fighting for dominance over my diet (good-for-me versus good-tasting), my thin aspirations versus my temptation-driven reality, Jared versus his fat pants.

The Jared/Family Guy axis articulates a powerful human story—but I suspect (or, at least, I hope) it's a story Subway's telling without being conscious of it. If the brand truly knew what it was doing, it might not be so casual about dangling such a dichotomy in the faces of customers. Because those customers seem to be using the brand's health halo as permission to eat more indulgently, and by adding an obese cartoon version of Jared into its marketing communications, Subway just might knock that halo askew.

In the end, I left with the Subway Feast steaming in my take-out bag, alongside some token apple slices. For the record, the Feast was good, but it was hard to enjoy. After all, no meal's a happy one when you're haunted by the ghost of Jared's pants.

Jim Hardison is creative director at Character, Portland, Ore., a firm that creates story frameworks for brands and their characters. Contact him at jim@characterweb.com.