

Tuesday, November 26, 2002



Stuart Elliott's In Advertising

Pepsi Enlists Canine Help

The North American division of the Pepsi-Cola Company is going to the dogs - to a dog, more specifically - to help stimulate sales of one of its smaller soft-drink brands.



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For Mug, second in the root beer category between Barq's from Coca-Cola and A&W from Cadbury Schweppes, Pepsi-Cola North America is introducing an animated character, named simply Dog.

The canine will serve as the focus of advertising and promotions in stores and on the Internet, with a budget to be determined, as well as appearing on cans, bottles and cartons. Dog, a bulldog on a mission, was developed in collaboration with *Character*, a consulting company in Portland, Ore., that specializes in creating and reviving brand characters.

Selling products with proprietary characters was once a mainstay strategy of

Madison Avenue as "critters" - the sobriquet bestowed upon them by a master of the genre, the Leo Burnett agency - proliferated for decades. They peddled packaged foods (Tony the Tiger for

Frosted Flakes), over-the-counter remedies (Speedy for Alka-Seltzer) and soft drinks, too (Sprite for Coca-Cola, a pixie that even lent its name to Coke's sibling lemon-lime soda). The device fell out of favor by the 1970's as consumers began perceiving characters as dated relics of a bygone era of balmy hoo, and was supplanted by characters borrowed from movies, TV shows and other elements of popular culture.

But like leg warmers and the movie musical, characters created for ads are making a comeback. The idea now is that critters - if properly conceived and presented - can help a brand make an emotional bond with consumers, a goal particularly prized in these days of disaffection and disconnection.

"When we looked at our brand, we saw it was really generic," says Rita Stockett, senior brand manager for the flavor brands at Pepsi-Cola North America in Purchase, N.Y. "Our objective is how do we go from 'Give me a root beer' to 'Give me a Mug.'"

The way to achieve it is "to differentiate ourselves in the root beer category," she adds, which could be accomplished with a character.

But which kind of character? Enter *Character*, which was spun off from the advertising division of Will Vinton Studios, the production company known for Claymation characters like the California Raisins. As the Character Development Lab at Vinton, it worked with agencies like Burnett on projects like revitalizing the Maytag Man character; in that instance, the recommendation was to pair the familiar "lonely repairman" with a younger, more active partner who would symbolize Maytag's innovative new products.



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"Maytag was the watershed because it showed how important characters could be in the arena of brand strategy," says David Altschul, the president of *Character*, "by adding some emotional resonance to the relationship with the audience."

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Ms. Stockett and her colleagues approached *Character* as they sought to redesign Mug's packages after conducting research about the brand, which has suffered lately from softening sales, and root beer, which is losing market share to newer soft-drink flavors. In focus groups, consumers were more attracted to packages with characters, but Pepsi-Cola North America was having difficulty narrowing the choices.

"We did recommend a character, to put a face on all the elements underlying the brand, and went through different types," says Jim Hardison, creative director at *Character*. "We went through some wild animals, some mythical creatures, but kept coming back to a bulldog."

"The bulldog represents what Mug is about, what the brand stands for and what root beer is," Mr. Hardison explains. "Root beer is exotic but familiar. There's a powerful quality to the drink, but it's mellow, laid back. It's old-fashioned, but still compelling. It's wild, but safe, and attractive, but not really a leading-man type."

All those qualities are epitomized by the bulldog, he adds, and especially fit Mug because the breed is known by its face - yes, its mug. The plain name, Dog, also evokes the down-to-earth qualities of root beer as well as echoing the brand name.

Ms. Stockett and her colleagues, who took part in what's called a "Character Camp" - a visit to *Character's* office to brainstorm ideas -, were enthusiastic about the results.

"As soon as people hear about this dog, they go right into telling a story," Ms. Stockett says. "It's engaging."

The story of Dog is being told on a Web site developed by the Dallas office of Tribal DDB, the interactive division of the DDB Worldwide division of the Omnicom Group. Visitors to the site (www.mugrootbeer.com) are greeted by a bold headline, "The Adventures of Dog," and are invited to "Team up with Dog as he travels across America in search ofÖ"

In the initial episode, which unfolds with each mouse click in colorful panels styled like comic books, Dog is introduced as the companion of Tex, a "cowboy truck driver for Mug root beer." Dog and Tex are on a trip on the proverbial "dark and stormy night" when Tex swerves to avoid a deer and veers off the road. After the accident, Tex is taken away by ambulance; the next morning, Dog wakes up alone and "heads off in search of his lost master."

"What will happen to Dog next?" the final screen reads, in classic Hollywood serial-film fashion. "Check back soon to find out!" The visuals are augmented with sound effects and an interactive game to hunt for objects like a key in various scenes; find all three icons and the reward is a download of music, a screen saver or "Dog wallpaper."

"Root beer makes you comfortable; there's a satisfying, homey quality to it," Mr. Hardison says. "We're taking all that away from Dog and putting him in pursuit of it, to find his lost master who represents what root beer represents."

Character has produced a plot map for the episodes, he adds, laying out an arc "that theoretically will end with a resolution of the quest."

Episodes are to be introduced at the rate of one each month or two on the Web



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site, Ms. Stockett says, which is being promoted on Mug packaging and signs on store shelves. Because Mug is a small brand in sales volume compared with behemoths like Pepsi-Cola, Diet Pepsi or Mountain Dew, there has not been media advertising for Mug in a couple of years. If that were to change, Mr. Hardison says, there could be television commercials telling the Dog and Tex story along with "trading cards and comic books."

Dog is not the first bulldog to peddle products. One represents Miller's Red Dog beer brand. Another bulldog has been the longtime symbol of Mack trucks. Then there's the bulldog in commercials for Kibbles 'n Bits dog food.

Bulldogs are indeed "used fairly frequently in advertising," Mr. Hardison says. "That's why we need to distinguish this dog, go beyond the face, if we want to own the character in the long run."