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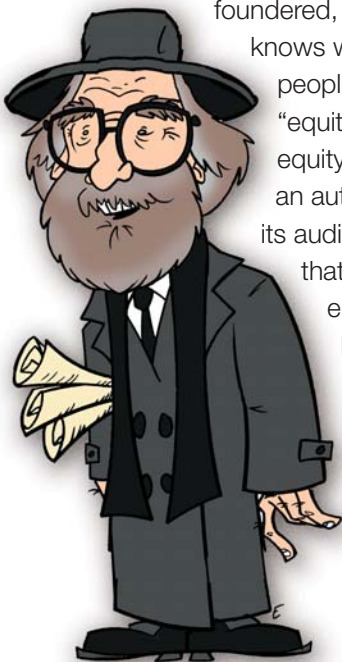
ICONS IN ADVERTISING

By David Altschul

An icon sounds like a really nice thing to have. You can put it on a pedestal in the corner of your office and maybe plant ivy to drape down the sides. But from the standpoint of your client's business, having an icon isn't all it's cracked up to be. In fact, in our considered opinion, icons are assets in decay

Consider, for example, how valuable the Betty Crocker character was to General Mills in 1950 vs. the equity she provides today. In 1950, Betty Crocker had her own syndicated radio show; she was the author of a very popular line of cookbooks; and women all over the country wrote to her for advice on cooking and entertaining, even though everyone knew that she was a fictional character. Today, Betty Crocker is a signature logo and a red spoon—valuable, undoubtedly, but with very little of the emotional resonance of the original character. Over the decades, Betty evolved slowly from a living character into an advertising icon.

Or consider Mickey Mouse, one of the most widely recognized and valuable corporate icons on the planet. But at least one attempt to translate that equity into commercial value—the Disney/Kellogg's alliance—has foundered, largely because no one really knows what Mickey's story is. Marketing people like to refer to brand icons as “equity characters,” but there is no real equity to tap unless the character makes an authentic emotional connection with its audience. And the only way to make that connection is to tell authentically engaging stories. But marketers have trouble with storytelling, partly because they routinely confuse storytelling with news. Marketers like to think that their story is whatever they'd like to tell their consumers about their brand. As one account supervisor told me



recently, We know our story: it's quality, quality, quality. But the story is not what you want to say; the story is the meaning your audience makes out of all their experiences with the brand and the character.

It may seem like the slow evolution of a living brand character into an icon on a pedestal is an irreversible process—either that or put a backwards baseball cap on the character to “contemporize” it—but we've seen a number of brand characters rediscover their true story in a way that successfully deepens their relationship with their audience. M&Ms is one case in point. For 40 years, beginning with “the dip in the chocolate pool and the quick candy shower,” the M&Ms characters slowly evolved toward icon status. The company, in fact, developed a 3-inch thick binder with rules and guidelines for the use of the characters. By the early 1990s, awareness of the characters, in the words of the marketing manager, was “a mile wide and half an inch deep.” But in the mid '90s, BBDO took over the account, politely tossed out the rulebook and found a story for the now-CG characters that offered real human resonance. The campaign has been credited with a 30 percent increase in sales in its first three years, and the characters began to routinely outscore Mickey himself in popularity. It's not about design and execution (though these are excellent in the case of the M&Ms guys), it's about the story. Get the story right, find the deeper human truth that informs the character and connects it to the brand, and you'll find a character that is much more satisfying to work with—and much more effective for your client, as well.

David Altschul (left) is president of Character (characterweb.com), a Portland, Ore.-based firm that creates and revitalizes brand characters.