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The Use of Character Icons as Marketing Tools

B&M answers the age-old question

by Dale Brown

B&M has a history of creating and using character icons as communications tools for a variety of companies across the country. Such a character edits the B&M newsletter and five other characters edit client newsletters.

The number one question we are asked about these characters is “Aren’t you afraid of offending someone?” After more than two decades of using character icons as marketing tools, here is our formal response to that popular question.

By their very nature, brand characters straddle the worlds of marketing and entertainment. They are created to attract attention and enhance communications. To survive they must be engaging to the targeted audience while also carrying the freight of company or product messages. It’s a tough balance to maintain over time.

What’s important to understand is that successful character icons are not ambassadors for a brand. Ambassador characters have to project flawless images and offend no one because every action will be perceived as a direct reflection of the companies they represent. This constricts their ability to do anything legitimately entertaining or emotionally involving. (Think Speedy Alka Seltzer, if you’re old enough to remember him.)

Versatile character icons, like the fun-loving, irascible M&M’s gang, have some real depth. The company they represent isn’t considered rude, dopey or conniving, even though its icons often act that way. They’re not ambassadors. They’re the fun, unpredictable and entertaining icons that attract and engage a targeted audience. Because they are flawed, they are unpredictable ... and unpredictability is the basis of their popularity.

Characters who are perfect are boring. We relate to characters through their struggles. Vulnerabilities, flaws and conflict are the windows through which the

audience connects with character icons. They make icon communications worth reading or watching.

Imagine Superman without Lois Lane or Kryptonite. He would be boring because he would be too perfect.

Perfect characters tend to leave audiences cold. If you want your character to connect, give him some problems, preferably the self-inflicted kind. The best character problems revolve around a brand or industry truth ... they are meaningful to the audience because the audience can relate to them.

Living characters don't follow rules. Rules eliminate surprise and surprise is the very essence of what gives characters life.

Yes, the best characters are "edgy." The editor of the B&M newsletter, is the most "edgy" of all the character icons we've developed. In some rare cases, a very small percentage of overly sensitive, political correct people may discover some reason to be offended by this character. We don't want them as clients anyway, so we don't care. But, we work very hard to avoid that possibility with client icons. At the same time, we don't let those types of people dictate or control the personalities of our characters ... because that would diminish the effectiveness of those characters.

Character icons reinforce product messages, inspire, educate and ultimately represent a uniqueness that helps strengthen a company's identity and market presence. They form authentic emotional connections. They help sell products and services. They remain memorable even after their column is read or their ad is seen. In short, they keep on working even when they're not around.

So, are we afraid of offending someone? We're aware of the possibility and make conscious, reasonable efforts to avoid it ... unless of course, we can get a laugh from the other 99.9%.



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