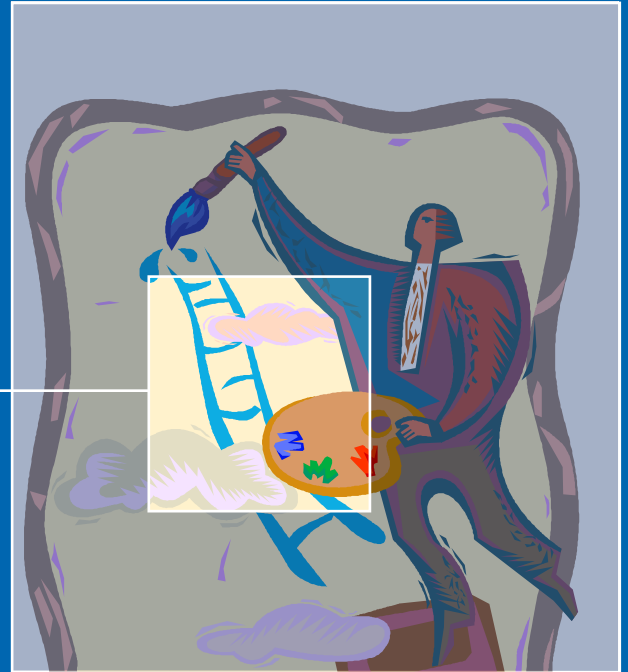


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Blue Papers



Brand Characters

Why are brand characters so effective in marketing?

Brand characters are a fictional representation of a brand and organisations use them to front everything from TV advertising campaigns to online videos and outdoor billboards. Brand characters first took off as a means of personifying an organisation in the mid-20th century, with the likes of Tony the Tiger for Kellogg's Frosties proving to be a durable template for what was to come.



Brand characters can enhance 'brand equity' by driving higher levels of engagement between an organisation and its target audience. Heightened engagement is the result of the brand character attaching human characteristics and traits to an organisation – something "to which the consumer can relate."¹ Qualities such as excitement, sincerity, ruggedness, competence and sophistication can help customers identify with an organisation, particularly if they possess similar attributes themselves.

Brand characters are often larger than life and display plenty of quirks and eccentricities, with the aim of making a strong impression on existing and prospective customers. This can be particularly worthwhile if a new brand is being launched in a highly competitive industry.

Some brand characters go on to become so ubiquitous that they end up becoming a part of popular culture, with even people who don't transact with the brands behind them knowing who they are and what they represent.

This Blue Paper will examine some of the most successful brand characters over the years, how and why they have proved so popular and the benefits they have had for the companies they represent. It will then review what companies need to do to create their own brand characters, with the hope of enjoying a similar level of success.

Successful brand characters

Which brand characters stand out when it comes to building awareness of a brand and getting its message across?

¹ "Brand Personality." Investopedia. Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <http://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/brand-personality.asp>

Compare the Market meerkats

The price comparison site sector is pretty crowded and Comparethemarket.com used to be just one of many companies operating in this marketplace. But in January 2009, it unveiled TV advertisements featuring Aleksandr Orlov - an animated meerkat with a Russian accent. He soon struck a chord with TV audiences which also led to countless promotional merchandise opportunities.

For instance, Orlov's 'autobiography' attracted more advance sales than former prime minister Tony Blair's memoirs,² while he has also been immortalised as a collectable range of cuddly toys and attracted a strong following on social media. This has helped to make Comparethemarket.com a giant in the price comparison site market. And Orlov's fame and ubiquity has been consolidated even further by the company's sponsorship of ITV soap opera Coronation Street - one of the top-rated TV shows in the UK.

Gerry Boyle, Chief Executive of media agency Zenith Optimedia, believes one indication of the meerkat's impact is that every one of Comparethemarket.com's rivals have "radically changed their advertising" in response to this campaign. He said: "without a shadow of a doubt he has been a catalyst for a huge change in advertising in the category."³ Mr Boyle stated that this is very similar to what happened when Howard Brown fronted Halifax's TV commercials a decade ago, as the ads featuring him exuberantly singing about the bank's products to the tunes of popular songs prompted every rival provider to review their marketing strategies as well. He added that the success of Comparethemarket.com's brand characters has been a clear demonstration that TV advertising remains a powerful promotional tool and a viable way of capturing the public's attention.



The Churchill insurance dog

Car insurance is another hugely competitive market and two decades ago, Churchill created a mascot to make it stand out. Since the firm's name reminded many of former British prime minister Winston Churchill - widely regarded as a national hero and political icon - it concluded a bulldog would be an appropriate choice, as it is another image that commonly represents Britain.

And since nodding dogs are a frequent sight in people's cars, it was particularly relevant to the motorists it was looking to bring on board. Churchill the Dog soon resonated with TV viewers, partly thanks to his comedy voice and memorable

² "The 'Simples!' idea that became a £10m empire." *The Independent*. Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/the-simples-idea-that-became-a-16310m-empire-2119590.html>
³ "How meerkat Aleksandr Orlov helped increase the market for TV ads." *The Guardian*. Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/jan/16/aleksander-orlov-price-comparison-ads>

catchphrase of “Oh Yes!” The dog became so popular that the company created a range of talking soft toys and even an official Facebook page dedicated to the canine.⁴

An amusing - or concerning, depending on your point of view - consequence of Churchill’s fame is that many youngsters now apparently associate the name Churchill more with the dog than with the legendary wartime prime minister. Speaking at the Sir John Cass’s Foundation Lecture at Cass Business School in London, outspoken former head teacher Katherine Birbalsingh said many schools are failing to teach children basic facts, figures and knowledge. “I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve had conversations with kids about Winston Churchill where they think he’s ‘that dog’ off the insurance advert from TV.”⁵



Car insurance is obviously not aimed at youngsters, but they’ll certainly be drawn to humorous ads and soft toys. This might in turn prompt parents to purchase toy Churchill dogs to keep their children entertained in the car, as well as provide a reminder for them to renew their insurance when the time comes. Finally, when the youngsters are old enough to drive, they will already be familiar with this particular cover provider, as and when the need arises to arrange their first policy.

Barry Scott

It’s not just cute and cuddly animals who make effective brand characters. Cleaning products brand Cillit Bang has achieved a staggering level of recognition thanks to its TV advertising campaign featuring Barry Scott, which launched in 2004. Played by Neil Burgess, Barry Scott is brash, loud, full of quotable catchphrases and keen to enthuse about the product’s ability to remove rust, dirt and lime scale in kitchens and bathrooms. It is possibly the fact that he is so excited by what might typically be regarded as an unremarkable and unexciting product that has helped him make an impact on TV viewers.

The adverts, starting with the introduction of “Hi, I’m Barry Scott,” might have made some people wonder if he was a genuine celebrity endorsing the brand, so he got people thinking and talking about him with their friends and relatives. Reckitt Benckiser, which owns the Cillit Bang brand, believes the character has also struck a chord because he reflects some of the traits it possesses.

⁴ “The Churchill Dog.” Churchill. Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <http://www.churchill.com/churchill-dog>

⁵ “Is the British education system broken?” City University London. Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <http://www.cass.city.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2011/october/is-the-british-education-system-broken>

UK Marketing Director Jerome Lemaire commented: "Like Cillit Bang, Barry cuts through to the heart of the matter. His directness truly reflects the Cillit Bang 'Turbo Power' message, which is about removing stains in seconds. Cillit Bang has been a phenomenon, firstly creating a completely new niche in the cleaning sector and also in the way in which the brand, along with Barry, captured the imagination of the public. You hear the words Cillit Bang and you think of a cleaner that does what it says it will do."⁶

According to Mark Choueke, Editor of Marketing Week, Cillit Bang "launched into a tough sector to be sexy in," as it was up against a number of super-brands in the household cleaning market. However, he noted that it had a "loud launch," while much of Cillit Bang's success was also put down to the fact it had a "silly name and a great marketing strategy."⁷

"Real" brand characters

Using brand characters has not spelled the end of celebrity endorsement by any means, but some famous faces have come on board with a company to present themselves in a very different light, often to the point where they might almost be deemed a character more than a brand ambassador. Ex-footballer and broadcaster Gary Lineker, for instance, has portrayed a serial crisp thief in Walkers Crisps' TV ad campaign for nearly two decades.

But perhaps the best example of this is Usain Bolt, the charismatic Jamaican athlete who has starred as an entire family in recent ads for Virgin Media.⁸ Bolt depicts everyone from a suave grandfather to a mischievous mother, as well as a playful child and a cheeky baby. The campaign demonstrates how every member of the family can benefit from Virgin Media's superfast broadband service at the same time, with all of them able to get online through their PCs, tablets and laptops to do "the things they love online."

Richard Larcombe, Brand and Marketing Director at Virgin Media, commented: "Who better to help us spread the word than the world's fastest man? Usain brings the ads to life with his brilliant portrayal of an unforgettable Virgin Media family."



⁶ "Cillit Bang brings backs Barry Scott for £5m push." *Marketing Magazine*. Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <http://www.marketingmagazine.co.uk/article/1160367/cillit-bang-brings-backs-barry-scott-5m-push>

⁷ "The unstoppable rise of Cillit Bang!" *The Guardian*. Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2010/apr/08/cillit-bang>

⁸ "Meet the Bolt family in Virgin Media's latest ad campaign." Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <http://about.virginmedia.com/press-release/9413/meet-the-bolt-family-in-virgin-medias-latest-ad-campaign>

The benefits of brand characters

So what exactly are the benefits that keep firms in all sorts of industries using brand characters?

- **Can humanise companies**

Brand characters can represent an appealing persona for companies operating in a mature and competitive industry. According to *The Marketer*, the magazine of The Chartered Institute of Marketing, “cute, furry or larger than life personas can humanise a brand and develop a bond with a target audience.”⁹

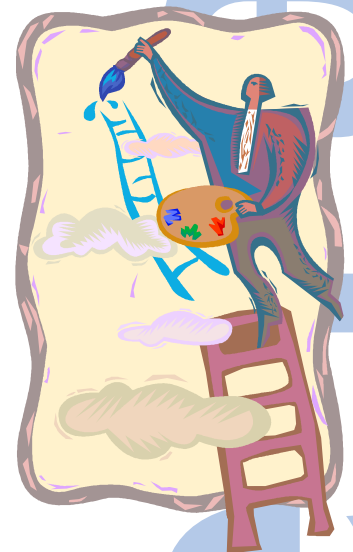
- **Encourage visual recall**

The human brain is particularly adept at processing visual information, so brand characters have helped people retain and recall certain images and cues relating to a particular company. Many people can recognise a brand character on a TV advertisement even if the sound is turned off, or identify it on a print ad or billboard without actually reading any of the words displayed alongside.

Cognitive Neuroscientist E. Clea Warburton commented: “Our brain has got more cortex devoted to processing visual information compared to that from our other senses. We are programmed to be encoding and retrieving visual information much more so than auditory information.”¹⁰

- **Work well for brands in low interest categories**

What do Comparethemarket.com, Churchill and Cillit Bang have in common, beyond the fact they all have memorable brand characters? Well, none of these firms are in sectors that are eye-wateringly exciting or glamorous, yet they are popular household names nonetheless. It’s an indication that brand characters can be particularly effective for companies in low interest categories, where their basic marketing message might not always be enough to pique the interest of consumers.



⁹ “Characters in marketing.” *The Marketer*. Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <http://www.themarketer.co.uk/analysis/trends/characters-in-marketing/>

¹⁰ “USING BRAND CHARACTERS TO CREATE ENDURING BRAND APPEAL.” *Second Win*. Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <https://www.secondwindonline.com/using-brand-characters-to-create-enduring-brand-appeal?journal=239>

- **Can't harm a firm's reputation**

It can be potentially embarrassing and damaging for a company when a celebrity who endorses its brand steps into scandal or finds themselves on the end of bad publicity. But firms that use brand characters to front their marketing campaigns will never have this problem, as they can be confident they won't say or do anything that could tarnish their image. And of course, using a brand character has the added advantage over hiring a celebrity in that it is a much cheaper option.

- **They work across various platforms**

According to The Marketer, brand characters "came to be seen as passé by many brands," but this changed when digital platforms such as social media moved into the mainstream. Indeed, the publication believes the emergence of sites such as Facebook and Twitter has "breathed new life into this strategy, as digital channels offered a forum for better character development, richer storytelling and a host of shareable content."¹¹

Social media has helped to support companies' wider storytelling strategies, which is why some brand characters have survived wholesale changes to marketing strategies and brand refreshes. Columbus Direct, for instance, opted to retain its easily identifiable dog character when it diversified beyond travel insurance to markets such as breakdown and home cover. Greg Lawson, Managing Director of the firm, said: "Like the meerkats, Columbus is a memory icon. The growth of content marketing as a discipline demands the creation of brand personality - and that's what we have tried to bring together."¹²

- **Can become iconic**

The word 'iconic' might be slightly overused but there's a strong case to say it's appropriate when describing some brand characters, such as Captain Birdseye or the Tetley Tea Folk. These characters became so ubiquitous that they infiltrated popular culture and became instantly



¹¹ "Characters in marketing." *The Marketer*. Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <http://www.themarketer.co.uk/analysis/trends/characters-in-marketing/>

¹² "What's in a logo?" *Marketing Week*. Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <http://www.marketingweek.co.uk/analysis/4011681.article>

recognisable to people of all ages.

This could be partly because brand characters often provoke a strong reaction in children and help to form their long-term views of the organisation behind them, while they also make brands instantly recognisable anywhere in the world. Merrie Brucks, Professor of Marketing at the University of Arizona, commented: "Children are easily persuaded through advertising techniques. The interesting part is that they don't outgrow that."¹³

How to create a brand character

The Social Media Forum Blog offers the following useful advice that companies might want to bear in mind if they are trying to develop a character to represent their brand on social media.¹⁴

- **Make brand characters believable and representative**

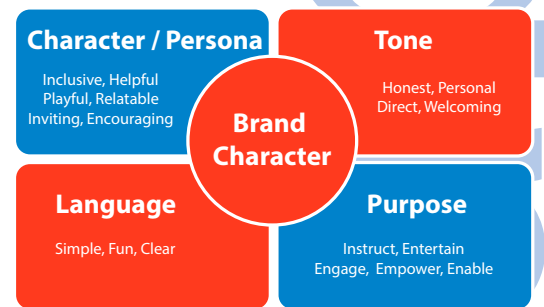
Companies make a point of defining the character traits of their customers, such as how they think and what they do. When coming up with a brand character, they "need to define themselves in the same way." What are the organisation's own traits, attributes and qualities? – and what kind of character would enable these to come across clearly?

- **Give brand characters a personality**

Create a mascot to represent your organisation that has plenty of personality. They don't have to be likeable, but they must at least be interesting and engaging.

- **Stay faithful to character traits**

A brand character will only resonate with a target audience if they act in a consistent manner. People won't buy into characters in a book or TV show if their established traits keep changing - and the same philosophy applies to a brand character. "This is especially true if you



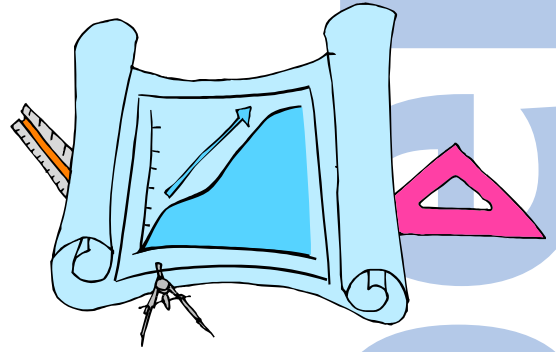
¹³ "The effects of ads that target kids shown to linger into adulthood." *The Globe and Mail*. Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/industry-news/marketing/lovable-marketing-icons-retain-their-power-into-adulthood/article17479332/>

¹⁴ "5 ways to create a character that will drive brand engagement on social media." *Social Media Forum Blog*. Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <http://www.socialmedia-forum.com/blog/2013/05/social-media/5-ways-to-create-a-character-that-will-drive-brand-engagement-on-social-media-and-5-characters-we-love/>

have a number of people managing your social media community.”

- **Be prepared to be outrageous**

A brand character gives you an opportunity to drive interest and engagement in areas that some might perceive as a bit dull or faceless. Being a bit off the wall, daring and extrovert could be a way of gaining people’s attention.



- **‘Futureproof’ your brand character**

Failing to move with the times has been known to be the downfall of brands over the years, but it’s worth remembering that consumers can become very attached to long-standing brand characters. This can cause problems for firms that are looking to relaunch their brand and change how they are perceived by their target audience, or broaden their appeal.

Cooking sauce brand Homepride had this problem recently when it went ahead with a brand relaunch, as its parent company Premier Foods had seriously considered scrapping the Fred character after half a century of service. However, focus groups reacted negatively to the idea and in the end Fred was given a reprieve.¹⁵ Helen Warren-Piper, Savoury Director at the firm, commented: “The reaction from women when we showed them the new creative was ‘where’s Fred?’”

Birds Eye also relaunched its brand recently as part of an effort to engage with a wider market - and it too decided to retain its long-standing brand character - Captain Birdseye. However, the iconic figure was slightly redesigned in the process, which meant the company was able to keep hold of part of its past, but use it in a way that demonstrates it is moving forward. Steve Chantry, UK Marketing Director at Birds Eye, explained the character was kept amid a £60 million rebranding exercise because he is still highly recognisable to consumers, with many feeling affection towards him. So be mindful that the company is likely to become closely associated with the brand character, as the company may need to stick with its mascot for many years to come.

¹⁵ “What’s in a logo?” Marketing Week, Web. 22 Dec. 2014. <http://www.marketingweek.co.uk/analysis/4011681.article>

Finally

Over the past 20 to 30 years, numerous organisations have created and developed brand characters to front their advertising campaigns. Many of the so-called household names represent large multinational organisations like Kellogg's or Virgin, but that's not to say SMEs, charities or organisations in the public sector can't create their own successful brand character. The creation and development of a brand character doesn't require a multi-million pound advertising budget. A brand character could be a lively addition to a social media campaign.



Alternatively, an organisation could create a brand character to help it diversify into a new area, or establish a presence on a media platform it has hitherto overlooked. In these circumstances, brand characters don't have to represent the entire organisation, but instead drive interest in a particular service offering or product range aimed at a particular target audience.

And finally every brand character had to start somewhere – with some time, effort and the right campaigns, you're brand character may just be the household name of the future.

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