Establishing the Spokes-Character in Academic Inquiry: Historical Overview and Framework For Definition

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ABSTRACT - A growing interest in advertising spokes-characters as product presenters suggests the need to establish a foundation for serious academic inquiry in this topic area. The issues that emerge most often when considering how to direct research efforts in this topic area are related to character definition, i.e., how a character looks and acts in an advertisement. This paper briefly documents the history and evolution of advertising spokes-characters, and outlines two criteria that separate these images from other advertising trademark symbols. A multi-dimensional framework for spokes-character definition is then presented, which provides for definition along four parameters: the physical Appearance of the character, the Medium it appears in, advertising or non-advertising Origin, and spokes-character Promotion of the product (AMOP). Topics for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Advertising characters, which made their debut in the late 1800s in the form of registered trademarks, have long been important forces in advertising strategy and American culture. As trademarks, the advertising character's main function in the early twentieth century was to distinguish one product from another in a marketplace increasingly dependent upon mass produced goods. In a 1950 advertising handbook, Rogers elaborates on this point, defining the trademark as "any device that enables a purchaser to choose the goods he prefers from among competing articles, and to discriminate against those he dislikes or knows nothing of" (p. 77).

Many trademarks were also intended to give large companies a personality that people could connect with, a sort of substitute for the familiar faces of local merchants, from whom the majority of consumer products came before mass production and transportation (Morgan 1986). Marchand (1985) notes that although consumers appreciated the benefits brought on by industrialization, they resented the accompanying "indignities of scale." Accordingly...

...advertisers gradually observed and responded to a popular demand that modern products be introduced to them in ways that gave the appearance and feel of a personal relationship. People craved opportunities, through vicarious experience, to bring products within the compass of their own human scale (p. xxi).

In the interest of establishing this personal connection with consumers, many companies created characters to use as trademarks. These characters appeared in a variety of forms, including animals, objects, mythological figures, and humans. Usually the animals and objects were personified in some way to facilitate identification with the consumer. According to Morgan, people imbued the trademarks with all that they knew or felt about the business behind them, based on reaction to the package and trademark, experience with the product, and the messages and images given by
Although ultimately responsible for selling products, it is evident that advertising characters appearing at the turn of the century played a significant role in gaining consumer trust for new products produced far from the point of purchase. In many cases consumers began to feel that they had a personal relationship with these characters, and advertisers were mindful of this advantage when developing characters to represent their brands.

Advertising characters have maintained a continuous presence in the American marketplace as product endorsers, symbols of company/brand continuity, and objects of nostalgia. During the past decade, a handful of significant campaigns have highlighted the ongoing appeal and versatility of advertising characters. For example, the successful union of Schultz’s comic strip heroes with Metropolitan Life Insurance showed advertisers that characters could be used to promote serious products and services. Advances in animation technique that brought about the success of both “Roger Rabbit” (rotoscope) and the California Raisins (claymation), also compelled advertisers to take another look at the use of spokes-characters in advertising campaigns (e.g., Gales 1987; McBride 1991; Young 1989). The resulting surge in character advertising has been fuelled even further by a rebirth in the classic animated film industry (e.g., Cole and Smilgis 1992; Pendleton 1990), the acceleration of licensed character marketing (e.g., Dallabrida 1993; Fahey 1991; Freeman and Fisher 1990), and increased attention to potential objects of baby boomer nostalgia (e.g., Barrier 1989; Garfield 1990).

Character advertising has also begun to attract attention as an avenue of academic inquiry. Stern (1988, 1990) explores the relationship between spokes-characters and allegorical figures in literary criticism. Callcott and Alvey (1991) present a spokes-character typology, which becomes the basis for research linking character type to product recall. Phillips (forthcoming) presents a different definition of advertising characters, which is adapted to a study of character meaning transfer in advertisements (Phillips 1993).

As interest in advertising characters continues to grow, the need to establish a foundation for systematic academic inquiry becomes more apparent. The issues that emerge most often when considering how to direct research efforts in this topic area are related to character definition, i.e., how a character looks and acts in an advertisement. The separate ad character definitions already presented in previous papers suggest that the foundation for ad research must include a comprehensive definition that can accommodate a variety of research perspectives. This paper attempts to provide such a definition, based on a survey of over 700 ad character images from the past century of American advertising. The majority of these images were collected from the Center for Advertising History (Smithsonian Institution) in Washington, D.C., and the American Advertising Museum in Portland, Oregon. The resulting multi-dimensional framework for ad character definition is intended to serve as both a foundation and a catalyst for future research.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN SPOKES-CHARACTER

Literature that treats the subject at allB whether from a pragmatic or historical point of view B is consistently vague about what exactly constitutes an advertising spokes-character. Simply deciding what to call the advertising character is a devilish undertaking, since “advertising character” seems too broad, and “trade character” conjures up images of a bygone era. It is in modern advertising history, when most advertising characters were registered trademarks for a brand and/or company, that the term “spokes-character” was used. Phillips (forthcoming), the term “trade character” seems slightly misleading.

Instead, the term “spokes-character” will be used in this paper, implying a relationship between imaginary advertising product endorsers and their human counterparts (spokes-persons), whose function is to speak for a product or provide some kind of visual demonstration (Stout 1990).

Technical Evolution

Part of the confusion in spokes-character definition stems from the fact that the means by which characters have been presented, along with the trademark themselves, have evolved over time. The modern spokes-character has its roots in “human-interest” illustrations and trademarks symbols used in early American advertisements. The appearance of illustration in advertising was rare until the advent of outdoor advertising posters in 1867, when the work of actual artists was “combined with advertising sense” in Europe (Presbrey 1929, p. 495). Before posters, illustrations were hampered in size and quality by the limitations of boxwood, the only wood available for woodcut reproductions. In the late 1840s, the use of pine for woodcut engraving made larger reproductions possible, and the use of human-interest illustrations evolved in outdoor advertising (Presbrey 1929). The pioneers of human-interest illustration are reportedly Macassar Oil for the hair and Nubian Blacking for boots, both English products. The Macassar ad contained a picture of a woman with hair reaching to the floor, while the Nubian ad showed a picture of a Negro grinning at his reflection in a recently polished boot. Presbrey (1929) notes that the latter picture “had an arresting quality and an interest that gave it dominance over the all-type sheets around it” (p. 484).

Another milestone in pictorial advertising occurred in 1887, when the English soap manufacturer, A. & F. Pears, used a painting of a young boy blowing soap bubbles in a magazine advertisement for Pears’ soap. The advertisement elicited more interest than the news pictures in the magazine, prompting other goods manufacturers to begin hunting art for their own advertisements. The introduction of the halftone technique for photographic reproduction in 1892 provided human-interest characters with more “naturalness and greater emotiveness” than previous line drawings and woodcut engravings could (Presbrey 1929, p. 382). Advertisers thus began to make wider use of human-interest trademarks, especially adorable child characters, to appeal to children and women (Homung and Johnson 1976).

Advances in photography, cinematography and animation had a significant impact on the way spokes-characters appeared in advertising. Spokes-characters presented via hand-drawn illustration were thus joined by live humans and animals photographed in costume or in character (e.g., Ronald McDonald and Morris the Cat). Characters were also presented via increasingly diverse methods of animation, including puppetry, stop-motion photography, rotoscope, claymation and, most recently, computer animation.

Historical Antecedents

In addition to their commercial roots as trademarks, spokes-characters owe much of their evolution to an historical fascination with personification. Personification, which is the representation of an object or creature as a person, is historically one of the most popular techniques used in the creation of advertising spokes-characters. The Michelin Man, created in France in 1897, was among the first personified spokes-characters. A host of industrially fabricated men, made of everything from paper to metal, followed in the footsteps of the man made of tires. Food and household items were also widely personified, e.g., Mr. Peanut and the Nick and Pull pencil characters. At least as popular as the personification of inanimate objects has been the personification of animals. Perhaps taking their cue from the rising popularity of comic strip and animated cartoon stars, early modern advertisers produced a number of walking pigs, rabbits, chickens and frogs, as well as employing celebrities like Buster Brown and Mickey Mouse.

Although undoubtedly sensing their appeal, the creators of the Michelin Man, Tony the Tiger, and the California Raisins may not have recognized that their creations mirrored a form of communication that has been an important part of various folklore traditions for centuries. However, a look at popular culture in various societies throughout history reveals a universal tendency to “humanize” animals, objects and concepts that are a part of everyday life. According to Gowans (1981), the pervasiveness of talking animals throughout our popular culture and commercial arts is the result of man’s roots in the past. Talking animals are common in examples of early Japanese and Western
medieval illustrations. Gowans believes these illustrations reflect a strong identity between humans and the animal kingdom in ancient times, and that "It's in part due to atavistic memories from this age that talking animals speak so effectively to our needs" (p. 205). Furthermore, Gowans asserts that "humor mouthed by animals is the safest way to assert values," because they allow us to "make jokes of what we are embarrassed to put plainly" (p.196). He notes that a good deal of traditional wisdom has been imparted by personified animals operating in cartoon worlds, where... courage, loyalty, wisdom, and shrewdness win out often enough, stupidity and wastefulness and folly regularly enough get their just rewards, for songs and stories about funny animals to display a sanity conspicuously missing from the twentieth century's controlling ideology. Such illustration therefore does for our society what illustrative arts throughout history have done B keep before populations those values and attitudes necessary and unavoidable if society is to survive, however unspeakable they may temporarily be (p.197).

In a study of animal lore in English literature, Robin (1932) maintains that animal symbolism enters into all mythologies, citing as an example the dragon, which appears in the mythologies of ancient civilizations from China to Scandinavia. He outlines three ways in which animals have been employed in literature: (1) in descriptions of animal life; (2) as types of character or disposition in analogy or contrast with human nature; and (3) as sources of simile or metaphor to illustrate the phases of human life and experience. Robin goes on to point out that while detailed descriptions of animal life are comparatively rare in literature, due to a lack of information about real animal habits,... there is a wealth of allusion to the supposed characters or dispositions of birds, beasts, and fishes. Many of these are accepted as types of human qualities, and from the dawn of literature to the present day illustrations of human virtues and vices have been drawn from animal lore. The lion has always typified strength, courage, and majesty; the fox stands for cunning, the ass and the goose for stupidity; the bee for industry and orderly government, the dove for meekness and constancy (pp.16-16).

Stern (1988) makes a similar observation concerning the supposed dispositions of animals found in advertising, noting, for example, the connection between tigers and the strength commonly attributed to them in our culture: Tigers, for example, in cereal ads (Tony the Tiger) are associated with human strength, in gasoline ads (Exxon) with car strength ("Put a tiger in your tank"), and in financial services ads (The Boston Company Special Growth Fund) with financial strength ("Grow, tiger, grow") (p.86).

Robin posits that the interpretation of the animal world inspired the fable, which we recognize today as a literary descendent of the oral stories told by many primitive peoples, most notably the Greek Aesop (circa 600 B.C.). He quotes a definition of the fable as relating an incident in which "beings irrational, and sometimes inanimate, are for the purpose of moral instruction feigned to act and speak with human interests and passions" (p. 16). Robin also points to animal use in allegory, most notably the bestiaries, in which the supposed nature of all known animals (and some imaginary ones) were described, followed by an explanation of their religious significance. He maintains that "natural history was ransacked for similes to illustrate in a mechanical way the most commonplace experiences and feelings of human nature" (p.19). In this way, animal lore was used to illustrate, compare and contrast all phases of human life.

Although the mode of transmission is far different in the modern era, using animals to illustrate human experience is still a vital element of popular culture. Personified animals such as Gertie the Dinosaur and Felix the Cat were among the first screen stars created through animation, and comic/cartoon history suggests that their popularity was due in part to human identification with character personalities. For example, in his historical analysis of the comics, Waugh (1947) concludes that "people read comics because they find themselves reflected in them," (p.335) and that "because people love to laugh at themselves, the (comic) strips are little mirrors which reflect their intimate habits and feelings..." (p.23). Similarly, Rosemond Tuve, in her book on allegorical imagery (1966), notes that the popularity of allegorical narratives hinged on peoples' tendency to see themselves in the stories:

It was clearly shared by mediaeval author and Renaissance imitator: the pleasure in pure seeing-of-similitude, taken in as immediately as an echo, while conceiving the literal story, as one sees a pebble under water with more significance than a pebble. Neither water nor pebble offers any great novelties; what pleases is merely to observe the nature of the world and correspondences one can see in it (p.10).

The human need to personify things, to give them a personality that can be identified with, extends beyond animals to abstract concepts and inanimate objects. Young children name their toys and attach personalities to them, taught to do so by Richard Scarry books and Charlotte's Web (1952), by Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel named Mary Ann (Burton 1939), The Little Engine That Could (Piper 1961), and by countless numbers of television shows, advertisements and movies that personify animals and objects in numerous fantastic ways. By the time we reach adulthood, personification is ingrained in our psyche. In addition to our pets, we name our vehicles, our plants, our guns, and even our body parts, forever seeking to relate to them on some human level.

This need to place ideas and objects on a human level dates back to ancient times, when gods were created to personify abstract concepts such as strength and love, as well as little understood natural forces like sunshine and thunder. The personification of abstract concepts, especially those having to do with virtues and vices known to mankind, was also a hallmark of medieval allegory. Allegory comes from a Greek term meaning "other-speaking," and is defined in the Random House College Dictionary as "a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms; figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another; a symbolic narrative" (p.36).

According to Lewis (1936), it is impossible to imagine the ultimate origin of allegory because "it is of the very nature of thought and language to represent what is immaterial in picturable terms "(p.44). Tuve (1966) devotes an entire chapter of her book entitled Allegorical Imagery to the debate surrounding allegorical definition, but for our purposes it is sufficient to say that allegorical communication often involves the personification of abstract concepts, such as time and nature, and conflict between these concepts (e.g., a battle between virtue and vice).

The importance of this material in understanding the function and appeal of advertising spokes-characters has recently been brought to the attention of consumer behaviorists by Barbara Stern. Stern links elements of medieval allegory B namely metaphor, personification, and moral conflict B to modern advertising strategy. She begins by making a compelling argument for the application of allegory in modern mass communication by comparing the medieval masses B "simple folk" who needed "simple lessons" in the form of allegorical moral instruction B to the modern mass market (Stern 1988). She goes on to identify two types of allegory that influence modern advertising: typology and reification (Stern 1990). The latter is of particular interest here because of its connection to personification. Reification allegory emphasizes conflict over allusion, and character over action. Personification is the main element in reification, and Stern points out that "any animal, vegetable, or mineral can be shown "behaving the way humans do" (p.18). In a personified advertisement, consumers have the opportunity to get to know oral hygiene products, household cleansers, various food items and even a few pharmaceuticals on a first name basis.

Reification may set up conflict between these characters, then highlight the brand as the solution to the problem. As an example of this application in advertising, Stern cites the now classic Aika-Seltzer commercial in which a man sits arguing with a personified version of his stomach, sitting opposite him in a chair. The man wishes to eat things which upset his stomach, and the conflict seems to defy resolution until Aika-Seltzer arrives to save the day. As demonstrated by this example, personification can serve as a humorous means of addressing...
somewhat taboo product areas, such as those dealing with human digestion and excretion.

**SPOKES-CHARACTER DEFINITION ISSUES**

From the preceding discussion, we can see that spokes-characters evolved from an interesting mixture of commercial necessity and human nature. It is also evident that advanced technology and other changes in American culture have affected spokes-character presentation since their introduction a century ago. A comprehensive definition must therefore be flexible enough to accommodate the diversity found among 100 years of spokes-character advertising. The proposed Framework for Spokes-Character Definition (Table 1) attempts to fill this prescription by providing four parameters for character definition: the physical Appearance of the character, the Medium it appears in, advertising or non-advertising Origin, and spokes-character Promotion of the product (AMOP). Spokes-characters may be defined along all four parameters, or on any combination of parameters that is desired for research purposes.

**TABLE 1**

**FRAMEWORK FOR SPOKES-CHARACTER DEFINITION**

Although this framework strives to be inclusive, there are two criteria that must be met for an advertising image to be considered a "spokes-character" within the AMOP parameters. First, a character must be used consistently in conjunction with the product it advertises. This excludes figures that appear in advertising as illustrations or graphic devices for a single ad or campaign. Secondly, the spokes-character must have a recognizable "character" or "persona." Webster's defines "character" as "a distinctive trait, quality, or attribute." This means that an image must have an explicit personality or nature that is easily perceived by consumers.

Several abstract human figures used as logos and graphic devices fail to qualify as spokes-characters using this criterion. Smith (1993) devotes an entire book to the study of FLMs (Funny Little Men) popular in American advertising during the 1940s. Although their form was generally recognized by consumers as humorous, the lack of a recognized persona limits consumer involvement with several of these figures, thus creating a different dynamic from that created by spokes-characters. The exclusion of these figures is not to deny that consumers become attached to these images as well as to characters used in advertising (consider, for example, the nostalgic appeal of the Coke bottle). While commercial images of all types can promote product recognition, ad recall, and even gain nostalgic appeal, spokes-characters are unique in that they provide consumers with the opportunity to identify with a specific persona. Therefore, we would argue that commercial figures not meeting the above criteria of ad continuity and personality should be studied as symbols and not as "characters."

**Appearance**

Although spokes-characters have appeared in a mind-boggling array of forms, a basic distinction can be made between human and nonhuman spokes-characters. Fictitious Human spokes-characters may be pictured realistically through illustration or less so through caricature. Notable among realistic depictions are the Quaker Oats man, Betty Crocker, and the Morton Salt Girl. Although photography made it possible to present live versions of these characters long ago, their images have consistently been updated via illustration instead. One reason for this choice of presentation may be the desire to present ideals that "real" humans could not adequately represent. For example, General Mills' Betty Crocker, whose face appeared for the first time in 1936, was created to be the perfect picture of domesticity. Although Betty's image has since been updated five times, a public relations manager at General Mills points out that she has always been a reflection of the American homemaker. The use of illustration enables Betty to be "everywoman," that is, a composite of the female employees at General Mills, and of women all over America (Kapnick 1992). It also allows Betty's image, enhanced by consumer imagination, to remain untarnished through several generations. As one employee at the Madison Avenue agency Wells, Rich, Greene, says: "Betty was created to have exactly the qualities she's supposed to have. She's perfect" (Kapnick 1992, p. D1). The introduction of a real person in the role of Betty Crocker might conflict with existing consumer perceptions of this spokes-character.

Many human spokes-characters have also been presented in the form of caricatures, with the intent of producing more attractive and/or humorous characterization: ethnic figures (e.g., the Gold Dust twins), old men (e.g., Sunny Jim), and children (e.g., the Campbell Kids). Webster's (1983, p. 275) defines caricature as "the deliberately distorted picturing or imitating of a person, literary style, etc. by exaggerating features or mannerisms for satirical effect." Far from being unpleasant, the distortion of human characteristics often helps endear the character to the consumer in some way. The physical features that make personified animals and objects attractive, in particular those that render characters childlike, often make human caricatures more attractive to consumers as well.

Actors have also been used to further a spokes-character's image. Before the advent of television, several versions of Buster Brown and his dog Tige toured the country promoting the Brown Shoe Company (Company pamphlet), and Aunt Jemima was personified from her conception into the 1960s by three generations of African-American women (Marquette 1967). More recently, Kool-Aid, Ronald McDonald and the Fruit-of-the-Loom Guys populate our television sets. Less costume-dependent personalities of our era include Madge (Palmolive), the Maytag Repairman, and Mr. Whipple (Charmin bathroom tissue).

Non-Human spokes-characters fall into one of three categories: Animals, Mythical beings, or Product Personifications. The degree of personification in animal spokes-characters varies widely, and can best be pictured on a continuum. Tony the Tiger, Smokey Bear and Joe Camel are among the most personified animal characters in that they closely resemble humans in their speech and/or behavior. Among the least personified is the Cat, a real cat that has been given a specific personality that allows consumers to relate to him. Non-personified animals like the Bon Ami chick and the Sinclair dinosaur, are generally used because they possess well-known qualities that advertisers wish to associate with their products. For example, the Bon Ami chick is perceived as soft and gentle, qualities that the advertisers wish to associate with their cleansing powder, while the Sinclair Refining Company chose a brontosaurus "to dramatize the age and mellowness" of the crude oil they refined.

Mythical-spokes-characters hail from a variety of literary and folklore traditions, and include giants (Green Giant), elves (Keebler), fairies (Coca-Cola's Sprite), mermaids (Chicken of the Sea tuna), genies (Mr. Clean), vampires (Count Chocula) and even Big Foot (Pizza Hut). Occasionally, mythical beings are created specifically for a product, as in the case of Kellogg's Big Mixx cereal, which featured "the legendary chicken/wolf/moose/pig of Yakima Valley."

Product Personification can take the form of the product, itself, or of some product-relevant concept. Modern food and household cleanser personifications like the California Raisins and the Dow Scrubbing Bubbles are the descendents of Mr. Peanut, created in 1916, and the Oxydol "Hustle-Bubble Suds," appearing in the 1940s. Product-relevant personifications B including the product's packaging or unique selling proposition B also have a long history in advertising. One of the most technologically advanced packaging personifications stars an heroic Listerine bottle that battles gum disease in a number of venues. After its boxing ring debut, the computer animated Listerine champion swung through a forest a la Tarzan, and most recently donned Robin Hood gear complete with bow and arrow to skewer plaque and gingivitis. Listerine's packaging predecessors include a dapper Clorox bottle in top hat and spats (circa 1940) and a looming bottle of Raid that sprays himself on hapless insects in Raid commercials (circa 1956). Examples of personified product-relevant concepts include the Domino's Pizza Noid (a personification of cold pizza that Dominos consistently foils) and the Glad-Lock Zipper finger, which personifies the bags' convenient closing mechanism.
The second parameter for spokes-character definition relates to the medium through which these characters are presented to the public. There are four basic media through which spokes-characters connect with consumers: print, film, radio and merchandise. As discussed above, spokes-characters appearing in print may be in the form of illustrations (realistic or caricature), or photographs. Spokes-characters appearing on film may be brought to life by some form of animation (cel, computer, stop-motion, etc.), puppetry, or live-action. Puppetry can be mechanized (e.g., the Energizer Bunny and Duracell robots) or hand-driven (e.g., the Hamburger in McDonald-Land or the Zip-Lock Finger puppets). Live-action spokes-characters include humans and animals in costumes or in character (e.g., Ronald McDonald or Morris the Cat).

Although not a visual purveyor of spokes-character imagery, radio has created its share of advertising personas, as well as contributing to the personas of existing characters. Betty Crocker was the star of daytime radio’s first cooking show, which debuted in 1924 (“The Story of Betty Crocker”). Betty’s subsequent radio performance in the 1950s network program, “Time for Betty Crocker,” proved more popular than her concurrent television appearances, perhaps because consumers preferred to create their own visual image of “America’s First Lady of Food” (Heighton and Cunningham 1976). The key to distinguishing between radio personalities and actual radio spokes-characters is whether or not the character survives independent of the announcer. One 1946 advertising handbook notes that “if an outside representative is employed (to represent a store), it is well to give a fictitious name that becomes the property of the store, to prevent the announcer’s taking to another employer any personal following built up” (McCormick, Everest and Bartlett 1946). In this way, announcers create a radio persona instead of achieving their own celebrity.

Finally, it is important to recognize the continuing popularity of spokes-character merchandise, which proliferates through promotional premiums and licensing. Several books have been written about the collectibility of advertising character merchandise, which became popular at the turn of the century with numerous Buster Brown and Campbell Kids products. Today, an entire catalog is devoted to Joe Camel merchandise, the Energizer Bunny offers beach towels and boxer shorts in his 1994 calendar, and members of the Dew Scrubbing Bubbles Tub Club can order a range of bathroom accessories (from towels to a shower radio) featuring the cherubic Scrubbing Bubbles. Although not advertising per se, merchandise featuring spokes-characters helps strengthen consumer awareness of the character, and presumably the brand. spokes-character premiums are perhaps better at promoting brand awareness than other forms of licensed merchandise since proofs of purchase are often required in order to obtain them.

Because of the prevalence of character licensing, it is important to differentiate between a spokes-character licensed to endorse a product and a character licensed to appear on a product. According to Stout (1990), an endorsement requires a visual demonstration or verbal testimonial from the personality. Therefore, Bart Simpson and the California Raisins are not spokes-characters for T-shirts and lunch boxes just because they appear on them. Rather, Bart is a spokes-character for Butterfinger candy bars, a product he actually touts, while the Raisins are spokes-characters for the California Raisin Board.

Origin

Spokes-characters can be further defined as having an advertising or non-advertising origin. Like their human counterparts, characters with a non-advertising origin can be classified as celebrities, that is, their notability is achieved through movies, comic strips and television, where they develop well-known personalities that can later be readily associated with a product. Examples of celebrity spokes-characters include Garfield for Embassy Suites and Alpo; Bugs Bunny for Holiday Inn and Astro World; and the Peanuts characters for Metropolitan Life Insurance. These characters are already widely known, and therefore may have many of the same characteristics as human celebrity endorsers, including the ability to attract attention and create a positive association for a product through a popular personality.

Non-celebrity spokes-characters are those characters with an advertising origin, that is, they were originally created strictly for advertising purposes. Exploratory research indicates that non-celebrity spokes-characters may be more effective than their celebrity counterparts because the identity they provide for a product belongs only to that product (Callcott and Alvey 1991). This eliminates the problem of character overexposure and subsequent consumer confusion over which product a popular celebrity character endorses. Instead, non-celebrity characters become almost “as one” with a product through repeated exposure over the years, often earning the support and trust of the American population.

Both celebrity spokes-characters and celebrity humans are related in that they provide ready-made images that advertisers borrow, with hopes of transferring something positive about that image to their products. In contrast, non-celebrity characters must be imbued with their own brand-appropriate image, preferably something that consumers find appealing, relevant to the product or company, and/or trustworthy.

Promotion

A final parameter for spokes-character definition concerns the way in which spokes-characters promote a product. Active promotion of the product involves speaking for the product or demonstrating the product in some way. Characters shown using the product (e.g., the Energizer Bunny and Joe Camel) or presenting it to the consumer (e.g., the Pink Panther for Owens-Corning insulation) qualify as active promoters even if they never utter a word on behalf of the product.

Passive promotion of the product is more symbolic in nature. For example, the Uneeda Biscuit Slicker Boy was created in 1889 to symbolize Uneeda’s revolutionary moisture-proof packaging (Morgan 1986). The Morton Salt girl symbolizes the salt’s unique selling proposition: that it won’t become sticky in humidity (thus, “When it rains it pours”). The modern Quaker Oats Man lends only his countenance to advertising for Quaker Oats, symbolizing both the product’s wholesomeness and its longevity.

It is important to note that the degree of activity a spokes-character exhibits can change over time. Many well-known advertising spokes-characters have moved back and forth between active promotion of a product and symbolic representation of tradition and continuity. The Quaker Oats man and Betty Crocker both actively promoted their products for many years before retiring to iconic status. The Campbell Kids and Elsie the Cow (both currently active) have also moved between active promotion and symbolic appearances on packaging and on the bottom of advertisements. This cycle may help to prevent character wear-out, while at the same time preserving consumer relationships with the characters.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The use of spokes-characters as product presenters is a topic area rich enough to sustain numerous research efforts aimed at understanding the character’s relationship to consumers and to the various products they promote. Key to the development of research in this area is the definition of advertising spokes-characters, which have been presented in numerous ways during the past century. Pursuit of an understanding of the spokes-character has potential to contribute to several areas of consumer behavior research, including source credibility, product involvement, nostalgia and symbolism.

The evolution and continued use of spokes-characters in advertising is indicative of an appeal that transcends changing consumer lifestyles and advertising trends. Although few research efforts have targeted the spokes-character directly, a number of studies provide clues to their
appeal. Advertising research has concluded that positive attitudes toward advertising can lead to positive attitudes toward the brand (Lutz, MacKenzie and Belch 1983; Shimp 1981). Spokes-characters have also been linked to various forms of positive affect, including attractive colors and shapes (Lawrence 1986), humor (Kelly and Solomon 1975) and nostalgia (Stern 1988). Future research should include further exploration of the affective components of spokes-characters.

In addition, most of the research that addresses spokes-characters directly, has been concerned with their effects on youth (Hoy, Young and Mowen 1986; Van Auken and Lonial 1985). Very little research has explored the relationship between advertising spokes-characters and adult consumers, and the use of characters in trade advertising has never been examined. However, it is evident that spokes-characters have always had some appeal for adult consumers. An historical survey of spokes-characters reveals a number of industrial product personifications likely to have been used in trade publications (Callcott 1993). In addition, Callcott and Lee (forthcoming) find evidence that animated spokes-characters are appearing in television commercials aimed at adult audiences. Spokes-character relationships to various target audiences can be examined using content analysis of selected media containing characters, or by using established methods for measuring audience response. Cognitive responses to spokes-character advertising may lend weight to speculation about spokes-character impact on consumer attention and memory.

The four parameters presented here serve as a guide for focusing on key differences in spokes-characters, with respect to both consumer response and advertising effectiveness. For example, a previous study using spokes-character origin found that spokes-characters with an advertising origin elicited 70% correct product recall, while characters with a non-advertising origin elicited only 30% correct product recall (Callcott and Alvey 1991). A future study along the first two AMOP parameters (Appearance and Medium) might examine differences in consumer perception of human vs. non-human spokes-characters. It is possible that people respond differently to human characters in costume or in persona than to more fantastic animal and product personifications. Experts in both animation and advertising have alluded to the "suspension of disbelief" that allows people to accept product claims made by animated presenters (Baldwin 1982; Crafton 1982, White 1981). The degree to which suspension of disbelief mediates consumer acceptance of human vs. non-human characters and their product claims is a promising area for further study.

It is also likely that spokes-character success is in part product-dependent. The recent controversy surrounding Joe Camel indicates that many consumers feel it is inappropriate for spokes-characters to promote certain products. Even if "appropriateness" is not an issue, there may be differences in the types of products successfully promoted by spokes-characters versus other creative approaches. Furthermore, determining which spokes-character types work best for different products would be valuable insight for both advertisers and advertising practitioners. Several studies have reported on the significance of product/endorser congruence (e.g., DeSarbo and Harshman 1985; McCracken 1989). Future research might examine whether the same source effects apply to spokes-characters.

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