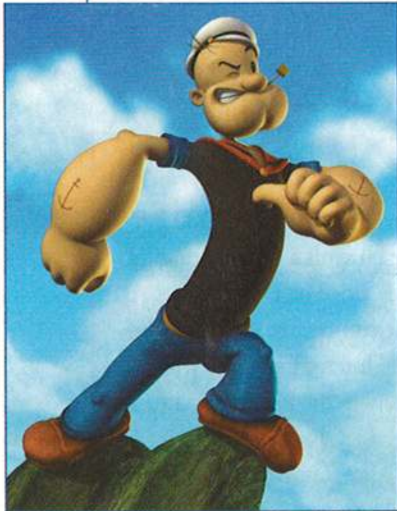
Character Longevity

Behind every character there's a story, a lifeline, and an image. Here's why you should keep that in mind.

The corner of Madison and Vine is littered with the bones of characters whose handlers thought they could "contemporize" them to make them more relevant. But managing a fictional character is a lot like managing a live celebrity (without all the back-talk). The key, as always, is understanding what story the character is living in, and the first lesson is that relevance is more about how a character looks at things than about how a character looks.



Take Popeye, for example. Popeye the Sailor is old, crusty, and almost inarticulate. He has been that way from the moment he was born, more than 75 years ago. Nevertheless, sometime in the 1980s Popeye's handlers started to worry that modern kids would never identify with a crusty old codger. So they developed a Saturday morning show called *Popeye and Son* that gave Popeye a jaunty new cap and Olive a pastel sweat suit and switched the focus to their teenage son, a bland, pretty surfer dude. The show died before the end of its first season, even as the original black-and-white Popeye cartoons continued to attract a loyal audience on late-night television. Turns out that a feisty little guy torn between his thirst for adventure and his loyalty to his odd, unconventional family on shore struck a much deeper chord with the audience than the pretty surfer dude.

That conflict between loyalty and adventure is at the heart of Popeye's story. In fact, the story framework of any effective character is built around that kind of conflict—a conflict that connects the audience to a fundamental human truth. The conflict is what brings energy to the story. As long as the managers of a character continue to tap into that energy, the character's equity bank will continue to grow. Compare the long-lasting success of the M&Ms characters with the blockbuster success and rapid flameout of the California Raisins. Both groups of characters were brought to life by the same animators and there are many similarities with regard to characterization and performance, but they have been managed quite differently.

The M&Ms characters want to be the center of attention. This is most evident in Red, a little guy with a Napoleon complex. To Red's everlasting dismay, this objective is in conflict with his nature. Since he is, in fact, delicious candy-covered chocolate, when people do notice him, they want to eat him, forcing him to run away. His quest to become the center of attention has to start all over again. The story framework of the M&Ms seems to be grounded in the observation that we want things that are bad for us, a truth that is very relevant to chocolate as a category. This is not something you would expect consumers to feed back to you in a focus group, but it is a truth that resonates, solidifying M&Ms' emotional relationship with its audience and giving its advertising an aura of authenticity. M&Ms licensing is congruent with this story framework. If you shop the Web for M&Ms merchandise you find items such as nightlights, lamps, clock radios, and candy dish telephones—all designed to fit the story of characters desperate to call attention to themselves.

The current incarnation of the M&Ms characters was developed in 1995 by the New York-based office of BBDO. Within three years, *BrandWeek* reported that topline sales were up by $250 million, and 10 years from the launch of the campaign the characters are still going strong. By contrast, the California Raisins peaked early and crashed within four years. They debuted in early October 1986, a conga line of Claymation Raisins dancing to Marvin Gaye's "I Heard It Through the

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Grapevine." By Halloween, kids all over the country were costumed in large garbage bags trying to dance like the Raisins. The advertising problem addressed by this campaign was the perception that young consumers thought of raisins as a very uncool snack. The success of the campaign was based on the fact that these dancing Claymation Raisins were unexpectedly cool, and it was precisely the conflict inherent in that phrase that gave energy to the Raisins' story. No voiceover announcer said, "Raisins are now cool," but somehow in their characterization as three-dimensional animated characters they were cool. And the fact that such odd, almost repulsive-looking characters nevertheless could be cool was at the heart of their story.

In the end, however, it was the licensing program that killed the California Raisins. In the first couple of years, licenses were sold for every conceivable kind of merchandise, most of which could not remotely be described as cool. Raisin images were everywhere, and overnight the characters seemed to go from unexpected to ubiquitous—taking all the energy out of their story.

In thinking about the management of fictional characters, we find it useful to distinguish between characters and icons. A character has a role in a living, unfolding story. An icon is an image that reminds you of a story you already have heard. The licensing business trades heavily in icons, but not every use of a licensed character is iconic—it depends entirely on whether the use of the character advances the story or merely reminds you of a story you already are familiar with. Much of the M&Ms licensed merchandise adds to their story, albeit in small, subtle ways, while the bulk of the Raisin paraphernalia was purely exploitative.

Mickey Mouse and Winnie the Pooh, two of Disney's most visible characters, provide a fascinating contrast between icon and character. Pooh's never-ending struggle between what he wants to do—driven by his insatiable appetite—and what he thinks he ought to do has powered his stories for many generations. His conflict is voiced primarily for very young children, but it resonates deeply for every age. It is the source of his timeless appeal. Mickey, on the other hand, used to have an engaging conflict, but since the 1950s he has been the corporate symbol for the Walt Disney Company. In that role, he is almost pure icon. The only energy powering his story comes from the connections people make—positive and negative—with the Disney Company itself.

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When we talk about story in connection with licensed characters, it is important to remember that the storytelling does not always have to take a narrative form. Design is a key storytelling tool, and the most successful designs convey the energy of the underlying conflict and hint at the meaning of the story in an engaging way. The images of Popeye suggest a character that is both crusty and lovable. The Raisins, in their original Claymation design, communicated cool in an unexpected way (although the images used for licensed merchandise managed to miss both energies). In this regard, it is interesting that Betty Boop remains a successful licensed property, even though virtually none of the teenage girls wearing Betty Boop T-shirts has seen any Betty Boop cartoons. Nevertheless, the story tension between sexuality and innocence is what captures consumers. Betty Boop managers have been very clear about maintaining the integrity of that story in all of the forms in which the character appears.

At the end of the day, I don't wear a T-shirt with an image of Popeye or Mickey Mouse or SpongeBob because I think the character looks like me. I am drawn to an image of a character because the image suggests a story that resonates with me—a story built around a universal conflict I identify with at some deep level. If the guardian of a character understands that story, then the character can be managed for a long, happy, and valuable life. ©

The opinion presented in this article is that of David Altschul, president of Character LLC, a Portland, OR-based firm that creates and revitalizes brand characters.