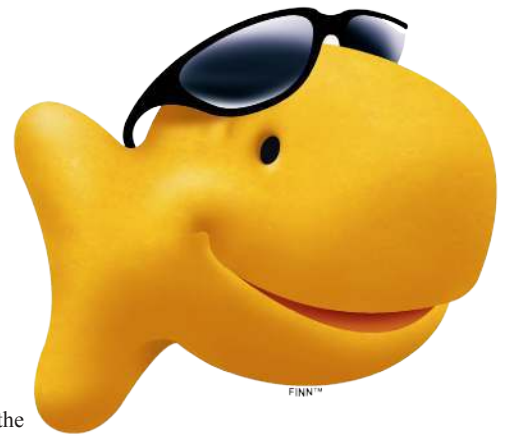


Local company gives corporate icons the lives their creators never imagined

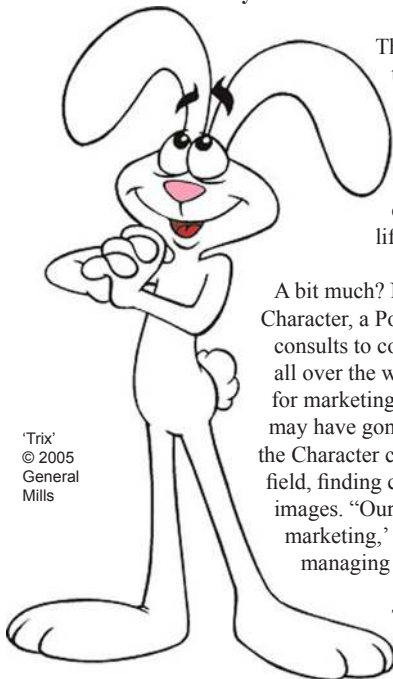


Character study

By PETER KORN

The Tribune

Take a minute to think about the Trix Rabbit. Not easy, mind you. He's just an advertising image, a means to sell cereal to children, a character without a story.



'Trix'
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The people at General Mills Inc. think there's more to the rabbit than that. He's been to camp. He's got an entire book written about him, 80 pages detailing his personality, his surroundings, his conflicts — what he wants out of life. Besides cereal, of course.

A bit much? Not if you ask the people at Character, a Portland-based company that consults to corporate giants (and miniatures) all over the world, helping develop characters for marketing, and making over old icons that may have gone a little stale. Along the way the Character crew has invented a marketing field, finding complex stories behind marketing images. "Our ambition is to change the face of marketing," says Brian Lanahan, Character's managing director.

They've got a good start. In a different age, Lanahan, David Altschul and Jim Hardison, the owners of Character, would be

writing novels or screenplays. And yes, if you ask, they do have a couple of those in closets at home. But this is the United States in the 21st century, where even storytellers find their inspiration in commerce. And the pay is a lot better this way.

These guys aren't writing advertising slogans or catchy commercial jingles. They're writing books — books about the Pillsbury Doughboy and the M&M candies and even Finn, the Goldfish cracker symbol. Books that never go on sale but help corporations discover a bit about their own stories.

The origins of the Character story are found, not surprisingly, at the old (Will) Vinton Studios in Northwest Portland. In 1997 Altschul, a bearded 60-year-old who looks a bit like the University of Chicago history and economics scholar he once was, created the Character Development Lab as a separate Vinton unit. Altschul's interest was story, not design.

Other people had created the famous California Raisins, which rocketed the Vinton Studios to center stage in the advertising and production worlds. For a while the Raisins were cultural icons, and all they were supposed to do was sell dried fruit, dancing conga style to Marvin Gaye's version of "I

Heard It Through the Grapevine."

But the Raisins' popularity and lasting appeal wasn't due to the song or even the clever idea of little dried grapes with rhythm. The raisins had personality, loads of it. Each Raisin was distinctive. Together they were cool without trying, conflict personified. Where there's conflict, there's story, and that's what Character tries to capture and bottle for all of its clients.

Eventually Altschul's lab had to mature and gain independence from Vinton's studio, because that's how stories happen. In Character's case, the breakaway began in summer 2000 when the creative team took on Old Lonely. That's the name of the Maytag repairman, who, in the commercials, was forced into irrelevance by the dependability of Maytag washers and dryers.

Altschul had been trying to arrange a meeting at what's known in the advertising industry as the Burnett critter shop. Leo Burnett, a Chicago-based advertising agency, pioneered the use of characters for brand names. As it turned out, Maytag knew Old Lonely had a problem, and they called Altschul about a solution. Sort of like therapy for an imaginary person. Only the therapists, in this case, came equipped with a gun, also imaginary.

For 30 years Old Lonely had epitomized dependability to the American public. But in 2000 dependability didn't sell — innovation did. Maytag had been trying to present itself as an innovative brand but, afraid to ditch Old Lonely altogether, they had resorted to using him at the end of commercials that weren't even about him.

So what does an American corporation do when nobody wants to take responsibility for a hard decision and a major change in strategy? It brings in consultants, of course. Altschul's assignment, he says, was to "re-invent the lonely Maytag repairman to stand for innovation, or kill him."

Old Lonely, resuscitated

Altschul headed to Chicago with On Your Feet, a Portland improv troupe that led 10 Maytag and Burnett executives through a series of role-playing games. "Character is revealed through conflict," Altschul explains, reciting what every budding novelist knows. And in that room, with executives playing word games and improvising sketches, the conflict surfaced quickly: dependability and innovation were at odds, and Old Lonely was miserable because of it.

The solution was a new ad campaign in which Old Lonely had a companion, a bright, young, innovative apprentice. Now the focus becomes the conflict between the two repairmen, and a more human story plays itself out on the screen. And if people connect with that story, Maytag sells more washers and dryers.



'Lucky'
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The Maytag campaign brought the creative team of Altschul, Lanahan and Hardison together and started them thinking about forming their own company. The split from Vinton Studios came in about April 2002, when the three partners agreed to purchase the separate Character unit from Vinton Studios and make it their own company. They finished making payments to Vinton Studios last month.

The Character offices on Northwest Overton Street are more sedate than what the trappings all around suggest it might be. After all, there are pictures of Tony the Tiger and the Cheetos Cheetah on a wall in back, and statues of Popeye and Olive Oyl and Brutus and the Pillsbury Doughboy set on a windowsill. All this manic, comic marketing energy, kept under wraps. The back wall posters include the faceless running man from AOL. He's probably the least publicly defined of any of Character's characters, but like the rest, he's got a story. In 2003 the Character crew took him to camp.

Grown-ups head to camp

The idea of camp is central to the Character business model. Once a month they put creative and executive representatives from a company through two days of drills similar to what the Maytag and Burnett people experienced. Storytelling is the focus, each participant telling stories from their own lives and offering insights into the company brand. On the last day, a 15-page synopsis explains what was learned about the company, its brand and its character, and within 10 weeks the complete character book is sent.

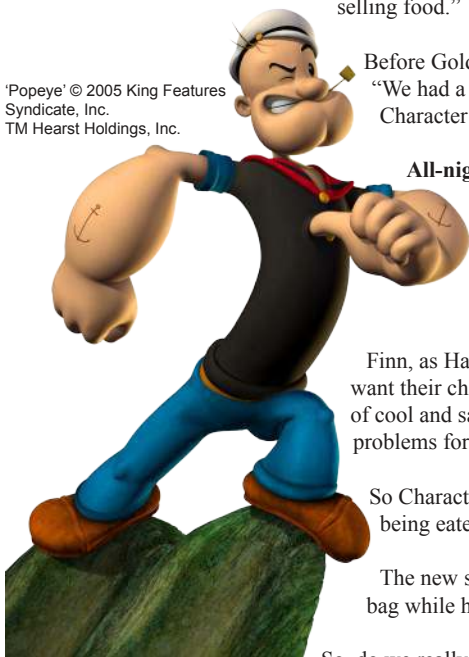
Camp is fun and games, acting and discovery. In the last few years Character has produced camps at an 800-year-old estate outside London, in a Quonset hut off Shark Beach in Australia and at the teahouse in Portland's Japanese Garden.

Camp is not "12 people sitting around a table arguing about the size of a nose," Altschul says. That's what the people at Character hate. They don't want to talk about the size of Tony the Tiger's nose. They want to talk about the size of his ego. They believe that consumers connect with advertising characters the same way we connect with family members or the hero of a fine novel. Even little Finn the Goldfish has an environment and friends and conflict.

Altschul has seen plenty of marketing managers cringe. Especially when he brings up the part about conflict. Conflict to sell crackers, the most basic of comfort foods? Conflict involves confusion. Crackers are about, well, a quick snack.

Connie Olsen, director of brand development and communications for Pepperidge Farm, begs to differ. She's a Character convert, having attended the Goldfish camp. "What we want to do is build a brand that has a strong connection with consumers," she says. "It's more about brand building than about selling food."

'Popeye' © 2005 King Features Syndicate, Inc.
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Before Goldfish camp, Olsen hadn't thought much about story. "We never had a character before," Olsen says. "We had a picture on a package." And Finn's picture had sunglasses over his eyes. Take a look at Finn in the post-Character camp ads, and you'll see the shades parked on his little fishy forehead. You'll also see he has a story.

All-nighters put it together

Jim Hardison, who is 40 but, appropriately for someone who works with cartoons, looks as if he hasn't aged in a decade or two, is Character's creative director. He's the one who stays up all night before the last day of camp. The improv and role-playing are finished, and he's got to synthesize what has been discovered in 15 pages by morning.

Finn, as Hardison recalls, came to Character camp without a name and looking a little remote. "Most companies want their characters to be flawless superheroes," he says. "We suggested this character would be a lot better if instead of cool and savvy he becomes vulnerable and worried. He is, after all, a delicious cracker, which could cause some problems for him."

So Character suggested that Finn become self-aware. "An entire school of Goldfish Zen masters have no problem being eaten as snacks, but Finn isn't ready to go that route just yet," Hardison says.

The new series of Goldfish ads has Finn trying on disguises, avoiding the "flavor blaster" and escaping the plastic bag while his piscatory buddies head off to meet their fates.

So, do we really buy crackers because of an emotional connection? Well, are Goldfish better tasting than any other cheddar cracker? Probably not. But Goldfish are what people buy year after year.

Olsen of Pepperidge Farms is convinced. "We learned about those human truths that connect people to brands," she says.

Forget spinach, try stability

Popeye is another character who has undergone Character analysis. About 80 percent of Character's consults involve figures who already exist. Popeye turned 75 this year. And frankly, he had begun to look it. With the exception of a Robin Williams movie and a brief attempt at a television show in the '80s that had Popeye outfitted in a jogging suit, all the Popeye cartoons were produced decades ago.

Superficially, Popeye is in conflict with Brutus for Olive Oyl. Pretty basic stuff. But in Character camp, Popeye was discovered to be a thoroughly modern character. He's a single dad balancing his family life with work. He wants to fulfill his destiny at sea, but he's got Sweet Pea to care for and somewhere deep inside he wants a stable home for himself and his son. Sure, Olive Oyl takes care of Sweet Pea when Popeye goes to work, but what's that about, anyway? Character helped figure out Popeye's story. A new Popeye show is in the works, Hardison says.



'Poppin' Fresh'
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Though the people at Character believe there is a story to be found in every company, not every company is necessarily right for Character. Managing Director Lanahan, 46, is the company's go-between, the guy who coordinates the work of the storytellers with the marketing people at ad agencies and corporations. He worked for years at the Coca-Cola Co. but grew disenchanted with classic marketing, "looking at consumers as lab rats," in his words. He says Character has been approached by a cigarette company but wasn't interested. "No matter what we did, it wouldn't change the fundamental business they're in."

Telling stories. That's the business Character is in. And if they don't like the story, they don't have to tell it.

Personalities, complexes put human touch in icons

Character can boast an impressive list of clients: Snap, Crackle and Pop from Kellogg's Rice Krispies, Tony the Tiger, Pillsbury Doughboy, Popeye, Maytag, M&M's.

Not to mention Mr. Clean, the Three Musketeers, the Foster Farms chickens, and Sonny for Cocoa Puffs. The goal is always to establish a character that will imprint itself in the public's consciousness so firmly that it becomes part of our culture. Here's a short version of Creative Director Jim Hardison's marketing Hall of Fame:

M&M's: "They're funny and engaging," Hardison says. "Red is the center of the story. Napoleon complex."

Trix Rabbit: "He's an underdog character. It's difficult to create a character where you don't let him get what he wants and still have him going for 40 years."

Popeye: "Brutus is huge, and Popeye is this little pipsqueak who's going to stand up for what he believes in. He never backs down for what he thinks is right."

Pillsbury Doughboy: "He's sort of a grown-up baby."

Snap, Crackle and Pop: Character suggested more depth for the threesome, but Kellogg's hasn't yet incorporated the suggestions. "Their job is to be fun, and they're very serious about it," Hardison says.



Character men (from left) Brian Lanahan, David Altschul and Jim Hardison cavort with some of their charges, including the Foster Farms chicken, the Pillsbury Doughboy and Popeye. Who knew the latter simply craved a stable home for himself and Sweet Pea?

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