

Using licensed characters to promote products to children

Not exactly child's play!

says Bryan Urbick, CEO of **Consumer Knowledge Centre**

It is nothing new for companies to use licensed characters to promote their products to children. However, since the 'world of children' landscape changes constantly, companies looking to use iconic characters to promote their products will need to maintain an in depth understanding of the market place if they are to be successful.

Consumer Knowledge Centre's research work involves children from as young as 18 months, and our research consistently shows that in order to build success using brand characters, marketers must develop meaningful stories that connect the brand values, personality and message with the character. When utilising familiar characters from television, film, or even other new media such as video games, it is important to build similar connections, but with existing stories and experiences from the original media.

Provided each is done in a way that is particularly relevant to the target audience and gives them a new and different experience of the licensed property, it will enhance the success of the product. Equally, it is essential to develop (for brand characters) or emphasise (for licensed character properties) personality traits that truly connect to and deliver a brand's core message.

In the past, mere recognition of iconic characters would often have been enough to guarantee success of a product. That has changed. From our work globally we have identified five 'tiers' with regard to the use of licensed properties with branded products. These include:

'Logo slap'

This is the use of characters on products merely to get 'kid pull'. The market is rife with numerous examples of this, and these types of products tend to go out of market as quickly as they come in. Parents frequently resent them because they often end up buying products the child begs for, only

to find interest is quickly lost and they do not get good value from the product. This approach may uplift sales in the short term but can often generate bad feelings and does not enhance the brand experience in the long term.

Promotional use

Characters and properties are used for a particular promotional reason (usually when a film is released for example) and often have some give-away that is character or property related. It's a somewhat old fashioned way of promoting products and parents may or may not like them, depending on whether or not they were going to purchase the product anyway. Kids often pester parents to buy the product simply because they want the enclosed toy or link with the property.

Once purchased, the kids then ignore the product. This leads to parent resentment and cynicism, particularly if they have to pay a premium for the product. With food and beverage products in particular, this practise has been highly ridiculed in recent years predominantly because of the obesity issue.



Character integrated products command a premium position

Character affected products

The packaging or product shape is changed, or the character is evident on the product.

Good examples are Lego Fruit snacks in North America (using the iconic Lego shape), Rev W V Awdry's Thomas the Tank Engine pasta in the UK, and Colgate's toothbrushes that have the character shaped handles. The shape adds excitement for the kids and enhances the eating or usage experience. Parents often use these types of products to entice young children to engage in certain foods or categories and the general acceptance is relatively high.

Character related

A nuance shift for character affected categories, these have some relationship with the character or property and tend to have a more natural fit and a stronger chance of success.

Sports equipment with LazyTown's Sportacus is a good example of character relationship. Not only do children see Sportacus having fun and therefore readily relate to the product, parents also view this favourably since it encourages



Bryan Urbick

their kids to get out and play. Dora the Explorer with Spanish tuition is another good example. Again, great take up by the kids and full support from the parents.

Character integrated

Probably the most effective and likely to be longer lasting. This can be a combination of 'character affected' and 'character related' categories but also include an extra layer of uniqueness that makes the product distinctive. They are particularly valuable in the food and beverage sectors. Sportacus Sports Candy from LazyTown is a good example. Sportacus encourages the kids of LazyTown to eat fruit and vegetables which he calls 'sports candy'. With character integrated products parents do not seem too bothered by having to pay a premium because they know that the products they are purchasing will achieve their objectives.

Whether a product is new to market or a relaunch of an existing brand the use of licensed property characters can have a huge impact on market share and profitability. Marketers should aim to avoid the Logo Slap and Promotional categories if they want the best and most enduring use of their licensed characters. Equally, understanding how to effectively reach an ever changing young target audience is crucial to obtaining the financial returns expected from their investment. ■