



Expanding Brand Design with Animated Character Mascots



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ABSTRACT This article suggests that expanding the teaching of brand identity for graphic design students to include animated brand mascots is a need for a future-ready curriculum. Looking at the current brand design curriculum and comparing it against the expansive digital channels that brands now leverage for engagement with their audiences, current trends in the industry require students to have the opportunity to showcase innovative connection strategies with audiences through the execution of animated characters that act as brand ambassadors. As brands look for more inventive ways to make deep and meaningful connections with their audiences through digital content, animated brand mascots can serve as creative solutions that personify and visualize the brand's personality. An exploration of this unique brand expansion touchpoint can offer graphic design students a rare competency that demonstrates their understanding of brand strategy with the use of motion design.

Keywords: motion graphics, graphic design, brand design, adobe character animator, illustration, animation

Introduction

A brand mascot is a distinctive brand asset (DBA) with unique anthropomorphic qualities that represent a brand's qualities through the expression of human characteristics (Rauschnabel & Ahuvia, 2014; Romaniuk, 2018). DBAs like this are more likely to bring conscious attention of the consumer to a brand than traditional graphic design elements (Romaniuk, 2018). A brand mascot, such as Mickey Mouse for Disney, the M&M characters, or Poppin' Fresh by Pillsbury, allows the consumer to create a deeper personal relationship with the brand, especially when they are animated (Mize & Kinney, 2008; Rauschnabel & Ahuvia, 2014).

Training in branding does not typically include character development. As the competition for customers intensifies, brands are looking beyond identifying marks and curated graphic systems to less expected, innovative executions that offer deeper connections with their audiences and strengthen communication. And yet, the typical graphic design curriculum still lags; a digital-first curriculum that is proactive rather than reactive, aligned with industry skills and practice, is still not available to students (Rohm, Stefl & Saint Clair, 2019). Specifically, teaching and using dynamic visual communication with diverse features are required in a future-focused curriculum (Tian, 2020).

As design educators, this article will argue that we should consider a more contemporary strategy for brand development that includes the cultivation of the brand's personas through simple character animation. Through the presentation of a case study drawn from my work teaching with Adobe Character Animator to create animated brand mascots, combined with a review of the literature, it is proposed that including character animation will foster a stronger brand identity for differentiation of the adopted brand from similar brands, in the mind of their consumers.

Traditional Brand Design Study

A brand is the name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of these, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of their competitors. In graphic design, the teaching of brand design is fundamentally rooted in the creative yet appropriate execution of symbolic elements and standards development related to the brand (Wheeler, 2012). Common deliverables include logo designs, typeface selection, and color palette assertion, as part of the developed visual brand language that is aligned with key DBAs (Romaniuk, 2018). These components are heavily presented in compositional layouts for various brand marketing mediums such as print materials, digital outlets, and social media to establish a distinctive identity for the brand's target audiences (Wheeler, 2012).

For graphic design students, to this end, teaching centers around the emotions, attitudes, and ease-of-use a customer has the potential to have when seeing, understanding, or using a product or service, and through which graphic design is engaged to improve communication between a product and its user to enhance the customer's overall experience of the brand and its meaning (Wheeler, 2012). Students investigate how consumers behave in response to a brand and examine how that behavior can lead to a better brand experience and design. Curriculum in graphic design also frequently offers students skills in setting goals and establishing specific actions to reach those goals to build a market response to a product or service which allows an organization to create an inroad into profit by developing a means to access consumer interest and building revenue streams (Rohm et al., 2019).

For these students, 3D animation applications are typically foreign (Rohm et al., 2019). Most graphic design curriculum utilizes 2D tools for motion design because animation is a specialty area often aligned with a different curriculum set, and even with different post-secondary majors such as film (as opposed to marketing) (Schenk, 2017). The fundamentals of brand design education center around visual identity development and student portfolios and do not typically feature a brand character. Again, characters and their development are assumed to be an extension of studies in film (Schenk, 2017). What this means is that there is an organizational and conceptual barrier between graphic design curriculum orientations and animation and character-based learning opportunities for students.

Embodying a Brand with Characters

Mascots are effective DBAs for building consumer awareness as brand characters have been shown to offer unique audience connections and digital media opportunities (Hoolwerff, 2014; Malhotra, Jonjua & Jha, 2018; Mize & Kinney, 2008; Puzakova, Kwak & Rocereto, 2009). The reason that this is the case is that there is a tendency for consumers to perceive brands as actual human beings, something proven in over thirty years of psychological research, and therefore representative of a person's wishful thinking of instilling life into objects or designed characters that may have very few actual human characteristics (Puzakova et al., 2009).

Importantly, Consumers make evaluations of brands based upon the perceived similarity between their own self-concept and perceived human personalities that they view in brands. If the result of such self-concept/brand image evaluations is positive, that is, in cases where consumers perceive the images of brands as being similar to their own self concept, then they may develop higher levels of brand preferences and brand loyalty and consumers will seek to own and surround themselves with brands that are congruent with their own self-concepts. (Puzakova et al., 2009, p. 416)

This may be why anthropomorphized brands are likely to be successful over the long term; consumers are psychologically invested in the longevity of characters that they love (Hoolwerff, 2014; Mize & Kinney, 2008).

On a more practical level, because of this perception of brands as personalities, companies are likely to embody brand characteristics in one of four ways: through endorsements by celebrities, employees, user-customers, and spokes-characters (Malhotra et al., 2018). Of these, spokes-characters are most likely to be used because they can provide a consistent brand message that is reflective of a company's current marketing strategy at a relatively low cost (Malhotra et al., 2018). A brand mascot can transmit clear values through an original brand character (Hoolwerff, 2014).

The commonalities in great brand characters include a distinct voice and visuals that are instantly recognizable, and that represent human features (Hoolwerff, 2014). Archetypes using key human lifespan characteristics, such as motherhood represented by Betty Crocker, adventure-bound people such as the Marlboro Man, and working characters such as Mr. Clean, help brands in creating, translating, and stabilizing their brand personality (Hoolwerff, 2014; Mize & Kinney, 2008).

These commonalities can guide original brand character research and creation, and ought to be a part of the repertoire of brand designers (Hoolwerff, 2014; Malhotra et al., 2018; Mize & Kinney, 2008; Puzakova et al., 2009). Designers should also be competent in the four dimensions of character likeability: personality, physical characteristics, humor, and consumer experiences with culture and characters as multiple studies that characters that align with these dimensions of design have the ability to increase the likelihood of consumer purchase intention (Mize & Kinney, 2008). As a whole, consumers need to be able to develop a trusting relationship with mascots that can be retained over the long term, and so this process has to be well-thought-out and connected to the brand strategy (Hoolwerff, 2014; Malhotra et al., 2018; Mize & Kinney, 2008).

By and large, brand characters are animated (Hoolwerff, 2014; Malhotra et al., 2018; Mize & Kinney, 2008; Puzakova et al., 2009). This not only includes classic mascots known in television advertisements but also novel uses of animation. For example, the Google Doodle has been purported to be a modern-day brand mascot for the world of technology (Miller, 2020). It embodies the values of the company, and adapts to new interests and searches. For these reasons, maintaining brand preferences and brand loyalty relies on knowledge of brand character animation, at least to a basic degree (Malhotra et al., 2018). The act of designing a company's offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the minds of the target market requires an understanding of the value and place of character and personality in branding, and the role of animation in the tradition of character creation.

Curriculum: Production and Engagement

Bringing a character to life can be accomplished through the integration of existing graphic design and animation-specific applications. In the Fall of 2019, I led a brand character design project for twelve students in my Emerging Technologies course. Students were trained to use Adobe Character Animator to create an animated brand mascot as an extension of an existing brand's identity. Character Animator is seen as a cost-effective and efficient way that opens up new creative opportunities for individuals who need a fast means of engaging in this practice (Thompson, 2018), and for graphic design students for whom 3D



Figure 1 (left): Nancy Miller, Matt Carriker for Demolition Ranch, 2019.
Youtube link: <https://youtu.be/OfcqmV7Nua8>

Figure 2 (middle): Catherine Derbala, Samantha Chip for Cat&Jack, 2019. Youtube link: <https://youtu.be/KB4DDrful6A>

Figure 3 (right): Rhiannon Howard, Mr. Simply for Simply Beverages, 2019.
Youtube link: https://youtu.be/Ek3NMg_IMmA

animation applications are largely foreign, Character Animator offered a pathway into teaching this skill set. The figures (Figure 1, 2, 3) represent static versions of the animated character outcomes from the pilot project.

In terms of the learning process, research shows that familiar visual brand development technologies and skills can be adapted to a design class (Mou, 2019). Graphic design students who are provided with a high level of autonomy but also group-based project support will adapt quickly to using 3D animation tools, and will be motivated to engage in these projects after graduation (Mou, 2019). This is likely because of the fact that cross-platform creative expression in design can lead to an overall increase in design skills as well as interest among students (Chai & Fan, 2017). Students who can learn to use one set of design tools are more likely to adopt others, so there are few barriers to adding this skill set to graphic design students' repertoires (Chai & Fan, 2017; Mou, 2019).

Developing a compelling and original brand character starts with the study of the personal and emotional aspects of the brand, not its products and services. Successful examples of animated brand characters were used to best position the aims of the coursework, and a dissection of the example characters chosen for this case study revealed commonalities in how the character embodies the associated brand's voice and values, which was used as a teaching tool. From there, parallels were drawn between the brand's values and the articulation of the character's physical appearance, voice, tone, and movement to inform a document developed to guide student research of their adopted brand. Considerations of what makes a successful character were then reviewed in an examination of this developed teaching aid. Following the population of the guiding document with relevant brand research, the execution of the character was further explored.

For the students studying animation for this project, bringing the character to life via Character Animator was accomplished with a clearly articulated workflow

that mimicked existing project management protocols for their other coursework. Students, who were already familiar with an agile design protocol, used their Illustrator and Photoshop skills to create a basic character, and then workshop their brand strategies to update and refine these characters for their final presentation. For most students, Character Animator was a natural extension of their current immersion in the Adobe platform. Essentially, Character Animator uses tools similar to Illustrator with the addition of animation rigging options, which means that students can easily adapt their current skills platform to this and other similar animation programs. As a whole, this case study project revealed that Character Animator was an adaptable tool for graphic design students in executing their character.

For the pilot run of this project, engagement with students was relatively high. The majority of students met the required criteria for their character based on the findings from the literature, and specifically the four dimensions of character likeability: personality, physical characteristics, humor, and consumer experiences with culture and characters. Students revealed unique and independent character identities for their adopted brands. More than this, students reported during their end-of-term evaluations that they enjoyed learning about mascots and how they can be used to build a brand identity and personality, and how Character Animator was fairly easy to uptake and use as a means to develop their brand.

Curriculum: Opinions

To learn the opinions of other design educators on the inclusion of brand mascot design in the brand identity curriculum, I sent a brief, anonymous survey titled "Are brand mascots relevant to brand identity curriculum in graphic design" to over 200 graphic design educators teaching at two- and four-year post-secondary institutions in March of 2021. The responses clarified expected outcomes for current brand identity development curriculum and opinions on the relevance of brand mascot design and development from participating faculty.

Survey Results

I. Demographics:

Employment:

- 94% 4-year postsecondary program
- 6% 2-year postsecondary program

Age:

- 29% 30–39
- 36% 40–49
- 29% 50–59
- 7% 60+

Years teaching course(s) that address brand identity development:

- 14% 1–2 years
- 21% 3–5 years
- 29% 6–10 years
- 7% 11–15 years
- 29% 15+ years

II. Current brand identity student projects that respondents lead typically involve the following student deliverables or artifacts:

- 18% Logo
- 18% Colors & Fonts
- 15% Social Media Design
- 15% Letterhead and Business Card Design
- 12% Packaging Design
- 9% Website Design
- 8% Other
- 5% Brand Character Design/Development

Brand Marketing

- 28% Social Media Marketing
- 28% Digital Advertising (Display Banner Ads, Streaming Video)
- 25% Traditional Advertising (Print, Outdoor)
- 9% Other
- 9% Email Marketing

III. Brand identity student project(s) that respondents lead involve the following student deliverables utilizing motion design:

- 47% Animated Logos
- 47% Animated Graphics for Social Media
- 6% Animated Brand Characters

IV. Motion application tools utilized by students of respondents in assigned brand identity project(s):

- 34% Adobe After Effects
- 28% Adobe Photoshop
- 21% Procreate
- 7% Other
- 7% None
- 3% Adobe Animate
- 0% Adobe Character Animator

Key Survey Findings

The majority of design educator respondents:

Utilize motion design in brand identity student projects, required in animated graphics for social media and animated logos.

Think that the design and development of a brand character (or mascot) should be taught to graphic design students as part of brand identity development **only** if and when applicable to the brand.

Do NOT think that the inclusion of a brand character (static or animated) in a graphic design student's portfolio would benefit the student by helping them to stand out to prospective employers.

Do NOT teach or value the design and development of brand mascots.

Conclusion

Embodying the brand, in the form of an animated character or brand mascot, can allow students to explore the humanization of the brand's values, voice and attitude with a surprising brand solution that leverages digital media while engaging audiences to build brand loyalty. Expanding brand identity design education for graphic design students to include animated brand mascots allows them to create digital brand ambassadors that visually represent their brand's values and attitude that resonate with their client's consumers memorably. There is value in student exploration of character development to show competencies in brand strategy, marketing, and execution with motion. Student outcomes in this exploration should focus on brand personification, not cinematic quality, but at the very least begin to help students achieve a basic skill set in this area that they can expand over the course of their careers. The inclusion of brand mascots as part of a more contemporary approach to brand positioning and strategy in the student's portfolio can assist in setting them apart and making them more competitive in the candidate pool of recent graduates. Against the popular opinion of the surveyed faculty, I expect that the unexpected inclusion of an original brand character in the graphic design student's portfolio can help them stand out to prospective employers.

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Nancy Miller

As Program Coordinator and Professor for the Graphic Design program at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, Nancy is passionate about the success of her students. Her primary goal as an educator is excellence in career preparation for her students. Leveraging close to two decades of real-world experience, initially as a Graphic Designer for top-ranking corporations such as Nike Inc., Burton Snowboards and Hollywood Video Corporation, and later as a Creative Director at the largest advertising agency in South Texas, Nancy aims to empower students with cutting edge industry technologies and practical field expectations vital to their professional success. She often works with small businesses and non-profit organizations to elevate their brand design and digital presence for deeper, more memorable connections with their customers and audiences. In Nancy Miller's professional career, she has garnered over 170 design awards at the regional and state levels as well as a dozen international awards.

