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TOOLS AND STRATEGIES TO GROW YOUR BUSINESS AND CAREER

BRAND AMBASSADORS

From funny to furry to kind of freaky, mascots help build market buzz *By Timothy Burn, Associate Editor*

Susan D'Aniello was fairly proud of the little dog logo she designed.

Her handiwork found its way onto the Web site of Doody Calls, the Northern Virginia pet-waste removal company she co-owns with her husband, Jacob.

But as the company grew and the couple began planning to launch franchises, the little dog started looking a little amateurish. Then a trusted Doody Calls customer confided in the couple: The little dog is cute, but if you really want to take this company to the next level you need a real mascot.

Days later, with the help of a young graphic designer, Doodle was born. He is a little yellow cartoon dog, with a big smile and a beach ball.

"We are by no means the only pooper-scooper business that is franchising right now," says Susan D'Aniello. "We wanted [our mascot] to be fun and simple, but we also wanted to set ourselves apart" from the competition.

For now, Doodle adorns the Web site and company vehicles. Soon Doodle will be seen on street corners in cities across the country. The D'Aniellos are taking the next step by commissioning a costume company to design and build a Doodle costume.

Turns out, that's how a lot of mascots are born. A business owner wants to expand the brand and begins to ponder ways to get the word out. Like Doodle, mascots often start as back-of-the-napkin drawings and then get touched up by professional graphic artists.

ALL BUZZ IS GOOD BUZZ

Some mascots arrive as brilliant epiphanies. "It hit me like a vision," says Bob Kodner, CEO of the Crack Team, a masonry repair business based in St. Louis with locations across the country, including Kensington. "Right then and there I came up with the name and what he would look like. I must have had too much caffeine that day."

On that day, Mr. Happy Crack stormed onto the scene, hoping to join the pantheon of great corporate mascots that America can't stop talking about. The Geico gecko. The Aflac duck. The Maytag repairman. The Burger King. And now, Mr. Happy Crack.

Imagine a square slab of concrete, with a big goofy smile, two arms, two legs. Mere days after the freeway brainstorm, Mr. Happy Crack was up on the company Web site, then on hats and T-shirts. A few weeks later, Mr. Happy Crack was a punch line on "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno." Orders for masonry work jumped as giggly customers called to report repair damage, and in many cases indulge in off-color jokes about, well, cracks.

Such humor was nothing new for Kodner, whose father,



Mike, the Crack Team founder, often was called "the Ray Kroc of Crack." Son Bob had always promised his dad he would not do anything goofy with the company until Mike died. But after his drive-time epiphany about Mr. Happy Crack, he just couldn't wait.

"If done correctly, a mascot can personalize a brand," says Brad Nierenberg, President and CEO of RedPeg, an Alexandria brand-marketing company. Getting customers to embrace your company can be a real challenge, especially in industries saturated with competition. There are countless masonry repair businesses. But there is only one Mr. Happy Crack who's made a cameo appearance on Jay Leno. The D'Aniellos hope Doodle will help them stand out as a fun, family-friendly company.

RedPeg has helped companies with mascots on a number of occasions. Recently, it ran a promotional campaign for the Baltimore Area Convention and Visitors Association, putting several people in crab suits and sending them to the streets of other cities to promote Baltimore as a destination.

"Are mascots for any company?" Nierenberg asks. "I wouldn't recommend a mascot for a funeral home. Anyone

can create a mascot, but you have to think about what you want to do with it. You can't just put someone in an outfit and send them out to a mall."

SPREADING THE LOVE

Commerce Bank was looking for a brand ambassador, something fun, something to help imprint its brand in every community where it was opening a branch. "We are opening lots of new locations, and we're expanding rapidly in D.C.," says John Cunningham, Commerce's chief marketing officer. "We do these big branch openings on Saturdays with tents, clowns and music. We get lots families with kids, so we decided we needed a mascot."

Cunningham helped conjure up Mr. C, a big red C with two arms and two legs. "For us there was not a whole lot of thinking to it. We have big red Cs all over the place at Commerce. So we just went to a designer and had them build a prototype."

Mr. C is on hand for bank openings. He also helps out with programs to boost internal morale. Commerce Bank likes to recognize employees who do something well beyond their job description. Several times a year, Mr. C will jump in a van with a few other reps from corporate to make surprise visits to star employees. Such "surprise and delight" visits usually include a little hype and free pizza for staff and customers.

Mr. C made a recent appearance at Ross Elementary School in D.C. to help students learn about banking and bartending. "I wasn't sure what the reception would be because I have only been in this market since March," says Commerce Bank Market President Kevin Gullen, who travels constantly with Mr. C and calls the mascot one of his best friends. "Needless to say, he stole the show. The kids were all over him. He's like a magnet."

Mascots can be the brainchild of an entrepreneur or, in the case of Snort, the spawn of a communal mind-meld of customers. Snort is the name of Columbia-based SourceFire's primary product, open-source network intrusion detection and prevention software.

Company founder Martin Roesch designed the Snort open-source application in his basement. The open-source community shaped the growth of Snort the pig the same way it shaped the development of the application.

"The original pig graphic was designed by a guy in Kyrgyzstan who helped out with the open-source project in the early days," Roesch says. "That's where the idea of the pig first came from, and the users of Snort liked it."

The original pig was a front-on shot of a little brown fuzzy pig standing in a muddy farmyard. Roesch realized he needed a new pig when he decided to take his open-source technology to the commercial marketplace. He (CONTINUES)

contacted some designers who were doing graphics for another open-source project. A few hours later, the new Snort arrived via e-mail, and Roesch loved it. The Snort pig has become synonymous with the intrusion detection software.

KEEPING UP WITH THE TIMES

Creating a mascot is fairly straightforward. Come up with an interesting character that has some association with your brand. Find someone to draw it, and find someone else who makes costumes. Businesses have found there are limitless possibilities of what can be done with mascots.

Once created, mascots have a tendency to take on lives of their own. They are no longer just drawings on a page. They are living creatures that may exist in the marketplace for decades to come.

"Once I created Mr. Happy Crack I knew the genie was out of the bottle," Kodner says. "Deep down I figured it would work out. I mean, I can't be the only one out there who enjoys a little double-entendre humor."

While any mascot would certainly love to be the next Ty-D-Bol man or Brawny lumberjack man, Nierenberg cautions that

even popular mascots can grow stale. Once in a while a mascot needs a makeover. The Brawny character is always a rugged-looking guy, but his hair color, eye color and shirt color have changed over the years. Sometimes a mascot that survives through generations can become culturally inappropriate, like the Aunt Jemima pancake lady, created in 1890 in the image of a former slave.

"They have to make sure that the mascot stays contemporary, while still staying true to what the brand represents," Nierenberg says.

Kodner is well aware that Mr. Happy Crack may be skating on some thin cultural or political ice and realizes that his mascot may need a new look. "I'm thinking Mr. Happy Crack might look great with low-rider jeans with his boxers exposed," Kodner muses. "Or what about a thong?"



BATHROOM HUMOR: Jacob and Susan D'Aniello are looking to franchise Doody Calls, a pet waste removal service. Look for mascot Doodle at a dog park near you.

Birthing a mascot: From napkin to market in \$5,000

So you've decided to create a mascot for your business. You have a decent drawing on the back of a napkin.

What next?

Keep in mind that the mascot will be the face of your brand as much as, if not more than, you the owner of the company. Make sure it looks as sharp as it possibly can. Jacob D'Aniello, co-owner of Doody Calls, had a good idea of what he was looking for in a mascot. He hired a graphic designer to pull it off.

Then there is the matter of trademarking and copyrighting the mascot. Doodle is by no means the only dog mascot out in the world. As Doody Calls spreads across the country through franchising, the likelihood increases that Doodle will happen upon another dog that looks a bit like him.

"You really need to conduct a trademark search to make sure that your mascot does not look too much like someone else's," says Alex Curtis, director of policy and new media for Public Knowledge, a Washington advocacy group.

Curtis says it is important to both trademark your mascot and get the image copyrighted. Trademarking is intended to help consumers identify particular brands without confusion. Copyrights help protect ownership of the image.

You can get your mascot copyrighted by visiting the Library of Congress Web site (www.loc.gov). For trademarking, first visit the Web site of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (www.uspto.gov). Both sites offer a wealth of information and step-by-step guidelines.

D'Aniello and Curtis say it is essential to hire an attorney to guide you through the steps.

"You can get a trademark completed on the USPTO Web site for no more than \$500," says D'Aniello. "But we really wanted to get this right. We wanted to spend the money upfront on legal help so that we don't suffer an identity crisis later on."

D'Aniello said the total cost for Doodle, including design and legal help with patent and trademarks, was \$5,000. Man-sized Doodle costumes are another matter. D'Aniello is having a costume company design and build Doodle costumes at a cost of "several thousand dollars."