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CREATIVE STUDIOS

PRESENT

BEYOND **ADVERTISING**

CHARACTER BUILDING

—

HOW CG CHARACTERS ADD VALUE FOR BRANDS IN A CROWDED MARKET

A WHITEPAPER IN ASSOCIATION WITH
LITTLE BLACK BOOK AND SYSTEM 1

THIS WHITEPAPER EXPLORES
HOW CG CHARACTERS
MAKE FOR HIGHLY
EFFECTIVE ADVERTISING.

In today's crowded media space, it's harder than ever for advertising to cut-through and reach consumers. However, there is mounting evidence to suggest that well-crafted CG brand characters are achieving significant success in doing so. As we'll see, evidence suggests that these characters help:

- Battle short-termism
- Strengthen consistent brand messaging and communications across platforms
- Increase profit and share of voice
- Communicate more clearly with deeper emotional connections
- Facilitate stronger brand engagement

Of course, characters and brand mascots have been used by advertisers for decades, and some have permeated history and culture so deeply our world would be different without them. The 1950s and 1960s produced some of the world's most recognisable and enduring characters and brand mascots including Tony the Tiger (1952), The Milkybar Kid (1961), Ronald McDonald (1963) and the Pillsbury Doughboy (AKA Poppin' Fresh) introduced in 1965. However, in recent years fewer of these characters have been used, but perhaps they could be the answer to marketers' woes?

Join us as we explore recent evidence, delving into the impact of characters on profit, longevity and emotions. We'll also meet the teams behind some of the most effective brand characters of the past decade, find out how best to approach creating CG characters in 2021 and ask experts from the The Mill about practical considerations for brands and agencies.

ABOUT THIS WHITEPAPER

This whitepaper uses a variety of sources from advertising and marketing research including System1, Kantar, the IPA and others. Alongside this, the data is supported with interviews from agencies McCann Worldgroup, VCCP, Leo Burnett, adam&eveDDB and The Martin Agency. Information regarding the process of creating these characters has been sought from The Mill, Psyop and Framestore.

CHARACTER STATS

In 1992, 41% of campaigns used a fluent device (a character or running theme). However today the number has plummeted to 12%.

In the UK, just 7% of ads feature a character fluent device. In the US, that falls to 4%.

A long-term campaign featuring a character fluent device will, on average, increase Market Share Gain by 41% compared to 29.7% for campaigns not featuring a character.

Similarly, long-term campaigns featuring a character fluent device will increase Profit Gain by 34.1%, compared to 26.2% for campaigns without.

Long-term campaigns featuring a fluent device will on average increase new customer gain by 40.9%, compared to 32% for campaigns without.

In 2018, ads in the US featuring a character fluent device generated 8% more Share of Voice than campaigns without one.

Even brands with a fluent device aren't using it much. Of these brands, 63% use their character in TV ads. On Facebook that drops to 25% on average, and just 21% use it on Twitter

Emotionally-led campaigns will generate almost double the profit of non-emotionally-led campaigns over the course of three years.

CHARACTERS AND LONGEVITY

Characters and mascots have staying power. Snap, Crackle and Pop have been with us since the 30s, the Tetley Tea Folk since 1973 and Planter's Mr. Peanut was born in 1916 and was still featured in Planter' 2020 Super Bowl ad. We know it anecdotally and instinctively — but it turns out there's hard evidence backing this up.

All of which has interesting implications given current tensions in the industry around a crisis of long-term brand building.

In 2019, the IPA released key research from renowned author, strategist and marketing consultant Peter Field that pointed to a crisis in creative effectiveness. It warned of the dangers to creative effectiveness posed by short-termism in marketing and highlighted a misunderstanding of how brands grow.

The report outlines how 'over the pre-crisis period 1996–2008 creatively awarded campaigns were around 12 times as efficient as non-awarded ones, but over the period from 2006–2018, as the crisis developed, this fell to below four times as efficient.'

Correlating evidence from Orlando Wood, Chief Innovation Officer at System1, also points to a drop in the use of characters in advertising during this period. Wood believes that the rise of digital advertising and communications may have been a factor in their decline. "In the same way depth appeared in the Renaissance, you have this flatness emerging in advertising which started in 2006. I don't think there's one thing that triggered it, I think there's many things. It's partly digitisation and the use of digital platforms, and the use of digital comms more generally. It was a time of enormous acquisitions of ad agencies at holding companies. It was a time of globalisation, and the need for global advertising standardisation. An ad needs to work everywhere today, so they started to lose cultural roots. And when an ad has to work everywhere, what normally happens is that it doesn't work anywhere to full effect."

Peter Field's 2019 report also suggests efficiency and effectiveness in advertising is down to a shift in trends. 'The collapse in effectiveness and efficiency can be explained largely by the shift to short-term activation-focussed creativity and the strategic and media trends this has promoted.'[1]

DEFINING A FLUENT DEVICE

System1 defines a Fluent Device as a "**fictitious character or characters (humans or creatures) created by the brand and used as the primary vehicle for the drama in more than one ad across a campaign.**"

OR it is

"**A scenario expressed as a slogan, used more than once in a campaign, as a primary vehicle for the drama, without which the ad would make little sense.**"
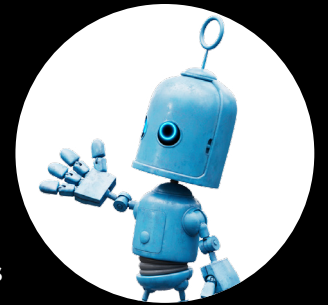
Noticing this trend, Wood then studied the work of psychiatrist, writer, and former Oxford literary scholar, Iain McGilchrist. McGilchrist's work looks into the different ways information is processed in the left and right side of the brain. Wood explains, "the five types of attention that neuropsychologists broadly agree on, four of them come from the right brain. It's only narrow-focused attention that the left brain deals with. So, all advertising should be geared towards right-brain. And the trick is to use living creatures that can sustain the attention." One way Wood believes marketers can achieve effective long-term advertising is with what he calls a 'character Fluent Device'.

1 IPA & Peter Field - The Crisis in Creative Effectiveness

"The character Fluent Device is one means of unlocking growth over the long term," adds Wood. "It develops greater emotional response and promotes processing fluency."[2]

In his book, Lemon, Wood demonstrates how character Fluent Devices are actually more effective than non-character fluent devices at achieving market share and profit gain.
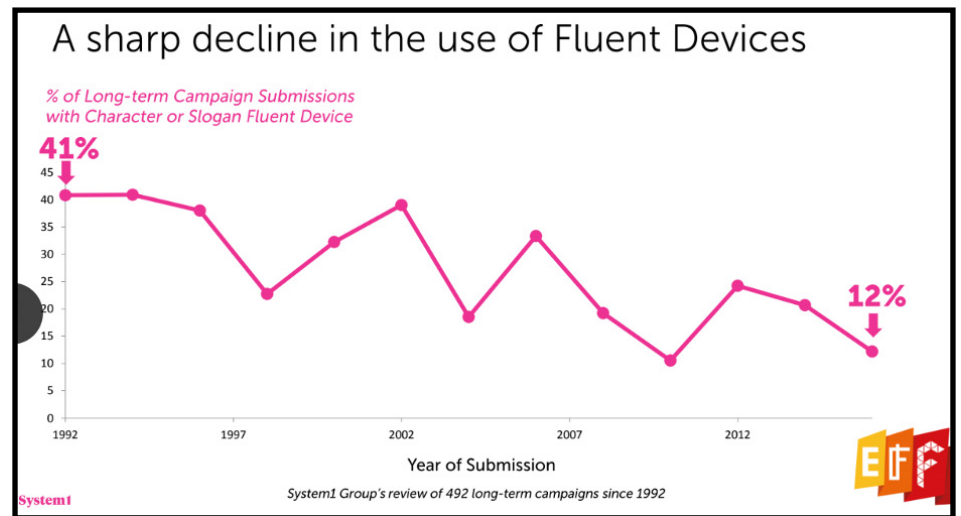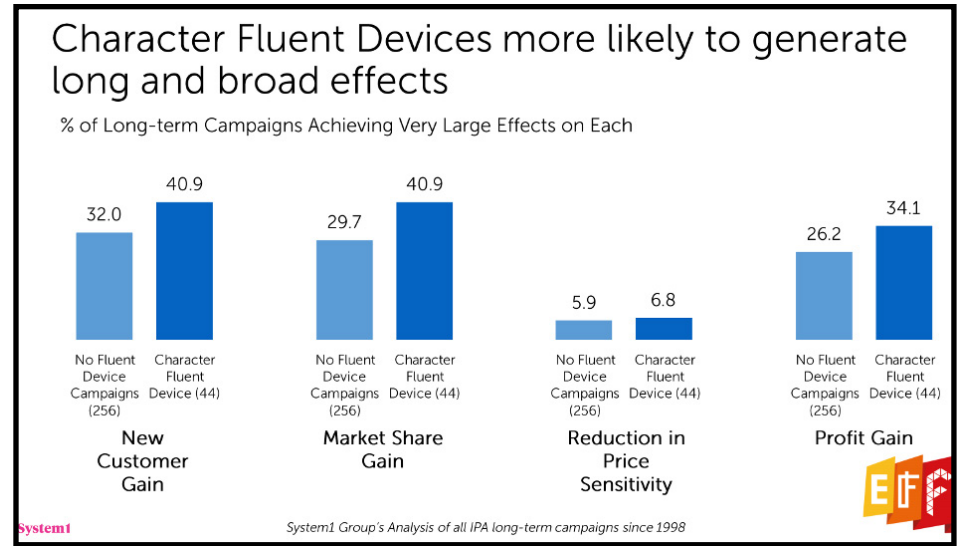
He also found that character Fluent Devices are a way to unlock long-term growth in digital channels - one of the areas many have identified as having driven a trend of short-termism. "Currently overlooked, character Fluent Devices offer digital channels an opportunity to become part of the long-term growth story for brands."[3]

But despite this, there has been a sharp decline in their use.

Dr. Sharon Ponsonby- McCabe is a lecturer in marketing communications at Ulster University in Ireland, and the co-author of Brand Mascots and Other Marketing Animals. In her book, she explains that mascots can offer many advantages to the brands that create them: "Companies can use brand mascots to bring their central character to life, to inject their products with meaning, and to enable important stakeholders to interpret what they stand for."

Much of her research points to the fact that characters are rarely used and often held in comparatively low esteem despite the fact there is mounting evidence for their effectiveness in communication.

When probed by LBB, some creatives have highlighted the fact that brands can see characters as more suitable for children, gimmicky and not 'creative.' But there is a psychological reason they work so well...

Character Fluent Devices more likely to generate long and broad effects

% of Long-term Campaigns Achieving Very Large Effects on Each

System1 Group's Analysis of all IPA long-term campaigns since 1998

A sharp decline in the use of Fluent Devices

% of Long-term Campaign Submissions with Character or Slogan Fluent Device

System1 Group's review of 492 long-term campaigns since 1992

2 Orlando Wood - System1 - Creativity & Effectiveness: Developing creative best practice for long-term growth in a multi-platform world
3 IPA & Peter Field - The Crisis in Creative Effectiveness

CHARACTERS AND EMOTION

> "WHEN DEALING WITH PEOPLE, REMEMBER YOU ARE
> NOT DEALING WITH CREATURES OF LOGIC, BUT
> CREATURES OF EMOTION"
>
> — DALE CARNEGIE, 1936

Humans have evolved to recognise emotion in other living things and their surroundings — to recognise it in other humans is an instinct, in creatures it is a protective projection and we even seek to apply emotions to inanimate objects — have you ever told your car 'you can make it' or screamed red rage at an uncooperative printer?

Of course, this need for emotional connection hasn't bypassed advertisers. For centuries they have used characters, human and non-human, as a device to build a deeper emotional connection and stronger brand recognition with their audience. This was instinctive for early advertisers, but now there's a bounty of scientific research to support the fact that using characters has a positive effect on memory and interpretation of communication.

Modern marketers are working every day to hit ambitious KPIs, like increasing sales, growing in market share, brand loyalty and brand recall. Ultimately, it's an exercise in capturing attention, improving memory and learning. And the key to success? Emotion.

An article published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* tells us that "Emotion has a substantial influence on the cognitive processes in humans, including perception, attention, learning, memory, reasoning, and problem solving. Emotion has a particularly strong influence on attention, especially modulating the selectivity of attention as well as motivating action and behavior."

Other scholars have also pointed out that, 'it's important to understand that emotional exchanges don't simply influence emotions. Depending on the exchange, they can also affect additional characteristics such as mood, attitude, and behavior.' [4]

So, while emotional connection and characters can help with long-term brand building, they also help with the short-term demands that many marketers still must contend with.

We also know that creature characters, in particular, have a strong emotional connection with audiences. Insurance brand GEICO even cite one of the reasons for creating their famous Gecko was because 'campaigns from the past have proven animals create a strong connection between customers and companies.'

Orlando Wood's concludes in his book Lemon that 'relevance is not enough. For growth, you must make people feel more; entertain for commercial gain'. As part of this research he tells us 'campaigns with a fluent device elicit stronger emotional response'. He also agrees that fluent devices create 'memory structures for brand recognition, making investment go further.' [5]

4 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5573739/
5 WOOD, O. (2019). LEMON. HOW THE ADVERTISING BRAIN TURNED SOUR. 1st ed. [S.I.]: INSTITUTE OF PRACTITIONER, p.106.

UK MARKETERS WILL REMEMBER <u>BINET & FIELD'S 2013 IPA REPORT</u> DEMONSTRATED

Emotional effects build over years
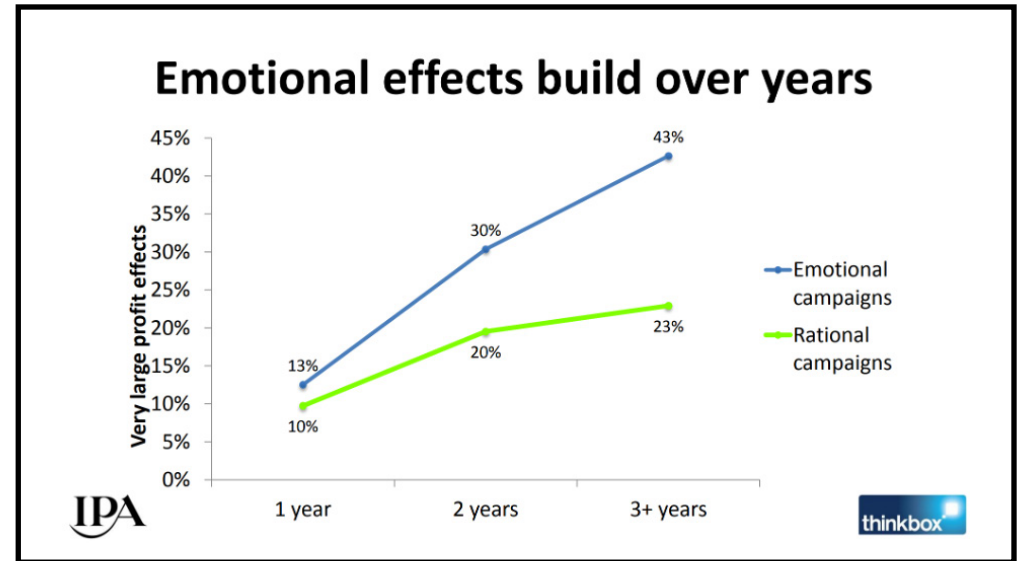
"THE LONGER THE TIME FRAME, THE MORE EMOTIONS DRIVE PROFIT."

CG CHARACTERS AND PRACTICAL BENEFITS

In 1994 the first ever banner ad was launched.

Since then, advertising has been revolutionised by the digital age. The demand for content continues to grow exponentially. Advertisers have been calling for agencies and production companies to develop innovative technology and methods of working in order to create more high-quality content, at faster speeds and for less cost.

But marketers know there are many challenges ahead for them to get there.

What's interesting is that CG characters can combat many of the advertising challenges presented by the digital age as well as the need for increased content.

1—THEY CAN BE ANYWHERE AND EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE...

One of the benefits of CG characters is that they provide consistency. They can be omnipresent for a brand, instantaneously appearing on digital channels, print, OOH and even as TV personalities. In December 2019, Kellog's' Frosties mascot, Tony the Tiger, made a debut appearance on CBS' The Late Show with Stephen Colbert to launch a school sports programme for American children.

Technology has advanced so much that CG characters can be puppeteered in real-time which greatly speeds up the rate of production. The Mill utilised a similar technique in 2017 for the 'Be More Berocca' campaign from JWT. Their technology allowed for the creation of real-time renders of a dancing chameleon named Roccy for use on social media. The resulting spike in social media engagement for the brand was key to the 45% rise in sales following the campaign.

This technology is now widely available to brands and can be employed to create multiple assets quickly.

2—THEY ARE 100% TRUSTWORTHY

Distrust of advertising has been prevalent in recent years, and nowhere more so than towards influencers. In 2018 Netflix's 'Fyre Festival: The Greatest Party That Never Happened' exposed a huge lack of regulation around influencer advertising that has been fuelled since by increasing numbers of Influencer slip ups. In the same report as quoted above, WARC also demonstrated that there is a "rising distrust in influencer content worldwide, borne out of concerns around authenticity and credibility."

Unlike real influencers, CG characters do not have a life of their own. You have full control over their actions and behaviour. Many brands have been rocked by the actions of influencers on their payroll, but CG influencers will never step out of line — since you control their message.

And we see that audience want to engage with these CG influencers. Comparethemarket.com's loveable meerkat Aleksandr Orlov has 55.7k followers on Twitter, Planter's Mr. Peanut has 134.3k followers and GEICO's gecko has 33.6k.
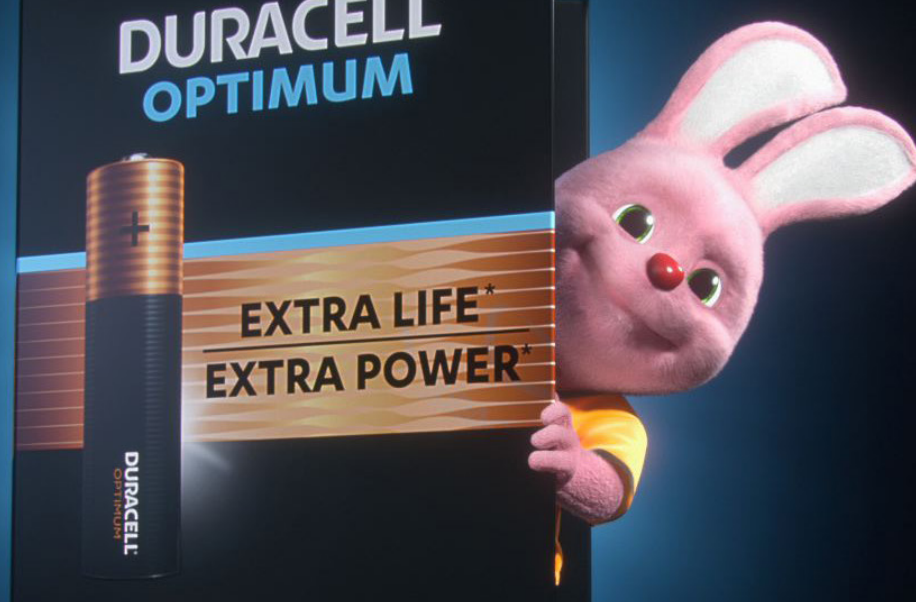
3—YOU CAN LITERALLY OWN IT

As a non-sentient, fictional being, you can fully own a CG character. Not only does this lend well for cost-efficiency, but it also means you will never be tied up in complicated legal issues or conflicting sponsorship deals.

Brands can even employ 'identity guardians' for their characters. Mikros MPC in Paris has been the long-lasting Bunny's visual identity guardian for the last seven years, ensuring the consistency and integrity across all media worldwide, be it TV, digital, social media or print.

Owning the character IP also proffers product opportunities. Many CG characters used in advertising have been translated into highly-sought after plush toys. In the UK there was such high demand for the cuddly version of Aldi's Christmas mascot 'Kevin the Carrot' that fights broke out in stores and customers had to be limited to one toy per purchase.

When comparethemarket.com created toys of Aleksandr Orlov, they were due to go on sale in Harrods for £19.95 until unexpectedly high demand prompted Mohamed Al Fayed to give the entire stock to children's charities. In 2016, over 22,000 'Buster the Boxer' toys sold out at John Lewis just two hours after the release of that year's ad of the same name.

4—THEY DON'T PLACE RESTRICTIONS

Compared to actors or real influencers, CG characters also have much more amenable schedules. You can dictate the pace of the ads you're making, unbeholden to the schedule of a high-profile celebrity or influencer. Additionally, you'll avoid paying the kind of fees that are involved with hiring real-life talent.

So, let us show you in more detail how four brands have put characters to work...

CASE STUDY 1
O2 BUBL

"IT COULD INTERACT WITH CUSTOMERS IN THE REAL WORLD, AND EASILY REPRESENT TECHNOLOGY"

Client: O2
**Agency:** VCCP London VFX Production: The Mill
Headline Stats:
- +42,000 Tik Tok Followers in 48 Hours and 15 million views on launch video
- 15.7% increase in 'puts customers first' perceptions vs 2019
- Best score in Customer Consideration over the past 8 years

System 1 Star Rating: 4.3 (O2 Christmas Advert 2020 - Bubl Ice Skating)

BACKGROUND

In January 2020 the UK telco sector was already facing big challenges. The market had been becoming hugely commoditised and fiercely competitive among the top networks for some time. The minimal difference in functionality of new model mobile phones had meant that having the 'latest tech' was becoming less important to consumers than value tariffs. So the new and scrappier mobile virtual network operators — who had aggressively been driving down prices - were capturing a large market share which meant the major telcos were suddenly having to compete with various added-value entertainment properties as part of their package.
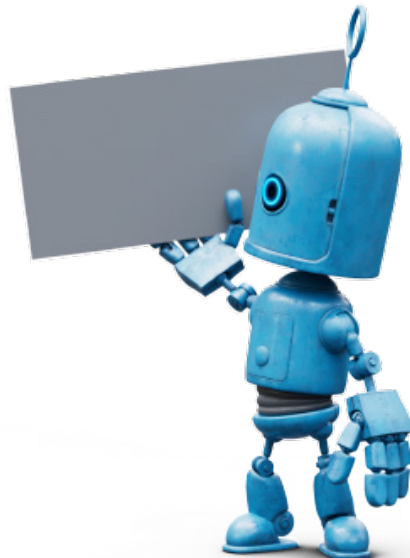
For O2, this presented a big problem. Typically, the network was perceived as being one of the most expensive and as the global pandemic hit, their one historic strength - early access to events and experiences — disappeared completely. What's more, the company also had to close the doors of stores during lockdown.

They needed to maintain relevance with value-conscious consumers and differentiate themselves from the other networks without the use of their biggest USP, O2 Priority.

CREATIVE

Besides O2 Priority, the network has one other big strength - its coverage. For some time O2 had invested in building an infrastructure to ensure it had great coverage across the UK but the problem with communicating this service was that it was invisible.

Enter their affable little robot Bubl, and VCCP London.

VCCP London have a legacy working with mascots and planning director Jenny Nichols tells us that right from the briefing stage, the agency thought a brand mascot would be the answer for O2 for three reasons: Firstly, they knew mascots are proven to be effective for driving long term market share and profit gains (they also created Compare the Market's Meerkats. Secondly, the agency understood that characters are 'powerful message carriers' and 'bring clarity to categories which are hard to understand' or are not symbolised by something tangible or visual. Finally, VCCP knew from experience that, in an omni-channel marketing environment, mascots are incredibly flexible.

"The biggest challenge was devising a creative strategy that would achieve O2's urgent need: to make the brand 'seen' again," explains Jenny. "At a time its service has never been more vital to our lives, we needed to connect with people on an emotional level again - something telcos often struggle to do."

VCCP London had to consider several important things when developing the idea and brief for the character. This character had to solve a problem. So they set out to create a character which 'represented the idea that O2 is always there with you, and for you'

"As a business with a vast array of areas, products, services, touchpoints; we needed a character who could make sense of everything O2 can do for you - fix a screen, sell a phone,

or guide people through a process," adds Jenny. "It was strategically crucial that we create something with as much likeability, usefulness, flexibility and longevity as possible."

For inspiration, Jenny tells us the VCCP team turned to the expert animation studio Pixar, the planners behind the Compare the Market Meerkats, classical literature, and the VFX team behind film-industry renowned characters (The Mill).

"We needed a character with character, and depth. One that was accessible and warm, not wacky or obnoxious. Something that people would actually want to be there with them all the time", she explains. "It had to be useful, have a clear role wherever we'd put it, and send a message about O2. The creative department came back with a small blue robot. O2 was born from the idea that connection is as vital to life as oxygen (hence the bubbles), what better to bring it to life than a robot with a bubble-blowing antenna? It had a humanity to it, without being homo sapien. It could interact with customers in the real world, and easily represent technology."


PRODUCTION

At the centre of the production brief was the concept that Bubl "is the physical embodiment of the O2 network, and brings to life the idea that O2 is always there with you, and for you, through thick and thin." Knowing that Bubl had to feel real to consumers, Jenny explains the VCCP team quickly realised the solution would be a CG one, noting it was "a testament to the team at The Mill that this was the case."

Their choice of studio and advice for brands on choosing the right VFX partner was crucial. "When choosing your VFX company you are also casting. No one can direct a good performance out of a bad actor and how convincing your character's performance is is in their hands."

At The Mill, Creative Director, CG, Anthony Bloor explains the character conception really started with Bubl's personality, "We'd been briefed that he was a friendly, helpful character. Both earnest and hard working, but not perfect. We even knew what kind of music he might like and the fact he doesn't like ducks (something to do with being a bit afraid of water because of the chance of rust)."

Jenny explains the human personality and little flaws in the make-up of Bubl were deliberate, and David Bryan Animation Director at The Mill explains that flawed characters are more
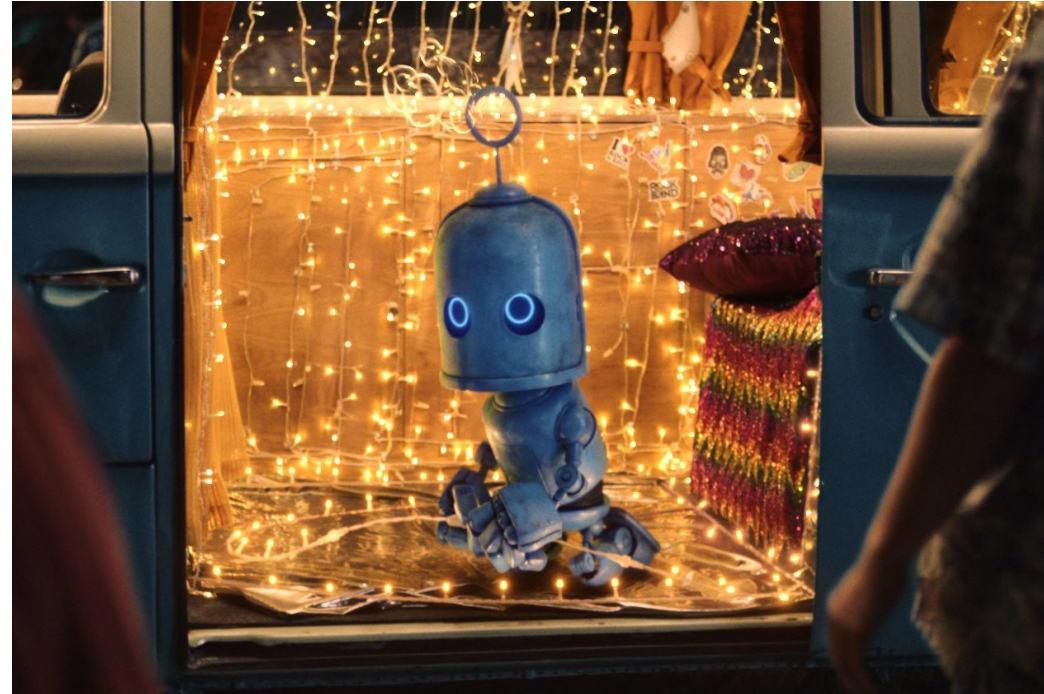
likeable – hence the slightly scuffed appearance and easy nature of Bubl. "We latch on to humanity within characters because we aren't perfect people. A flawed character is always more likeable and will give your character more personality. Brands can and should use these flaws to their advantage, like O2 have with Bubl."

When it came to the physical brief for Bubl, the The Mill team knew they were making a well-used and retro-looking robot but otherwise the brief was fairly broad. "I don't even know how many designs we went through," says Anthony. "It was hundreds of sketches and dozens of 3D concepts, there must have been 50 versions of the eyes alone!"

His size and limitations were also well-deliberated: "We had to keep in mind how he would sit in a scene next to a person too, so his physical size in ratio to head and hand size was a tricky balance. His head and hands are very large for his size. Although he is super articulated, he still can't reach the top of his own head. Rather than try and compromise on the character, though, these limitations were accepted and embraced as something to always keep in mind for the character.

"We decided to make things more difficult for ourselves by not giving Bubl a mouth," laughs Jenny. "No smiles and no talking meant he would have to express his emotions differently. At the heart of the design is Bubl's wand antenna. This is where the iconic and distinctive O2

EFFECTIVENESS

Looking at the effectiveness of Bubl so far, the character's flexible use on all platforms was vital in helping O2 to engage audiences it had traditionally struggled to reach.

Knowing that people wouldn't immediately come running over to them, O2 and VCCP took Bubl to a place where a star can be created overnight — TikTok.

The first ever robot dance off and O2's first foray into the platform certainly made some noise. By choreographing a routine appropriate for the platform and recruiting famous Tik Tok creators to participate in dance battles, Bubl accumulated 42,000 followers in just 48 hours. The videos had somewhere in the region of 15 million views and drove an 8.8% lift in brand awareness in the Gen-Z audience. Hot on the heels of that success, Bubl went on to make a splash all over the UK via Snapchat. Approximately 4.5m million Snapchat users turned their living rooms into ice rinks using AR to mimic O2's Christmas TV ad, and had Bubl skating around their living rooms.

"Interestingly early testing showed us that people warmed to Bubl quickly and were intrigued by him, but perhaps hadn't connected with him on a deeper level. They wanted to understand his personality and quirks and what else he could do," explains Jenny. "As Bubl gained big traction on social media, we could see that it gained more credibility when doing functional tasks. People were beginning to understand why Bubl helped you - because he embodied being there for you and with you."
As O2 and VCCP began to move Bubl's story on they recorded a +15.7% increase in 'puts customers first' perceptions demonstrating the clear connection the mascot was having with people on an emotional level.

Whilst Bubl is still relatively new, data also point to the fact it will have a long-term positive impact for the brand. Not only has O2 achieved their highest NPS score in 10 years, 42% of Gen Z audiences tested feeling more positive about O2.

"It's still relatively early days, but part of the power of Bubl was not creating a completely new distinctive asset for the brand, but rather weaponising the assets the brand has had since inception," concludes Jenny.

bubbles are produced allowing us to ensure Bubl remains the O2 brand icon, and not just another character."

She continues, "funnily, we learnt from Neuro Tracking that people feel upset when Bubl is in danger. This in itself indicates an affection for the character which, for many, is still quite new. We've seen a lot of demand for merchandise, which also reinforces people like the way the character looks. The proportions of the character were also specifically considered when thinking about evoking the right emotions from people - trusted, not perfect, reliable and fundamentally always putting you first (which is why he's small)."

With so many parts to the character of Bubl, VCCP London developed 'the Bubl Bible'. "The Bubl Bible" became the internal religion," says Jenny. "Bubl is not the brand, but a part of the brand. Bubl should always be doing something on behalf of a customer. Crafting these rules turned Bubl from a two dimensional character, into a device that we could use to do everything the brand needed it to."

ALDI & KEVIN THE CARROT

"CG: HOW ELSE COULD WE HAVE DONE IT?"

Client: Aldi
Character: Kevin the Carrot
Agency: McCann Manchester
Production: Psyop (ATL) & CRAFT (Digital)

Headline Stats:
- Market leader in 'Brand Building', 'Differentiation' and 'Emotional Impact'
- Beat UK sales performance target of +5% during all four years of the campaign
- Aldi grew 19x faster than the market in 2016 and 30 x faster in 2019
- System 1's most effective ad of 2020 – beating all other brands and retailers
- System 1's 3rd most effective global Christmas ad of all time.

System 1 Star Rating: To measure an ad's emotional response, System1 uses a five-star rating system. This ranges from 'No Growth' in Share of Voice as depicted by one star, to 'Exceptional Growth' at five stars.

Highest: 5.8
Range: 2.3 - 5.8 out of 6

BACKGROUND

Aldi's loveable Christmas mascot, Kevin the Carrot, burst onto the British and Irish advertising market in 2016. The supermarket retailer had been gaining a huge share of voice in the market since 2010 and was achieving approximately 45% growth year on year following its successful 'Like Brand' and 'Swap and Save' campaigns, developed by McCann Manchester.

<u>In 2016, the UK retail market was worth approx €406 million.</u> Increasing market share by just 1% would increase profits by €4.6 million.

However, Aldi was struggling to maintain their market share over the Christmas period, with core customers often defecting to more expensive supermarkets or those with a full Christmas range. Looking to retain their core customer base over Christmas, the brand and agency McCann were looking to see how they could extend their 'Amazing Everyday' campaign to customers who were typically looking to treat themselves over the festive period.

"We realised that Christmas IS the Amazing Everyday," explains Jamie Peate, Global Head of Retail Strategy / Head of Effectiveness for UK at McCann Worldgroup. "Through research we identified that people recognise that Christmas is actually still a day just like any other but it's different somehow. More magical.

If you think about it, a Christmas dinner is essentially an amazing roast, your house is still your house, but it's decorated and beautiful, town centres become stronger community hubs with annual events, festive markets and lights. So, our creative team wanted to take the most everyday thing we could find, such as a carrot and make it amazing."

Category context

Since 2011 Aldi enjoyed fantastic growth. For the past three years Aldi had the highest YoY growth of all its competitors in a market that was growing at substantially lower rates of 0.41% in 2016 and 3.8 % in 2017.[2]
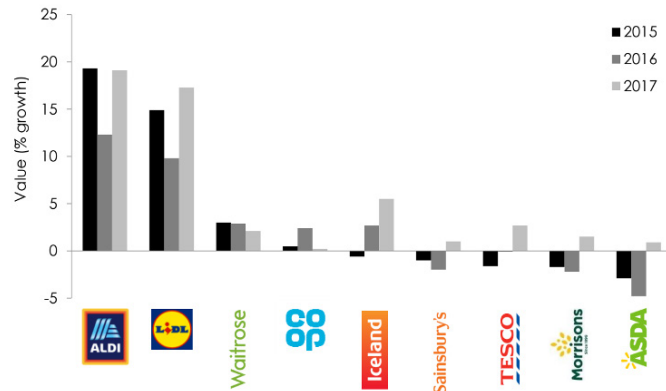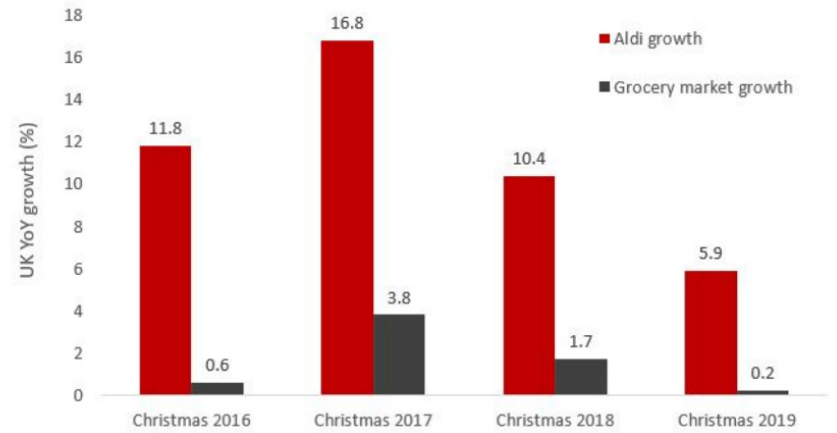

Figure 1: Aldi and competitors' revenue growth between 2015-2017
Source: Kantar Worldpanel, Grocery UK, 52 w/e to 3 Jan 2016, 52 w/e to 1 Jan 2017, 52 w/e to 31 Dec 2017

Source: Kantar, Aldi UK Till Roll, 12 w/e year end 2015-2019

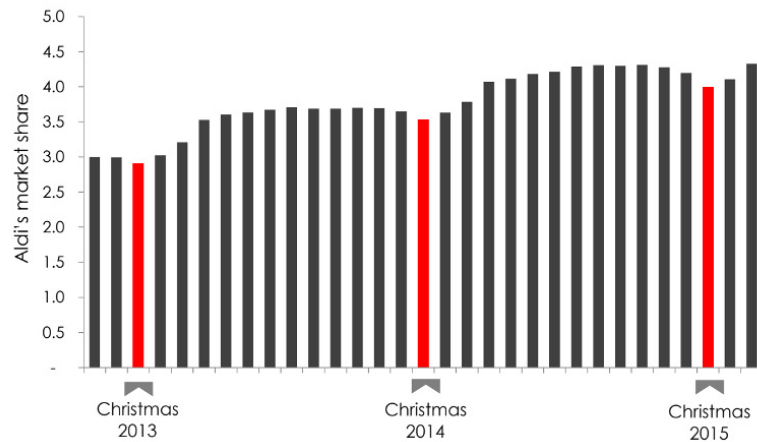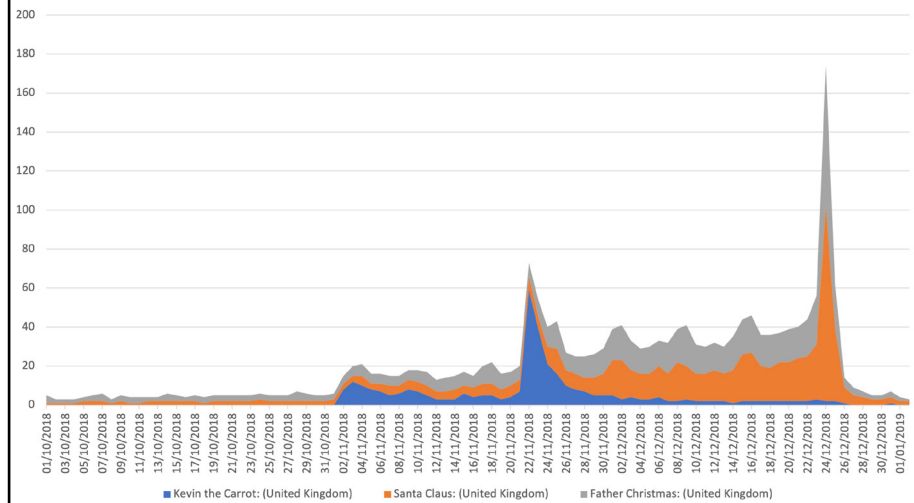Despite its strong growth through the year, Aldi consistently sees a dip in market share each Christmas.

Figure 6: Aldi's market share 2013-2015
Source: Kantar Worldpanel, Market share, Aldi,12 w/e 3 Jan 2016, 4 w/e 3 Jan 2016

THE CREATIVE

Inspired by the millions of children who leave one out for Rudolph, Kevin the Carrot became a device to solve this marketing problem.

The little root vegetable not only walked customers through the whole Aldi range of Christmas products in adverts, he was a relatable character that added magic to the everyday.

Todd Mueller is the founder of animation company Psyop and also directed the spot alongside Kylie Matulick. For Todd, the creative development and writing are paramount to an animated character's success. It's important for brands to understand that an animated character should not be treated as an offshoot of a logo or brand identity. "There's some ground rules to developing good characters and one of the most important ones is that it's not just frosting. For a character to be really compelling there needs to be some obstacles. We need to use all the puppet strings we can to create a connection with the character.

We do see quite often that any expression of challenge can, in a client's brain, question what it says about the brand. But it's absolutely critical to make the character compelling. That's step one: how do we make it compelling? Define all those rules and then start creating."

PRODUCTION

To create the Kevin the Carrot design, McCann Manchester called on the team at Psyop. While McCann kept the character brief largely open, Psyop's Todd Mueller notes that the team's intention was always to have a character that moved away from a more conventional cartoonish appearance. "The first moment we saw the script about a talking carrot, we got quite worried that it would end up being a bit too childlike. We wanted to make sure that even though it was going to be an animated carrot, there was something appealing about him for adults."

To achieve this, Psyop worked to establish a uniqueness and unexpectedness to the character that kept him from feeling too young. "That's how we arrived at the very small eyes and subtle mouth. The arms and legs were designed to feel like roots or nodules that came off actual carrots." At the character's inception, the team certainly had a design in which the eyes were bigger and the face more expressive, but gravitated towards an understated face and let Kevin's movements carry the emotion and the story. "We realised just by the way that you puppet a carrot, you can express a lot of the storyline without a face. That told us we didn't need so much of an expressive face."

The team at Psyop researched deformed, "not ready for prime time" carrots, noting that "the stuff you pull out your own garden" revealed a lot more personality. Avoiding any cartoonish additions, such as shoes or gloved hands, Psyop ensured there was a level of sophistication and idiosyncrasy to the more subtle character design. The team went through around 20 to 30 iterations of the character, going from sketches to rendered drawings and models to eventually land on the carrot seen on screens every Christmas.

Since his launch in 2016, Kevin has gone from strength to strength. He's grown narratively — he now has a wife and three children — and his onscreen appearance has evolved too. It's a great example of how creating a character mascot is such a future-facing decision, as the character stands the test of time by growing up alongside its audience.

Speaking of Kevin's progress across the years, Todd notes: "I think the main thing, from a technical perspective, is that the way his legs and arms move has improved and the green carrot top has become more photorealistic in the way it moves and looks. Even the general carrot-ness over the years has improved. Every time we work on it we use the same face model but use more texture."

Although Todd himself was not surprised by the popularity of Kevin, Aldi certainly was. "Certainly, the first year this was just a one-off, there were no plans to invest in a multi-year campaign until it had this success," Todd says.

But there's more to the success than simply opting to make a CG character. "It's not just enough to have a singing, dancing character. There has to be a story, there needs to be some salt, something compelling for young and old. We've created an asset that is extremely valuable to Aldi and that's another big win in character animation. You're not just making really successful marketing, you're actually building value in an asset."

Look beyond the big TVCs and you really start to see the broader value that Kevin brings to the brand. McCann has been able to create its own social media content with the cheeky carrot. McCann and Psyop worked closely to ensure their Kevin tools would create content of a high standard of craft across all channels. "It's not just production, there's still a lot of creative effort and directing that needs to go into it in order for it to be effective. It's really important to set up the stage so that the lighting, the rates of motion, the setup, are all locked down so that what the character does within that framework still holds true and is in keeping with who that character is. It's not good enough to say you'll do a character campaign and just have these assets able to drive your marketing. For that to be successful each character needs a lot of depth and personality, so the audience actually feels compelled to care about what the brand is doing and saying. When those characters start to veer away from that identity it really dilutes the effectiveness."

Todd asserts that when the mediascape is so dense, it's critical to make brands noticeable. "Having dialogue-driven marketing will never get to the same place as when you have a character that's likeable, unique, and compelling." Neysa Horsburgh, managing director at Psyop agrees. "The beauty

of animation and character is that, while it takes time and resources to create and invent that character, once you have that asset – especially with real-time coming into play – you can leverage those assets in so many different ways across many different platforms. To me it's the golden age, and with technology advancing as rapidly as it does, things that made animation scary in the past are probably going to be less scary in the future."

EFFECTIVENESS

Kevin was a roaring success. In 2016–2019 the Christmas campaigns resulted in Aldi beating its sales performance target by more than +5%, jumping from 19x growth in 2016 to 30x growth in 2019, reducing the customer trade out during December, increasing market share, increasing penetration, improving customer loyalty and increasing sales of premium products.

In 2016 Aldi also released a plush toy of Kevin which sold out within thirty minutes of it landing in stores.

As Kevin's story has developed, so has the campaign's results. On 22nd November 2018, there were almost 10x more searches for 'Kevin the Carrot' on Google in the UK than there was for 'Santa Claus' and 'Father Christmas'. Despite creating more of the toys each year, Aldi's Christmas ad still incites 'carrot-mania' according to the Guardian who reported that customers were still fighting and queuing for the toys when they were released in November 2019.

In a report by Kantar for Marketing Week, the 2019 campaign came out top for effectiveness out of 3000 Christmas campaigns tested across eight key measures. Kevin was the market leader in 'Brand Building', 'Differentiation' and 'Emotional Impact'. The ad was among the top performing in six out of the eight key measures, with its closest rivals only managing to be among the top performers on four. Kantar also shared exclusively with Marketing Week that 'The campaign scored particularly highly on emotional impact and whether people enjoyed the ad — coming in the top 10% of all ads on Kantar's database (not just Christmas ads), as well as driving long-term brand growth.'

In 2020 Kevin was introduced in the German market as Kai Karotte and he was also System 1's most effective ad of 2020, beating all other brands and retailers including John Lewis — scoring 5.8 stars out of 6.

As a result he was also hailed as System 1's 3rd most effective global Christmas ad. Only beaten by long running ads from Coke — 'Holidays are coming' —and Macys.

AWARDS

Aldi's key task was to dissuade its loyal shoppers from trading up and out in the run up to Christmas. In each of the four years of Kevin campaigns, the proportion of customers trading out in the last 4 weeks reduces, falling from -6.45% in 2015 to -3.04% in 2019. Overall, trade-out reduces by 3.41%, bypassing the 3% target.

Source: Kantar, Aldi UK, Till Roll, 4 w/e 31 Dec 2014 to 22 March 2020
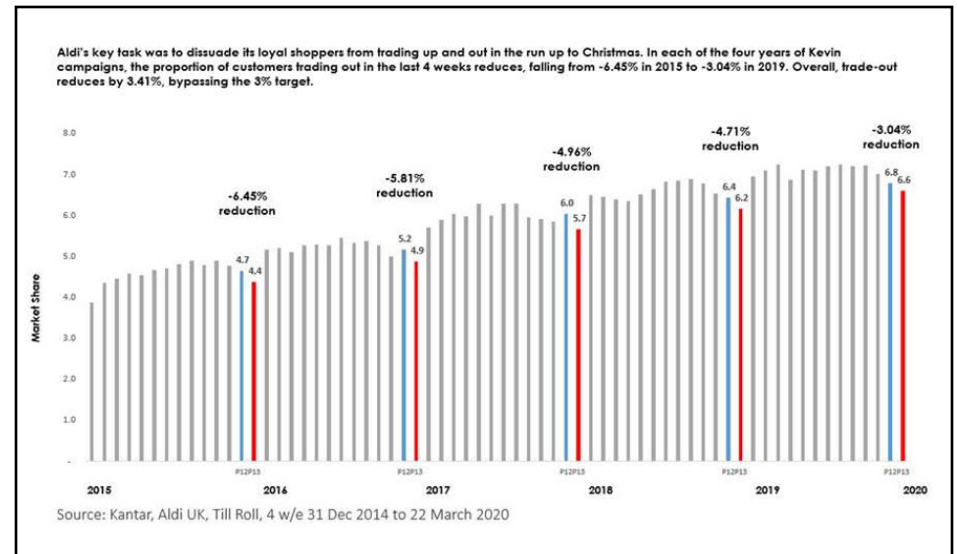
CASE STUDY 3
GEICO & GECKO

"HE'S A GECKO BUT HE GOES THROUGH HUMAN PROBLEMS"

Agency: The Martin Agency
VFX Production: Framestore
Headline Stats:
- 2nd largest market share in Auto Insurance
- 1.5 million YouTube subscribers
- Gecko (the character) has 31.9 K Twitter followers

System1 Star Rating:
Highest: 4.5
Range: 3.5 - 4.5
Average: 3.9

BACKGROUND

In August 1998, the Screen Actors Guild was on strike. This was causing a headache for creative agencies all over the USA as they couldn't use live actors in their campaigns. Were it not for the strike, GEICO and their AOR The Martin Agency might never have ended up with our straight-talking Gecko, who remains their iconic mascot more than two decades later.

In a 2006 USA Today interview, [6] GEICO's Marketing VP revealed that the Gecko would never have been his first choice. "It was not my favourite campaign, personally. But I became much fonder of him as we sold more policies. I'm a big fan of anything that makes our phone ring or website click. He really has helped us, brand-wise."

Steve Bassett, group creative director at The Martin Agency, explains that Gecko was created to help solve an awareness problem. "Twenty years ago, GEICO wasn't nearly the household name it is today. Legacy insurance brands had been advertising a lot longer and had a much bigger share of voice," he says. And so, the Gecko was originally intended as a one-off, fun mnemonic that would stick in the audience's heads.

CREATIVE

Creative inspiration can come from anywhere, and the spark that inspired The Martin Agency team to create a character happened in a focus group. Upon listening to the feedback, both creatives and the client were struck by how often the GEICO/Gecko mispronunciation kept coming up. "The idea was this Gecko was annoyed with GEICO, because people kept calling him for savings on car insurance rather than GEICO," recalls Steve and so, the original 15-second spot was created, first envisioned as a one-off ad.

However, the ad and character proved surprisingly popular. "It became apparent people really liked that character with its British accent and how unusual it was," says Steve, "So, after that first ad ran, we did a couple more. Then we did a couple more and more and more and more". There have been a number of creative changes to the mascot in the ensuing years. Most notable of all is the switch from an upper-class voice (originally provided by Frasier's Kelsey Grammar) to the 'man-of-the-people' accent that you hear in the modern spots. The decision to run with the British accent was, The Martin Agency's Justin Harris explains, a simple case of trying to make the Gecko appear 'smart'.

As with Kevin the Carrot, the secret to Gecko's enduring popularity is that he has been treated not as a symbol or an icon, but as a fully realised personality. "Something that's worked really well for us throughout his lifetime is to treat him like a human. He's a gecko but he goes through human problems," explains Steve.

That drive to give Gecko a more 'human' feel informed a redesign in 2004. As CG technology

6 USA Today, 'Gecko wasn't first choice for Geico', 16/07/2006 https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/advertising/adtrack/2006-07-16-geico_x.htm

improved, the agency saw the opportunity to make him look even more expressive, engaging and, most importantly, human.

For the creatives, it's easy to see how the innate humanity of the character has played such an important role in his success. "I love the conference call spot [7] ", says Steve, "He goes through what we all go through. It's very relatable. He's not infallible, sometimes he makes mistakes, and he has a great sense of humour".

Justin agrees, "when we made him more human, people can start to see themselves a little bit. That certainly helps build trust".

Above all, the GEICO Gecko's appeal and longevity have been a culmination of many astute creative decisions. To sum it up, Justin puts it down to "all those elements together - gecko, human traits and unusual accent - plus don't make him a shell for the company, put him out in the real world with real people and see what happens".

And over two decades later, it's still happening.

PRODUCTION

In order to create the lovable gecko that audiences see on their screens today, Framestore produced numerous concepts and designs. David Hulin, Creative Director at the time, worked on extensive iterations of Gecko's design, exploring a wide range of aspects before deciding on the character's iconic appearance.

GEICO's Gecko has understandably evolved across the years, with his characterisation developing in response to

both the storytelling beats and in order to produce the most appealing CG character. "He used to have very black eyes," explains Creative Director Andy Rowan-Robinson. "But now, we show more iris as it allows us to portray a wider emotional range.

"We've advanced other features in his face to aid his performance, and we ensure we keep him up-to-date with the latest rendering technology. In addition to this, we periodically revisit and refine the qualities in his scale and skin texturing."

Beyond Gecko's physical appearance, his personality also changes and evolves — just as humans do as they age. "The earlier spots are much the same Gecko," notes Andy, "but I like to think he's carrying the culmination of his life experiences with him now."

Not only has Gecko himself evolved, but the way in which he can be utilised by brands and agencies has changed as the years progress. Numerous tools and platforms are now available to help create easy content to share across social

media, in addition to key televised campaigns. Real time systems are now used, allowing artists to record a character as if it's being 'puppeteered' live. With Gecko, animators are able to mix this live puppeteering with stock animations that the character often does — such as pointing or waving — to give an extra level of refinement closer to the finish audiences see in the full televised spots but for use in other media.

Andy also highlights how A.I. technology has begun to show promise when it comes to the evolving capabilities of CG characters, transporting them to different platforms such as game engines and experiential events. "It's relatively straightforward to create all the blends between actions," he notes. "I've seen A.I. be used really well to make minimal animation or motion capture blend really well across a lot less animation inputs to the same effect." With the advancement of the conversational technology that powers digital assistants, Andy says, it's not a huge leap of imagination to soon be interacting directly with a known 3D character in a similar manner.

7 Geico - 'Conference Call', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gghIbUOG7Sk

Such opportunities serve to highlight the innate flexibility of CG characters, something which Andy certainly attests to. "You have a 3D representation of the IP that you can use in multiple formats, on various platforms." With such technological advances, a character can simultaneously live in a full commercial, a 2D billboard, in A.R. on a mobile phone, as a 3D object on a webpage, in VR, or as a video game character. "It can be embedded into any traditional content or live in an entirely made up world," notes Andy. "It's easy to pick up the same character, pose it or animate it, then send it to all these outputs simultaneously."

When it comes to articulating the difference between a good and bad CG character, Andy asserts that ultimately you need depth. Rather than regurgitating brand slogans, it must establish a connection with the audience, giving them a reason to engage. "If you were writing a novel, you would develop interesting multi-faceted characters and the same holds true for CG characters," he says. "How does the character react under pressure? What imperfections do they have that makes us relate to them and believe they are real? What drives them?"

When you watch Gecko, Andy notes, you can see he is reacting to the world around him – making decisions to navigate the little challenges he's set in each spot. "We try and portray this thought process in the animation, just like an actor would portray it in a live-action performance."

When The Martin Agency won the brief for the GEICO account the company was the 9th biggest
Auto Insurance company in the US. Today, they are the second largest with a 13% market share, ahead of Progressive with 11%.

In 2005, the GEICO Gecko was voted as America's 'Favourite Advertising Icon' [8].

Additionally, the GEICO Gecko has amassed an engaged audience that would be the envy of most of the world's brands. In addition to the company's 1.62 million active YouTube subscribers, there are over 500,000 Twitter mentions of GEICO ads over the past year, and each Thursday sees around 130,000 tweets relating to the brand under the #throwback hashtag.

SAMSUNG & OSTRICH

"SAMSUNG AREN'T A BRAND THAT TYPICALLY USES MASCOTS OR CG CHARACTERS LIKE THIS AND HONESTLY WE NEVER THOUGHT THEY'D MAKE IT IN A MILLION YEARS"

Agency: Leo Burnett Chicago
Director: Matthijs Van Heijningen @ MJZ
VFX Production: The Mill
Headline Stats:
- 'Best-Liked' commercial in 2017
- Most awarded network campaign of 2017 at Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity
- Contributed to increased pre-orders of Samsung Galaxy Note8

System1 Star Rating: 5.2

BACKGROUND

Samsung's ostrich flew onto the scene in 2017. Coming off the heels of global technical issues with the Galaxy Note 7 – which knocked $7 billion off its market value [9] – the launch of this 'Do What You Can't' campaign was perfect timing for a brand that needed to win back the public's support with an inspirational story celebrating the power of determination.

Given the scale of the PR problem caused by the Galaxy Note 7's failure [10], the brand needed a bit of communication that was pure emotion, explains Leo Burnett's global strategy director Christopher Bridgland.

"It became a trust issue for the brand and there had been some deserters going from Samsung to the Chinese brands like Huawei and Xaomi," he says, setting the scene. So although trust wasn't the initial objective behind this campaign, it was an issue the brand had and one we thought we could take on through emotional storytelling."

CREATIVE

Luckily, creative agency Leo Burnett Chicago, had the perfect idea sitting on their slush pile. The spot was originally pitched as part of Samsung's 2016 Olympic push but at that times the brand chose instead to focus on real people for the campaign. The idea was on the table for almost a year before it was produced, waiting for the perfect moment to take to the air. Finally, with the launch of the S8 and S8+, Leo Burnett sold in the vital 'Do What You Can't' tagline, bringing it to life with an ambitious Ostrich finding inspiration to do something impossible – all with the help of Samsung's VR technology.

"At the time, Samsung had just launched the S8 phone which was the next big innovation in phone design, being borderless. So, they had a lot of ambition and priorities around this launch and they needed an emotional piece of storytelling to draw people into the brand," says Christopher.

Used only once, Ostrich was never intended to become a mascot for the brand, instead becoming a one-off character used at the perfect moment in time.
The campaign was also pretty unusual for the brand in its execution, explains Matt Blitz, SVP Executive Producer at DDB who worked on the campaign while at Leo Burnett.

9 'Samsung's New Phone Delayed After Reports of Exploding Bat-teries', Time, https://time.com/4475745/samsung-exploding-batter-ies-stocks/

10 Samsung confirms battery faults as cause of Note 7 fires,23/01/17, BBC News https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-38714461

"Samsung isn't a brand that typically uses mascots or CG characters like this and honestly we never thought they'd make it in a million years – as much as they loved the idea," says Matt. "What better way to bring a tagline to life than have a flightless bird be inspired by a piece of Samsung technology?"

Directed by MJZ's Matthijs Van Heijningen and with VFX from The Mill, the Elton John-sound tracked spot brought a magical twist to the abilities of VR technology and created a memorable CG character in the process.

PRODUCTION

Ostrich was a character who defied all reason. She defied the laws of physics and anatomy - as the largest and heaviest bird species, ostriches should not fly. She is not your typical cutesy character design — leathery, raptor-like and intimidating, ostriches tend not to be endearing. So, when it came to production, the big challenge facing director Matthijs Van Heijningen and the team at The Mill was to bring this dreamy big bird to life in a way that was both believable and relatable. Simple, right?

With so many moving parts to juggle and a careful balancing act between realism and expression, the team at The Mill had a big job on their hands with this Ostrich. The experienced crew included creative director Michael Gregory, and animation director David Bryan (with four back-to-back VES animation wins under his belt).

First of all, there was the challenge of designing and building the CG model of an ostrich. Despite The Mill's vast experience of creating animals and their extensive library, they needed to build the ostrich from scratch. She turned out to be one of their most complex creations, but the nuance they achieved underlines the benefit of working in CGI.

One huge challenge in the design and build process was overcoming the bird's inherent ugliness and their quirky, dishevelled textures, explains Michael Gregory. "It's not like you're doing a crow or a robin where the groom is really quite tight. With the ostrich it has this crazy variation of feathers, with a great deal that make up the wings," he says.

The hard work and hours spent tussling with the creation of the Ostrich paid off and the model was so successful that the team at The Mill remember vividly the moment when they first really saw her take shape.

"On any CG character, there's always a key moment where you see all the assets for the first time," says Michael. "That was the kind of pivotal moment on the job when everyone went 'oh wow, this is going to be good.' The first time I saw the work it was just a turntable on black and had a little test on it, so the feathers were all moving. It was utterly amazing, it looked absolutely perfect."

The team quickly realised that the CG model of the Ostrich could be used to do much more heavy lifting in the spot.

"I think The Mill surprised themselves with how great the model worked from a visual and animation standpoint and so they came to us and said, 'we think we should use the model for all these live action shots we weren't planning on using them for,'" says Matt. This was not only due to the difficulty

shooting live ostriches (have you tried telling an ostrich what to do?), but in order to elevate the shots themselves. After swapping out two practical shots with CG, The Mill realised the animation enhanced the story, making the 2D version look less elegant and refined in comparison.

CG was not only the ideal solution for dealing with difficult animals and creating more effective shots, but for establishing a greater emotional connection between the character and the viewer. Matt notes: "The eyes are the windows to the soul. People express emotion a lot with their eyes and they can tell a story." Michael and the team of artists at The Mill took some artistic licence for the dramatic close-up shot of the eye since such emotion was needed to fully support the spot's narrative. The eye itself was built in CG to reflect the clouds above, and contained a dilating pupil to emphasise the importance of the moment. "We can't really control an ostrich's face to react like that but we had to because it's very emotional – it's the moment she was inspired to fly, to think 'holy shit, maybe I can do this too.' Animals don't make those facial expressions. You have to take a little bit of licence to really communicate what you want the emotions to be."

Matt concedes that it's certainly tough to balance the realism of the live ostrich and the potential over-expressiveness of a CG creation. "There was so much research that The Mill did, and so much we did on set with the creatures to get all the dimensions correct.

The lighting and the textures are all super crucial to make it feel fully real. I'd seen some demos from other places, not The Mill, and there's more of a cartoony look to the animals and that's not what we were looking for. The one thing The Mill brings to the table is that they're the best at photoreal." He affirms, however, that there was no other way to create the character than with CG, enhancing numerous aspects from storytelling to character appeal.

Building the model for Ostrich was only the first step in her creation. To truly bring her to life, they had to get the movement and animation spot on.

To get it right, they needed to observe the animals closely. "We cut an animation reel together of real reference stuff," says Michael. "The main thing for me was getting the ostrich's fall right so, like any job, I scrolled through YouTube and found a reference for everything. We found this barrel roll where an ostrich fell over for real and that formed the basis of the animation."

For Michael, success lies in a blend of practical shooting and CG. "You'd never get those little nuances and beats that you have when you go and actually shoot something for real," he notes.

Working on Ostrich turned out to be a huge learning experience for agency producer Matt. One key point he thinks that agencies and marketers should keep in mind is the importance of understanding what you want the character to communicate and sticking to it throughout. "There's a lot of R&D especially if you're creating a new character," he notes. "Be prepared for a long process and for figuring out the character's movements and skeletal structure. There's going to be failures along the way, be patient with it, it's a long process."

The team initially thought the job was going to be done in six weeks, but in reality took three months to complete after they decided to use more CG in the overall mix of the spot. "Don't expect that you're going to do something well in a short period of time. To create the best CG characters and be authentic and realistic to the animal you have to be patient – you have to give it the time it needs to work."

And for Michael, who is more accustomed to the world of CG animals, the blend of live action and CG meant that the job became a lesson in collaboration and craft. "Technology can help us, but it's all about those creative decisions and individual artistry. If you're on a film shoot, everyone from the director to the DP to the CG artist brings a little something. You can get a computer to do stuff for you, but I think the exciting thing is the artist that drives the computer. We're effectively a team of artistic scientists that use technology to keep pushing and pushing."

MULTIPLE FEATHER TYPES
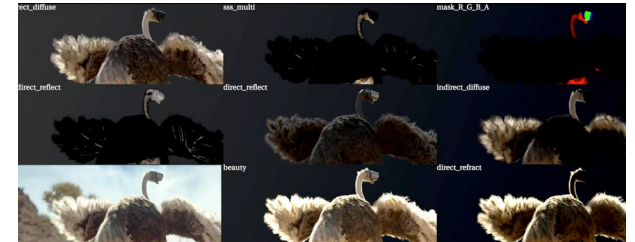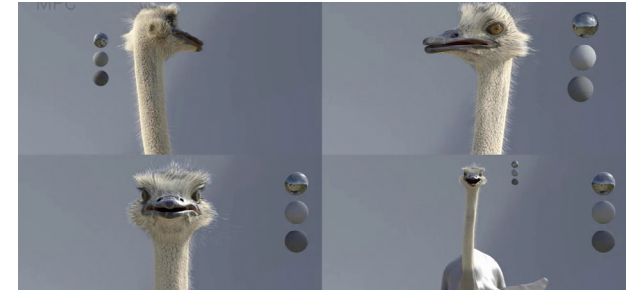
EFFECTIVENESS

In Campaign's Adwatch of the Year 2017 [11], Samsung's Ostrich advert was the favourite when compared to numerous other adverts from the same year [12]. When discussing 'likeability,' the campaign placed 5% above second place, 'liked' by 48% of those surveyed.

Christopher Bridgland explains that the universal appeal of the campaign was based on its underlying humanity. "No matter the country, where you're from or what language you speak, you can connect with the film emotionally.

"It's a human story about trial and failure. This Ostrich wants to try for new pastures and no matter what gets in his way, she has this never-say-die belief which I think would inspire anyone who watches it."

But the effectiveness of the campaign wasn't confined to the UK. Christopher recalls that "it was a global campaign, it ran in Europe, South America, Australia and North America". And the fact that the campaign, and its central character, were so simple was a big part of its ability to do that. "It had no language, it had no voice, it was all pure visual drama on the screen".

Christopher notes that, when testing the ad in focus groups, "in China, Japan, Singapore, South America and Europe the responses were always the same. As soon as it came on people were totally grabbed by it and a few in the audience even cried. Even in the sort of harsh, sterile environment of a focus group it could still emotionally connect, which could only be a good sign".
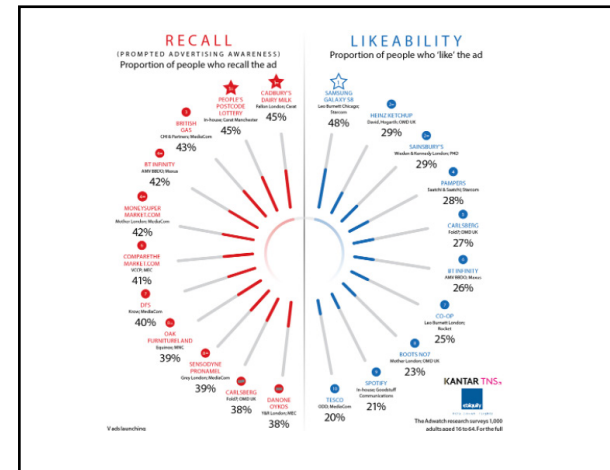
The graph on the right shows that, coming out of a period of damaging PR for the brand, the ad was totally successful in terms of 'likeability'.

The long-term effect that the spot had on the brand's image shouldn't be understated. Christopher explains, "I think this solidified in people's minds who Samsung are.

"Beforehand people saw Samsung as perhaps something of a faceless corporation from Korea. But now it's clear that they stand for something in the world, and that's priceless for building a connection between brand and consumer".

Alongside this, the spot was featured on Ad Age's 'Best of 2017 TV/Film', placing in 9th [13].

Position	Brand	Agency / TV Buyer	Likeability	Published
1	Samsung Galaxy S8	Leo Burnett Chicago / Starcom	48	June 2017
2	Comparethemarket.com	VCCP/MEC	43	Feb 2017
2	Anchor	Creature of London/Carat	43	Feb 2017
4	Amazon Prime	Joint/Initiative	42	Jan 2017
5	Warburtons	WCRS/Mindshare	41	Dec 2017
6	The AA	Adam & Eve DDB/Carat	39	August 2017
6	3 Mobile	Wieden & Kennedy London/Mindshare	39	July 2017
8	Purina	Zenith Optimedia/ AFG Europe	38	July 2017
9	McVities Digestive Nibbles	Grey London/MEC	36	April 2017
10	Ikea	Mother London/Vizeum	34	Sept 2017
10	KFC	Mother London/Blue 449	34	Sept 2017
10	Moneysupermarket.com	Mother London/Mediacom	34	Nov 2017
10	Tesco	Bartle Bogle Hegarty/Mediacom	34	Oct 2017

AWARDS

Cannes Lions
Most awarded network campaign of 2017 | Gold x 3 - Direction, Animation, VFX | Silver x 2 - Adapted Music, Durable Consumer Goods | Bronze x 2 - Entertainment / Online, Cyber Lions / Brand Video

Clios
Gold - Film | Silver x 4 - Animation, Cinematography, Direction, Visual Effects | Bronze x 2 - Editing, Music- Licensed

The One Show
Gold x 3 - Visual Effects, Animation, Direction | Silver - Online / Short Form | Bronze - Television / Long Form | Merit x 2 - Innovation in Moving Image Craft, Cinematography

British Arrows
Special Arrow - BEST CRAFTED COMMERCIAL 2018 | Gold Arrow x 2 - Animation, CGI | Silver Arrow x 3 - Best over 30', Electronics, VFX

London International Awards
Gold x 4 - Use of Licensed Music, CGI Animation, Visual Effects, TV/Cinema/Online Film: Electronic Equipment | Silver - Direction | Bronze x 2 - Cinematography, Sound Editing

D&AD
Graphite Pencil - TV Commercials 61-120 seconds | Yellow Pencil - Special Effects for Film Advertising | Wood Pencil - Use of Music for Film Advertising

AICP Awards
Animation | Licensed Soundtrack | Visual Effects

Kinsale Sharks
Silver - International Film - Broadcast TV, Cinema, Online/Home & Media Electronics | Shortlist - International Film Craft - TV/Online or Cinema/Best Direction

VES Awards
Outstanding Visual Effects in a Commercial | Outstanding Animated Character in a Commercial | Outstanding Compositing in a Photoreal Commercial

Creative Circle
Gold - Film Craft - Best Direction (single) | Gold - Film Craft - Best Animation (single) | Gold -Film Craft - Best Editing (Single) | Gold - Film Craft - Best FX / CGI (single) | Silver - Film Craft - Best Use of Music (Single) | SIlver - Film - Best TV 60s & Over (single)

JOHN LEWIS MONTY THE PENGUIN

"I THINK CGI WAS THE ONLY WAY TO DO THIS"

Client: John Lewis
Agency: adam&eveDDB
Director: Dougal Wilson
VFX Production: The Mill
Headline Stats:
- 29% Market Share
- 5.8% Increase in Sales over Christmas
- 568 Million Impressions

System1 Star Rating: 5.1

BACKGROUND

Monty the Penguin, which hit TV screens in November 2014, is the most iconic of the annual Christmas ads for British department store chain John Lewis.

The Christmas period is a hugely important time of year for John Lewis, accounting for around 20% of overall sales and 40% of annual profits. Momentum and confidence for the year ahead can be established if the brand has a successful festive period, setting the business up well for the following 12 months. John Lewis has come to dominate the Christmas period since launching its iconic adverts, performing well every year - so much so that teams from other brands tell us that their unofficial goal is to 'beat John Lewis' Noteworthy spots such as 'The Snowman's Journey' and 'The Long Wait' have helped establish the brand's festive credentials. In 2014, however, the ambition was much greater and there was pressure like never before. The brand's sister supermarket brand, Waitrose, was suffering a profit squeeze – John Lewis had to be the main profit generator for the group.

With lavish stores, a digital mobile site, and the hybrid 'click and collect,' John Lewis has been at the forefront of omnichannel retailing. For the 2014 Christmas campaign, the brand needed to activate all of these opportunities in order to engage with as many different audiences as possible. The goal was simple: create the most integrated marketing campaign not only in the history of the brand, but any UK retailer.

CREATIVE

Monty came waddling onto the scene, built around one universal insight. Young children often see their favourite toys as real, living friends.
The first step was on settling on the idea of a penguin. adam&eveDDB's chief creative officer Rick Brim recounts how Monty was always either going to be a penguin or a monkey. "I remember a discussion between me and my creative partner about that, and we settled on a penguin partly just because it was Christmassy! But also with a penguin you can tell stories through the eyes or just a little wobble of the neck."

The theme of 'realism' was sustained throughout the creative process. "He had to look real because it was essential to believe this kid was hanging out with a real penguin as opposed to a cartoon penguin," explains Rick.

This meant that CG was the only viable approach. "I think CGI was the only way to do this. It lifts it when you have a real living, breathing penguin on your screen - it takes it away from cartoon-land where it's less believable and therefore maybe a bit less emotional."

The creatives went a long way to ensure that Monty would be as lifelike as possible. For the creatives along with director Dougal Wilson, that process began with a trip to Edinburgh Zoo. After weighing up potential different penguins, the team settled on the Adelie Penguin because of its "expressive eyes".

The behaviours of the Adelie Penguin also guided the team. "[Adelie Penguins] collect rocks as a token of love for their other half, which gave us the idea of splitting up the Lego. So, we matched the actions to real life for total authenticity," recalls Rick.

Whilst many CG characters lean into the 'cute' aspect, the search for authenticity steered the team away from this. "We were conscious not to make it too cutesy because the story was quite saccharine. So, to go overly cutesy on the penguin would have been too much."

The sum of that dedication to realism is a campaign that people connected to on an almost unprecedented scale.

PRODUCTION

Building a character with that level of appeal will always be a challenge, even to the experts. Rick adds, "I don't know what the difference is between a good and a bad character. It's so hard to know for sure, but I think one common thing is eyes that can tell a story or communicate emotion - not necessarily big, but expressive. Because it's all about emotion, you instinctively look at peoples' eyes to connect with them."

"I think that's a common ingredient for success, and it worked for us with Monty".VFX supervisor at The Mill Thomas Harding explains, "The ad has to tell a story, and one of the key aspects of telling a story is conveying emotion. And in this story, it's about a penguin who's a bit lonely. Penguins don't have an especially expressive face, which makes the eyes so important. All the emotion needs to be conveyed through that, and his movement". Focusing on the eyes meant that the team did not have to give them human characteristics that they don't really have in order for audiences to connect

As well conveying the emotion of the spot, it was also essential for Monty's movements to be as realistic as possible. The Mill had a large library of National Geographic footage for the team to comb through, meaning that there was a realistic reference for every scene in the spot.

Over the years The Mill has built its own proprietary systems for different types of creature work, as Thomas explains. "We have in-house tools that have been created and used for fur, feathers and all sorts of aspects of a variety of species, texturing for animals, muscle systems and stuff like that. And we can use them in so many different ways to create really realistic CG creatures."

For Monty the team at The Mill decided to use a full feather system to further push the realism. In the close ups you can see the layers of feathers and as Monty moves you can see the feathers shifting. Even on the wider shots where you might not think that level of detail is necessary since you can't see individual feathers, the way the light bounces off them is different so the team wanted to be true to that.

Overall, Monty is a testament to what happens when consummate craftsmanship comes up against character development and insight. "While obviously the penguin is very cute", says Thomas, "the success I think comes down to the fact that we can identify with the fact he's lonely. What makes it successful is that we've managed to bring these human qualities to a live animal."

According to a 2019 survey in the Radio Times[14], Monty was the star of the UK's best-loved John Lewis ad. And it wasn't just the audience that grew to love Monty — during production, the team fell for him too.

14 The Radio Times - Monty the Penguin Voted Best Ever John Lewis Advert https://www.radiotimes.com/news/2019-11-15/best-ever-john-lewis-christmas-advert/

EFFECTIVENESS

Just one hour after launching on social media, the hashtag #montythepenguin was trending #1 globally on Twitter. With 212,000 tweets about the advert, combined with 165,000 shares on Facebook, the launch of Monty the Penguin resulted in a total of 568 million impressions. When it came to Google, the number of users searching for the campaign hit record levels (see chart below). In total, more than 29 million people watched the advert online - this was more than double the views of 'The Bear and the Hare' from the year before and above any other competitor's campaign that year – this included the much-discussed Sainsbury's advert '1914'. According to YouGov, John Lewis became the third most talked about brand in Britain in 2014.

Over 250,000 people clicked straight through from the ad to the John Lewis website, with Monty and Mable soft toys selling out on the day the campaign launched online. Profit from the campaign merchandise was so high, it paid for the advertising by itself.

In the days after the toys sold out on the official online store, they were found advertised on eBay for up to £499, a considerable mark-up from the original prices (£95 for a giant Monty to £12 for a smaller toy). Sales of penguin toys on eBay soared by 300% when the ad aired, with the online retailer seeing 6,000 searches for 'Monty' and 250 for 'Mabel'. Between the 6th and 17th of November 2014, a total number of 2,638 penguin toys were sold on eBay, equating to an average of 240 purchases a day.[15]

Since Monty, even retailers like Amazon, which is a competitor to John Lewis, sells fake John Lewis merchandise at Christmas, based on the character. The power of that character is so much that it transcends the advert and transcends business, and that all really started with the immense popularity of Monty.

Compared to 2013 numbers, Christmas sales were up 5.3%. Such a figure allowed John Lewis to triumph over all its major rivals for the sixth consecutive year and contributed to a spectacular set of year-end results. Gross sales increased by 7.5%, taking market share to its highest ever at 29%. This was the biggest increase in market share since the brand began supporting its business with emotional advertising. Customer numbers also grew 4.8% year on year, and spend per customer was up 3.6%.

John Lewis Advert: (Worldwice)
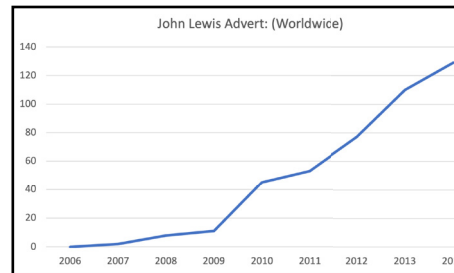
AWARDS

Cannes Lions
2015: Cannes Lion Bronze - Integrated
2015: Cannes Lion Silver - Film
2015: Cannes Lion Gold - Film Craft
2015: Cannes Lion Grand Prix - Film Craft
2015: Cannes Lion Gold -
Branded Content & Entertainment
2016: Cannes Lions Grand Prix Creative Effectiveness

Creative Circle
2015: Gold Award

British Arrows
2015: 2 x Gold Arrows & 1 x Silver Arrow

One Show
2015: Silver Pencil - Consumer Television / Over 60 Second - Single 2015: Silver Pencil - Online films & Video / Short Form - Single

ANDY
2015: 4 x Gold ANDY's

D&AD
2015: 5 x Wood Pencils

Eurobest
2015: 2 x Grand Prix
Creative Effectiveness Award

2 x Gold Awards
Silver Award
Bronze Award

Effies
2016: Gold Effie - Retail

15 The Independent, 'Penguin toy sales up 300% on eBay following John Lewis 'Monty' Christmas advert', https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/penguin-toy-sales-up-300-on-ebay-following-john-lewis-monty-christmas-advert-9875694.html

THE PROCESS OF CREATING CHARACTERS: A BRAND MARKETER AND AGENCY PRODUCER FAQ

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE MILL

After delving into these cracking case studies, you might be feeling the appeal of character creation. If you are looking to create a character for a single campaign or for ongoing use, though, where do you start?

The Mill has been behind many of the most recognisable CGI characters of recent years, both in adland and beyond. From John Lewis' Buster the Boxer to Disney's live action remake of The Lion King, the studio is responsible for some of the most compelling creatures to hit the screen in recent years. That means they've got a wealth of experience as well as an arsenal of tools, tricks and assets to draw from.

*We spoke to Head of Creature Development at The Mill, **Fabian Frank**, to get everything you need to know about the process of creating CG characters.*

What is the usual process for creating a CG character and when should we seek the help of a VFX Company?

Developing a CG character is a collaborative exercise. We are working closely with directors, agency and brand creatives to find the best and most cost-effective way to achieve a project. Getting involved in the creative process as early as possible is always beneficial.

What should we come armed with in the briefing stages?

At the beginning of every character project we try to understand the personality and requirements of our CG hero. What are we trying to achieve? What emotions do we want to convey and how does this connect to the brand's identity?

A written character brief or a quick chat to outline the framework is usually enough to get started. Our art department would then start to put together some concepts and conduct extensive research.

This can range from character studies for non-photoreal creatures or reference shoots of real animals. We combine the real world references with the narrative of the story to create our character, not just how it looks, but how it feels, behaves and emotes.

Roughly how long does it take to create a CG character — what is the ideal length of time needed for concept through to completion of design?

The required time to complete a CG character from concept to final shots totally depends on the complexity of the task. This can range from a couple of weeks to a few months. By being involved in the creative process early we can work out more efficient workflows to streamline the process.

What time is needed to use this character in a TV ad vs. a digital ad?

Digital content becomes more and more important and also the quality the audience expects from digital ads doesn't differ from the classic TV ads anymore. You hear a lot, this is just for digital, but audiences have the same expectations for quality if they are viewing online or TV or a film. This goes for characters and all VFX work we do. The media shouldn't impact the quality.

This then means the process and timings can be very similar for all types of media, but to keep up with the increasing demand for more content and quicker turnarounds, we explore different techniques like real-time rendering. This allows us to create and version creatures in real time and export out quickly. This gives audiences additional avenues to engage with their favourite characters. At The Mill we have a variety of tools that make this possible for brands allowing them to create more extensions of their characters across multiple channels.

What are the benefits of brands creating a CG character?

CG characters can be a strong tool to shape a brand's identity for years. Just think about the Duracell Bunny. It was introduced in 1973 and is still iconic.

People connect with characters, CG or real. Their big advantage over a real animal cast is the flexibility. A CG character can be adapted for different media and easily repurposed for future campaigns at a fraction of the cost. Also, if using a CG character, you have complete control over its performance and in advertising when we only have a brief window to get a message across, it is important every aspect works towards the key message.

How long can you use the CG materials for?

This is totally open and can be tailored to the brand's needs, from a one-off commercial to campaigns running for years. A great advantage of a CG character is how it can grow alongside your audience, meaning people are developing an emotional attachment to the character. For a brand, that's priceless.

How easily can the character be adapted for different platforms and media?

Adapting the character for different platforms is usually not required, and we want to make sure it looks the same and is recognizable across all media. After all, the character is the face of the brand.

The only exception is VR and interactive content which has different technical requirements. The character needs to be optimized to be rendered on the fly at a high frame rate which can be a challenge in itself when it comes to hair or feathers.

Once made can a brand own the character and adapt it themselves?

At Technicolor Creative Studios we are using propitiatory tools to achieve the quality and photorealism our clients expect. For example, our grooming tool Furtility which was used on *The Jungle Book*, *The Lion King*, and commercials like John Lewis Buster the Boxer.

Those tools are tightly integrated into our pipeline and hard to extract. These tools allow us to ensure the quality is consistent across the whole campaign and across all media, we offer a full service from TVC to digital content as well as VR, immersive and real-time applications.

What sort of tools and platforms are available for brands/agencies if they want to then take this CG character can create easy social content?

The options are endless. For John Lewis' Buster the Boxer, we created a VR experience, accompanying the main advert, where the audience could jump on the trampoline and choreograph the animals themselves.

Combining traditional media channels like TV commercials with social media, VR experiences and mobile apps gives brands a great exposure. But it really starts with the objective of the campaign, from there we can really recommend approaches for brands and adapt CG characters across all media. And there are a lot of ways using real-time rendering that we can quickly create version of a character for use in social media or other experiences where your audience wants to directly engage with a character.

Some people might worry that a CG character might be a bit restrictive — how flexible can CG characters be when it comes to adapting to complex media strategies? Can you talk about the technological advances that have allowed brands/agencies to take CG characters to different places?

CGI has come a long way in the last decade. Not only has quality improved but turnaround times have decreased. What would have needed hours and hours to render a few years ago can be turned around a lot quicker nowadays. This means adapting to new demands and creating content becomes faster and more efficient, giving us and the clients more freedom to focus on the creative part, rather than being restricted by technical limitations.

In addition to traditional VFX work, new technologies like real-time and VR play an increasing role in CGI content creation. Characters created for a TVC can be adapted to work in real-time or VR applications, giving brands a broad spectrum of possible media strategies.

How has the cost of creating a CG character changed in the last decade? Has it gone up or down drastically?

Software and hardware have evolved drastically, meaning faster feedback, quicker turnarounds and more efficient workflows. Even the Holy Grail of CGI, humans, are nowadays believable and convincing.

 But the creative challenges of crafting an engaging character and an impactful film has remained the same. It is down to the skills of the artists using the tools.

SUMMARY / KEY TAKEAWAYS

THE DESIGN

Whilst there may be no out-of-the-box formula to creating a successful CGI character, there are some qualities that many of the top-tier examples share.

Firstly, a focus on the character's eyes appears essential for conveying emotion. Particularly for characters who do not speak (Monty the Penguin, the Samsung Ostrich), designers successfully sought to have large and expressive eyes communicate the mascots' feelings. With Monty the Penguin, for example, the audience understands his loneliness and desire to meet another penguin in part through how we read his facial expressions.

Whilst brands may be concerned that giving a character larger eyes would give them a more cartoonish (and thus less realistic) feel, the rationale behind them is based on real-world animals. The Adelie Penguin was chosen as the basis for Monty because of its expressive eyes. This allows audiences both young and old to connect with the character through that essential human emotion.

Secondly, a common (and perhaps related) trend is imparting human qualities and behaviours onto non-human characters. Whether it be a real-world name ('Kevin' the Carrot) or a recognisable characteristic (the GEICO Gecko's loveable Britishness), successful characters tend to be humanised, and often placed in real-world scenarios. The GEICO Gecko, for example, was introduced in a press conference and is frequently depicted in office scenarios alongside human actors.

Finally, a drive towards realism is shared across multiple characters. Even for characters not seen in a clear real-world environment such as Kevin the Carrot, the production team at Psyop always intended to push the realism to make the mascot as truly carrot-like as possible. In fact, the team recall studying real-world 'deformed' carrots as part of a purposeful steer away from what could have been a very cartoon-like character. Whether it be the photorealistic plant on Kevin's head or the hyper-realistic feathers on Monty the Penguin, grounding CG characters in the real world appears to be a common ingredient for success.

THE IMPACT

This report shows that a CG character can meaningfully impact your brand in an enormously diverse number of ways.

Characters studied in this report have been responsible for carving out enormous social media audiences for brands that may never have been reachable beforehand. The GEICO Gecko, for example, boasts over one and a half million YouTube subscribers for his ads, with each subscriber receiving a push notification each time the brand has a new ad featuring its iconic mascot. On Twitter, Compare the Market's Aleksandr the Meerkat has tens of thousands of followers, with his individual tweets regularly retweeted thousands of times. These are two examples of the enduring brand loyalty that can be inspired through a quality CG mascot.

CG characters also have a proven track record of creating revenue streams in unexpected ways. John Lewis now makes a yearly habit of creating merchandise based on the star of each Christmas ad. The toys are consistently strong sellers and have created an additional revenue stream for the brand that wouldn't have been possible without the CG character.

Research carried out by System1 also demonstrates the advantages of using a character fluent device in your campaigns over a long period of time. The findings show how using a character can drive up the emotional resonance of your campaigns as well as brand recognition over time. A long-running campaign with a character fluent device will, on average, increase market share gain by 41% (compared to 29.7% for long-running campaigns not featuring one).

There are few advertising techniques that can drive positive change for your brand like a quality CG character. Whether it be a long-running mascot (the GEICO gecko) or a one-off character (Monty the Penguin), the potential benefits are enormous and multi-faceted.

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CREATIVE STUDIOS

TECHNICOLOR.COM/CREATE
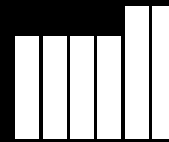
THEMILL.COM

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