

Where the wild brands are: some thoughts on anthropomorphic marketing

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Throughout history, humankind has had a love-hate relationship with wild animals. On the one hand, we fear and detest powerful predators, especially those that destroy our crops and kill our livestock. On the other hand, we envy and admire their speed and grace, adorn ourselves in their fur and feathers, and worship them as totemic deities who symbolise our tribes, our teams, our territories. Humankind's bestial bent is no less apparent in marketing, where brand animals, mascots and icons are all-but ubiquitous, be it the Lacoste crocodile, the Andrex puppy or Coca-Cola's cuddly polar bears. This paper considers marketing's anthropomorphic propensity, attempts to account for its omnipresence and conducts a content analysis of extant brand icons, which reveals that the "closer" an animal is to humanity, the more likely it is to be adopted by marketers and advertisers. An advertising icon life cycle is posited and four beastly branding strategies are identified.

Keywords Brand animals, Anthropomorphism, Aleksandr Orlov, Icon life cycle

In the United States, an animatronic duck with an attitude problem dramatically boosts the market share of Aflac, a nondescript life assurance company. In India, a dependably devoted dog called Cheeka catapults a lowly telecoms service into the subcontinent's supplier of choice. In Nigeria, Elephant extra-power soap powder cleans up in a competitive yet rapidly growing market for household detergent. In Japan, the country's newly-appointed tourism ambassador to China and Hong Kong is none other than Hello Kitty. In France, the venerable Michelin Man is reinvented as a pumped-up superhero, his days as a bon vivant conveniently forgotten. In Canada, Knorr's low-sodium side dishes are shilled by 'Salty', a tearful salt cellar who's been unceremoniously cast onto the condiment scrapheap. In Ireland, meantime, the spoof biography of Mr Tayto, a popular snack food spokespotato, outsells all but the latest cookery and diet books.

Approximately fifty years after Leo Burnett, the legendary American adman, came up with a host of unforgettable marketing "critters" including Tony the Tiger, Charlie the Tuna and Morris the Cat, brand icons are back with a bang (Amos 2010). Far from being considered crude and gimmicky – an amateurish tactic employed by those whose marketing understanding is

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limited to 4Ps, 3Cs, SWOT and suchlike – creating compelling brand mascots is the money shot of the moment (Connell 2010). At a time of severe economic duress, when worldwide advertising spend is disappearing like snow off a shovel, anxious executives are seizing anything that works. And since brand mascots work brilliantly, brand mascots it is (Brown 2010).

Meerkat manner

Nowhere is mascot mania better illustrated than in the case of Aleksandr Orlov. The brand ambassador for a price comparison website – surely the epitome of commodity products – Aleksandr Orlov is a meerkat, an aristocratic Russian meerkat, no less. Brandishing a flipchart and a pointer, he burst onto Britain's television screens in January 2009, with an ad that chastised those who confused his website (comparethemeerkat.com) with a similarly named price comparison website (comparethemarket.com). Resplendent in his red velvet smoking jacket, he patiently explained the difference between 'meerkat' and 'market', reiterated that the two websites were entirely unrelated and instructed those looking for the cheapest car insurance to conduct their research more carefully (Judge 2009; Sweney 2010).

Quirky, yes; daft, undoubtedly; predicated upon an appalling pun, undeniably. But before long Aleksandr Orlov's catchphrase, "Simples", was part of the British vernacular, gleefully regurgitated by schoolkids up and down the country. Better yet, his meerkat website, which really existed and really did compare rodents in a variety of poses, rapidly racked up 3.6 million hits. His Facebook profile likewise acquired 700,000 friends and his Twitter stream soon gathered 22,000 eager followers, who hung on his every tweet. More importantly, the price comparison brand behind the brouhaha rose from 16th to 4th in terms of customer traffic and its sales more than doubled in a matter of months.

Once up and running, Aleksandr Orlov was irresistible. A series of follow-up ads filled in the noble meerkat's back story – a tearful tale of painful exodus from the Kalahari Desert, followed by a demoralising trek across monotonous Russian steppes, briefly interrupted by an epic battle with malevolent mongooses led by Mongis Kahn – and reiterated its "Simples" message. Condemnation by the PC brigade for his laughably fake east European accent further endeared Orlov to the great British public, as did his 'Meerchat' podcasts with celebrities like David Hasselhoff. The momentum was maintained, moreover, with the aid of plush toys, pop songs and, in keeping with best marketing 2.0 practice, an interactive website featuring games, quizzes, outtakes, mashups, text alerts, wallpapers and what have you (Bussey 2010).

Such was Aleksandr's popularity, indeed, that London Zoo reported a vast increase in visitor numbers to the meerkat enclosure, though the ultimate accolade came at the end of 2009 when Comparethemarket's ads were voted the third most popular campaign of the decade, ahead of such acknowledged classics as Sony's *Balls* and Honda's *Cog* (Campaign 2009). Just about everyone concurred that a Russian rodent was the saviour of British advertising at a time of widespread despair and retrenchment. Meanwhile, envious brand managers around the country were telling their advertising agencies to "get off their butts and find me a meerkat" (Marketing 2009).

Keep it simples, stupid

It remains to be seen whether Aleksandr Orlov will last the course like Tony the Tiger and Charlie the Tuna – still pitching their products after half a century of unstinting service – or if he'll follow the flash-in-the-pan route of Levi's Flat Eric, Pets.com's Sock Puppet or the late lamented Taco Bell Chihuahua (Mitchell 2010). However, his staggering success is a timely reminder that gimmicky is good, that best marketing practice doesn't necessarily involve sophisticated customer retention strategies, let alone structural equation analyses of carefully calibrated brand scenarios. On the contrary, the meerkat was a desperation creation, a classic spur-of-the-moment, deadline-driven stroke of serendipitous marketing genius – just like the Marlboro Man, the Aflac duck, the Pillsbury Doughboy and the inimitable Michelin Man (Table 1, *overleaf*).

Relying on spokespersons may seem like a slap in the face for modern marketing science, proof positive that when push comes to shove marketing is cheap and cheerful and unashamedly cheesy, but the underpinning processes are profounder than they appear. Anthropomorphism, the act of endowing animals with human characteristics, is a universal trait, ancient and ineradicable (Mitchell et al 1997; Daston and Mitman 2005). From the cave paintings of Neolithic man, through the gods and goddesses of Ancient Greece, via the beast fables of Aesop, Apuleius, Andersen and Adams, to the cartoon capers of Mickey and Minnie, Tom and Jerry and the indefatigable Bugs Bunny, humankind has never been reluctant to anthropomorphise (Bleakley 2000; James 2005).¹ The totem poles of native Americans, the signs of the Chinese zodiac, the constellations in the heavens and the muscle-bound mascots adopted by sports teams and university colleges are testament to the ubiquity of anthropomorphism, as are our everyday interactions with companion animals, our pet names for cars, boats, computers etc and the kitsch collections of zoomorphic ceramics that clutter our dwellings (Baker 2001).²

If we hoi polloi are personifiers one and all – they don't call us "the herd" for nothing – the same cannot be said of our scientific elite (Kennedy 1992). Natural scientists are exhorted to eschew anthropomorphism at all costs, since it is nothing less than an "*unalloyed error*", an "*intellectual failing*", a signifier of "*sloppy thinking*" (Crist 1999). However, as the irredeemably anthropomorphic remarks of everyone from Charles Darwin

¹ This very brief list could be extended almost indefinitely. Popular culture, in particular, is replete with anthropomorphism. Consider cartoon strips (*Peanuts*, *Garfield*, *Fred Basset*), graphic novels (*Maus*, *Fables*, *Ninja Turtles*), rock bands (Eagles, Fleet Foxes, Gorillaz), hairstyles (ponytail, cowlick, mullet), dance steps (foxtrot, bunny hop, tarantella) and, not least, figures of speech (herding cats, jumping the shark, pig in the python).

² The formations of ceramic ducks flying across our dining rooms are surpassed only by reproductions of "dogs playing pool" paintings, such as Arthur Sarnoff's *Hustler* and *Jack the Ripper*. When it comes to high class critter kitsch, Salvador Dali's *Lobster Telephone* springs to mind, as does Jeff Koons' prodigious *Puppy* (Ward 1991).

Table 1 Nunc est bibendum

One hundred years ago, the French marketing magazine *La Publicité* editorialised on anthropomorphism. Just about every brand then popular had either adopted an anthropomorphic mascot or personified its package design. Bars of soap, plates of pasta, cans of oil, tins of polish, suites of furniture, strings of sausages pens and pen holders, patent medicines, manual typewriters, bottled waters and a battalion of mechanical mascots made up of screws, bolts, pistons, nuts, and more, were being eagerly anthropomorphised by ebullient advertisers. So much so, that *La Publicité* felt the fad had gone too far. Most brand mascots, it maintained, were stilted, contrived and derivative. With one noteworthy exception: Michelin's Bibendum.

Bibendum was conceived in 1894 when André and Edouard Michelin, the brothers behind the company, noticed how a display of rubber tyres looked a lot like a human torso. Later, in collaboration with graphic designer O'Galop, this tumescent tower of tyres was turned into a totemic advertising mascot, albeit by accident. Touting for business, O'Galop showed the brothers a speculative sketch that had already been rejected by a Munich brewery. It comprised a pot-bellied caricature of Gambrinus, the legendary king of Flanders who invented brewing, holding up a foaming flagon of beer whilst exclaiming in Latin, *Nunc est bibendum!* (now is the time to drink!).

Fortunately for O'Galop, André Michelin had previously used a similar expression at a civil engineering conference, when he claimed that his company's proprietary pneumatic tyre "*drinks up obstacles*". Inspired, O'Galop promptly redrew Gambrinus as a rotund tyre-man holding up a beer beaker filled with sharp nails, shards of glass and assorted road surface detritus. *Nunc est bibendum*, furthermore, was freely translated as "*the tyre that drinks up obstacles*". And in April 1898, the inaugural poster of the Michelin Man, later nicknamed Bibendum, duly appeared.

Once born, Bibendum didn't stand still. On the contrary, the chubby, cigar-smoking, lorgnette-wearing icon was soon exploited to the full. Facing fierce competition despite a rapidly growing market, the Michelin brothers sensibly refused to stint on brand building. O'Galop produced more than 300 separate designs, most featuring the rubber man in a host of poses, some satirical, some historical, some sporting, all brilliant, all boisterous, all completely over the top. Before long, Bibendum bestrode the globe, both literally and metaphorically, since the increasingly multinational company's mascot was often drawn at superhuman scale. The Michelins' demiurge even produced his own Ten Commandments, including "*thou shalt take the turn in the road with all due precaution, like a good family man*".

Many might imagine that there's nowhere to go after holding up the planet, Atlas-like, or sitting astride Sicily, smiling. However, the mascot cannily reinvented himself as a public servant, the guardian angel of road users. He started producing much-admired guides to good food and lodgings, as well as the all-important maps that helped travellers find their way to Michelin's recommended waystations. The company, in addition, provided a free route-finding service for customers and lobbied hard for necessary infrastructural improvements, such as the successful 1912 campaign to systematically number France's roads and highways. When not protesting, what's more, Bibendum found time for the joys of family life. He got himself a wife, Mrs Michelin (who promoted air pumps), a bouncing baby boy, Bib (who was responsible for bicycle tyres) and an ever-faithful hound (who bounded along in Bibendum's pneumatic footsteps).

As the years rolled by, however, the Michelin Man gradually shed his adoring family and lost a fair amount of weight. In the aftermath of the First World War, motor car tyres became progressively wider – the so-called 'Comfort' tyre was introduced in 1923 – and, accordingly, Bibendum was drawn with fewer and fewer bands around the midriff. His torso was reduced from eleven tyres to four, his arm rings were halved and, in a related move, he lost his trademark cigar, lorgnette and rambunctious demeanour. The upshot was a much slimmer, more youthful, reliably reassuring appearance, which the mascot retains to this day, despite numerous sales territory-necessitated adjustments. The sybaritic style of the early ads – a corpulent, drink-swilling middle-aged man – has been superseded by an athletic, ever-youthful look, such as the famous face-forward, fist-pumping, 'Running Bib' designs of Walter Storzuk.

Source: Adapted from Darman (1997)

(“*animal emotions*”) to Richard Dawkins (“*selfish gene*”) amply demonstrate, eradicating it is much easier said than done (Henninger-Voss 2002). When the hugely expensive Hadron Collider failed to function properly, for example, a spokesperson for CERN attributed the failure not to the machine’s “*teething troubles*” (that clichéd anthropic attribution) but to a minor “*temper tantrum*” (one hesitates to think what’ll happen when the black hole-replicating collider goes postal).

Needless to say, the prevalence and persistence of anthropomorphism has generated much academic discussion. The subject has been studied by biologists, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, literary critics and consumer researchers, to name but a few (Daston and Mitman 2005; Dotson and Hyatt 2008; Fournier 1998; Kiesler 2006; Levy 1999; Stern 1988).³ Innumerable terms pertaining to aspects of anthropomorphism have been coined, including “animism”, “reification”, “personification”, “anthropocentrism”, “anthropodential” and the “pathetic fallacy”. Diverse explanations of the phenomenon have also been posited (Hirschman 1994). For some scholars, it is a developmental trait, associated with childhood in general and the hunter-gatherer “childhood” of the human species in particular.⁴ For others, it is a form of wish fulfilment inasmuch as humankind makes sense of strange and alien surroundings by assuming that the human and non-human worlds are congruent. Hence our tendency to see faces in the clouds, men on the moon, horses in the surf and portraits of Jesus in pepperoni pizzas. Yet others of an evolutionary psychology bent contend that it’s a primordial urge that helps humans identify potential predators, which are often hard to spot in their natural settings. We see rocks as bears and mistake trees for tigers, because it is in our best interest to do so. Getting it wrong makes people feel foolish. Getting it right means survival (Guthrie 1995).

Regardless of the reasons for humanity’s anthropomorphic inclination, its ubiquity is not in doubt. If anything, anthropomorphism is increasing rather than decreasing in intensity (Balcombe 2010). Widespread concern over animal rights and endangered species, coupled with recent advances in cognitive ethology – that is, attempts to assess mammals’ mental states – have given rise to a new appreciation of animal intelligence, emotions, consciousness, welfare (McFarland 2008). When a dog places its tail between its legs, it is unscientific to infer that the creature feels “shame”. However, it is equally unscientific to assume that the dog doesn’t feel something similar to shame. There is no way of knowing (Sober 2005). What’s more, as humankind is increasingly divorced from the natural world through urbanism

³ For a discipline that aspires to scientific status, marketing is remarkably sanguine about anthropomorphism. The unmitigated horror with which it is regarded in the natural sciences, is completely absent in marketing. This suggests that marketing is much less scientific than it purports to be, which is true enough, though natural scientists are coming round to the notion that anthropomorphism, albeit unwelcome, is well nigh unavoidable (Connell 2010).

⁴ As you might expect, this non-PC point of view dates from the early years of the 20th century, when Durkheim, Spencer and Evans-Pritchard were in their pomp (see Guthrie 1995, especially chapter one).

and industrialisation and computerised intermediation, wild animals loom ever larger in the collective unconscious (Berger 2009). The much-vaunted infantilisation of consumer society is also conducive to anthropomania (Barber 2007), since childhood is the crucible of the animistic assumption “*that things such as the sun, the moon and the wind are alive*” (Guthrie 1995, p. 215). The massive popularity of movies like *Madagascar* and *Ratatouille*, computer games like *EyePet* and *SimAnimal*, websites like *Lolcat* and *Neopets*, iPhone apps like *Baloonimals* and *Angry Birds*, television series like *Peppa Pig* and *Shaun the Sheep*, and newly-emergent literary genres like animal noir,⁵ bear witness to anthropomorphism’s inexorable advance.

Of all the domains in which anthropomorphism runs rampant, it is arguably most rampant among managers (see Fournier 1998; Freling and Forbes 2005; Gabriel 2004; Spears et al. 1996). The much-maligned language of businesspeople is replete with 800lb gorillas, apes in the corner office, getting ducks in a row, big hairy audacious goals, cash cows, fat cats, dead dogs, fail whales and weasel words beyond number (Conniff 2008; Thorne 2007). Its gurus peddle parables about purple cows, black swans, dancing elephants, orbiting hairballs, long tails, animal spirits, hive minds, hidden hands, cheese-moving mice, storytelling squirrels and so forth (Salmon 2010). Our concepts and theories are predicated on personification – product life cycles, marketing myopia, store personality, viral marketing, buzz marketing, brand DNA, relationship marketing – as illustrated by this far from atypical excerpt from a recent textbook:

Every brand, like a person, has its character, possesses the unique traits which configure its ways of conducting relationships, the expression and demonstration of its own inner universe. It goes without saying that each character has a temperament which can take on numerous representations: happy, melancholic, extrovert and closed, extrovert and simple, friendly or standoffish. What is important for us is that the success of a brand is linked to its character, just as is the development of interpersonal relations between individuals.

(Fioroni and Titterton 2009, p.39).

Organisations, furthermore, are routinely regarded as organisms, with brains, hearts, lungs, limbs and the like, in a kind of managerial equivalent of Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, which considers the earth a living, breathing, self-regulating entity (Morgan 2006). Indeed, the very idea of the corporation rests on the 1862 ruling that a company is a person with all the legal rights of a human being, plus the not inconsequential benefits of immortality (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2005). Viewed in this context, advertising characters are but a small component of the anthropophilia that pervades business and management, albeit a venerable and highly visible one. It is no accident that the creation of the first brand characters, such as the Quaker

⁵ Animal noir is a cross between beast fable (*Jungle Book*, *Black Beauty*) and hard-boiled detective fiction (*Maltese Falcon*, *Black Dahlia*), where animal protagonists hop, slither and bound down the mean streets, stalking low-down dirty rats. Examples include Daniel Castillo’s *Claw of the Wolf* and Eric Garcia’s *Anonymous Rex*.

who adorns every packet of Quaker Oats to this day, coincided with the piecemeal passage of the company acts (Sivulka 1998).⁶

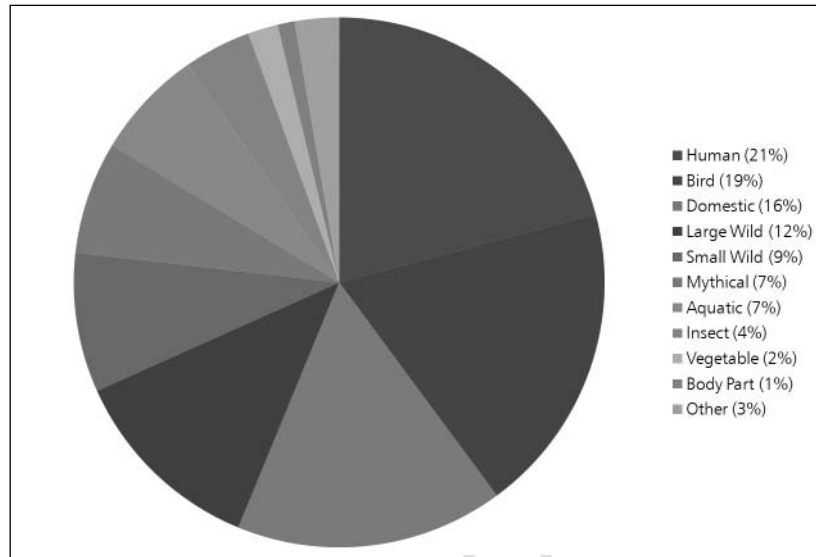
Show me the monkey

We are, for want of a better word, mascotomanes. The popularity of brand characters is incontestable. A brisk stroll down the breakfast cereal aisle of any large supermarket is a veritable walk on the wild side, a sugar-rush safari, where a marketing menagerie of cartoon chimps, elephants, toucans, wolves and elves battle to capture kiddie customers' attention and mobilise their fearsome pester power. Toy stores are no less zoological (My Little Pony, Go-go Hamsters, Big Mouth Billy Bass), as are car dealers (Mustang, Beetle, Panda), fashion houses (A Bathing Ape, Armani's eagle, Levi's straining horses), alcoholic beverage sellers (Wild Turkey, Famous Grouse, Thunderbird fortified wine), social networking websites (Twitter's bluebird, MSN's butterflies, Disney's Club Penguin) and, not least, theme parks, where every other ride is modelled on something supremely savage and scary (Spears et al 1996). There is nothing, in truth, that can't be anthropomorphised. The addition of "eyes" to a house or telephone or coffee cup or post box or scrubbing brush or a word like 'wood' immediately humanises the object and makes it hard to resist. The maxims of modern marketing, it seems, are not SWOT, PEST or even the imperious 4Ps. They are "adopt an animal", "feature a creature" or, as Red Bull energy drink brilliantly exemplifies, "liberate the ungulate".

Unleashing the beast is all very well, but as George Orwell (1945) reminds us, some animals are more equal than others. When it comes to choosing a brand mascot, casual observation suggests that dogs, cats and bunny rabbits are much more esteemed than snakes, skunks and squid. Leeches are likewise unloved, as indeed are dung beetles. In order to better understand this animal selection process, a database of 1,151 brand characters was built up from dedicated websites, published listings, marketing anthologies, logo design handbooks and site visits to selected brand museums (e.g. Blackwell and Ashworth 2001; Dotz and Husain 2003, 2009; Ibou 1991, 1992; Mollerup 1998). Although the dataset is far from comprehensive – just about everything can be, and is, anthropomorphised – it is sufficiently large to give some sense of the descent of brands (Figure 1, *overleaf*).

Broadly speaking, my database reveals that brand animal popularity is directly related to the species' physiological and psychological distance from humankind. The single most popular brand character creatures are real and stylised human beings – the Marlboro Man, the Michelin Man, Pillsbury Doughboy, Bertie Bassett, Captain Birdseye, Colonel Saunders, Ronald McDonald, Johnnie Walker's Strider, Monopoly's Mr Moneybags, Honda's Mr Opportunity, the Coppertone Girl, the Morton Salt Girl, the Burger King, Uncle Ben, Aunt Jemima, Joe Isuzu, Crazy Eddy, Fido Dido,

⁶ The contemporaneous passage of copyright and trademark legislation were of course the crucial developments here (Sivulka 1998). The companies acts, nevertheless, created conditions conducive to such commercial developments (Bakan 2004). BTW, this anthropomorphic bent isn't confined to companies. In his latest book, economist Anatole Kaletsky (2010) argues that capitalism itself is a living thing, wild and untameable.

Figure 1 A brand in the hand is worth...

Johnny English, Howard Brown, J.R. Hartley, Julius Pringles, the Gold Blend couple, the Bisto family, assorted Scottish Widows and many, many more.⁷ Anthropomorphically speaking, this is perhaps as it should be because “*We are people. We know a lot about ourselves. And we often make sense of other things by viewing them as people too*” (Guthrie 1995, p.129).

It follows, perhaps inevitably, that the second most common brand characters are domesticated animals, such as Hello Kitty, Morris the Cat, Nipper, the HMV dog, Cheeka, the Vodaphone pug, Elsie, the Borden cow, the Bon Ami chickens, Le Coq Sportif, the Aflac duck, the Dodge ram, the Calvin Klein polo pony, the Merrill Lynch bull and Burt’s ever-industrious Bees. Wild animals are rather less popular, unsurprisingly, though a distinction can be drawn between large carnivorous creatures like Tony the Tiger, the Lacoste crocodile, the Airness panther and the MGM lion, and smaller herbivorous animals like the Playboy and Duracell bunnies, the Monster.com and Bell Canada beavers, the Glenfiddich and Deere deer, the Firefox and Fox Head foxes and the Quantas and Cushelle koalas. Aquatic creatures and amphibians are less popular still. However, dolphins, seahorses, whales, turtles and lizards, such as Budweiser’s much-missed Louie, are striking exceptions to the cold fish rule. Insects, needless to say, bring up the rear, albeit butterflies, ladybirds, caterpillars, fireflies and, perhaps surprisingly, spiders, snails and scorpions are not without their supporters, as are personified fruits,

⁷ We’re often told that novelists offer otherwise unobtainable insights into contemporary marketing practice. This may or may not be so, but there’s a brilliant example of brand embodiment in Joshua Ferris’s *Then We Come to the End*, which is set in a Chicago advertising agency. Asked to come up with an amusing ad for a cold sore remedy – not an easy task – the creatives promptly invent ‘Cold Sore Guy’, who is personable and funny and, most importantly, doesn’t claim that the product “cures” the affliction (see Ferris 2008, pp. 94-96).

vegetables and plants (e.g. Mr Peanut, Miss Chiquita Banana, the Californian Raisins, Tom Tomato).⁸

Despite the inadequacies of the data set, the overall pattern is fairly straightforward and makes intuitive sense. Nevertheless it contains a number of oddities – corporate quirks that are worthy of mention. The first of these reflects the geographical variations attributable to national animals. Lions and bulldogs figure prominently in Britain, eagles and horses are popular in America, France is fond of roosters, Australia of kangaroos, South Africa of springboks, India of elephants and suchlike. Birds, furthermore, feature more prominently than might be expected in strictly physiological terms. This is due to the very strong symbolical and religious resonances that adhere to birds in general (flight, freedom, fecundity, foretelling the future) and certain avian species in particular (doves mean peace, storks bring children, owls impart wisdom, cuckoos cause trouble, etc). Similar considerations are presumably at work when the popularity of mythological animals is borne in mind, not least because many fabulous beasts can fly (dragons, phoenixes, Pegasus, Mercury's wingèd boot beloved by Interflora and Goodyear, among others). A secular trend is evident too, insofar as technological or social developments are reflected in the rise and fall of certain brand beasts. Aliens, for instance, were extremely popular in the 1960s and 1970s, when the space race, close encounters and *Star Wars* frenzy was at its height. Dinosaurs were all the rage during the 1990s, thanks to Steven Spielberg, Michael Crichton and the "mass extinction" controversies. More recently, anthropomorphic mobile phones, laptop computers and *Transformers*-type creatures have come to the fore and no doubt all sorts of blue-skinned avatars are waiting in the wings (Brown 2010).

Too much, admittedly, should not be made of the foregoing findings. They are indicative rather than definitive. Apart from the inadequacy of the data set, the classification process is somewhat arbitrary, often unsubtle and distorted by imponderables like the debatable "domesticity" of bees, ducks and camels. The major categories, furthermore, fail to differentiate between, say, cocks and hens, cows and bulls, stags and hinds, ewes and rams, even though the symbolic connotations of such choices are considerable. The overall pattern, nevertheless, is clear. The closer the creature is to humankind, the more likely it is to be adopted as a brand mascot. Indeed, careful scrutiny of the "wildlife" category reveals that bipedal animals with binocular (forward facing) eyes, particularly those that tend to sit on their haunches in an upright posture, are often the first creature of call for brand managers: Cadbury's gorilla, P.G. Tips' chimps, Linux's penguin, Kangol's kangaroo, Nesquik's bunny, the WWF panda, Smokey, the US Forest Service bear, and so forth. So prevalent is this propensity that those who are not ordinarily bipedal or erect are often portrayed in an upright stance. Tony the Tiger, Churchill the Bulldog and Charlie the Tuna, to name but three, appear to rely on their hind legs – and only their hind legs – for locomotion. Lions, likewise, are almost always

⁸ Another category worth noting is body parts. These include such icons as the CBS 'eye', Unilever's 'heartbrand' range of ice-creams, Yellow Pages' walking fingers, Allstate Insurance's clasped hands and Von Dutch apparel's hideously bloodshot eyeballs. Considered in isolation, such brand images are unremarkable. But when a big-picture view is taken, as in this case, they seem weirdly Frankensteinian.

shown rampant rather than couchant. Snouts similarly are foreshortened or subject to radical rhinoplasty. Neoteny is another commonplace feature, as we shall see.

What is it like to be a brand?

In addition to descent by commercial selection, the marketing equivalent of Darwin's descent by natural/artificial selection,⁹ my database reveals a number of variations in brand managers' anthropomorphic mindset. In some cases, the animal ambassadors are embraced wholeheartedly – to the extent of renaming the entire company after them, as in the cases of the Honey Monster and Jolly Green Giant – whereas in other cases the connection is curiously unclear. Broadly speaking, though, four mascot strategies can be identified: *match*, *mix*, *mystify*, *multiply*.

The *match* model is characterised by congruence, whereby the brand name, the logo, the mascot and the product or service are essentially one and the same. Jaguar cars, Mr Clean, Cobra beer, Betty Crocker, Camel cigarettes, Dove deodorant, Toilet Duck, Kangaroos sneakers, Mr Kipling cakes, Woodpecker cider, Crocs shoes, Penguin books, Puma sportswear, Shell petrol, Cap'n Crunch cereal, Red Bull energy drink and its antithesis, Slow Cow anti-energy drink, brilliantly succeed in bringing name, icon and offer together as a seamless whole. This is very much in keeping with Ries and Trout's (2000) classic marketing precepts of positioning and single-minded mindshare.

The *mix* model is rather less focussed insofar as the spokescreature endorses the product rather than embodies it. Geoffrey, the Toys R Us giraffe, Chester, the Cheetos cheetah, Leo, the MGM lion, Willie, the Kool cigarettes penguin, Morris, the 9Lives spokescat, the Hush Puppies basset hound, the Airwick ostrich, the Lacoste crocodile, the Trix rabbit, the Budweiser Clydesdales, Coke's Christmastime polar bears and Cheeka, Vodaphone India's indomitable pug, basically speak on behalf of the brand. In effect, they are the animal equivalents of celebrity endorsers, except that they work for free, don't complain, rarely go off the rails and, all things considered, are much less trouble than their human counterparts (Pringle 2004).

Multiply, by contrast, epitomises marketing's more-more-more mentality, the belief that if one critter is good, two critters are better and a swarm of brandcritters is best of all (Brown 2003). The Raid Bugs have exploded exponentially, albeit not quite to Biblical plague proportions. Hello Kitty's prodigious plush litter includes Keroppi the frog, My Melody the rabbit and Badtz Mary, the penguin. There are currently six M&M spokescandies, each with their own colourful personality. At one stage, Elsie the Borden cow was part of a cartoon herd – Beulah, Beauregard, Larabee, Lobelia and Elmer the Bull – before a cull was sensibly commanded. Since 1994, similarly, Toucan

⁹ Note, the word 'artificial' alludes to the fact that Charles Darwin was inspired by the selective breeding procedures of homing pigeon fanciers. He wondered if there was a natural, evolutionary equivalent of breeders' deliberate interventions. FYI, the title of this section refers to philosopher Thomas Nagel's (1979) celebrated rhetorical question on the knotty issue of "other minds" – what is it like to be a bat?

Sam has starred alongside his Froot Loops-loving nephews, to say nothing of Lil' Doggie, Rhino Rapper and the Ostrich sisters.

Congenital critter creep is one thing, but the *mystify* strategy is something else again. It's not simply a missed opportunity, where a potential link between brand name and animal mascot is ignored, as in the case of Lynx deodorant or Marmot apparel or Gatorade energy drink. It's a situation where the connection is sufficiently incongruous to fascinate third parties and draw them into a debate with the brand (Brown 2001). The logo of Hot Tuna clothing company is a ravenous barracuda. How come? Wolf Blass wine features a fearsome eagle on the label. Why not a big bad wolf? The animal ambassador for Foxes glacier mints is a lugubrious polar bear. Aren't arctic foxes up to the job? Agip's 4,000-plus petrol stations in Italy boast a big, black, fire-breathing dog with six legs. What's that all about?

Who was that masked mascot?

Curiosity, as everyone knows, killed the cat. But it doesn't do brands any harm. That said, animal mascots are by no means immortal. Branding is red in tooth and claw and an icon life cycle is clearly discernible (Aherne 2006). The introductory phase usually involves a Darwinian struggle for survival against competing brand animals or non-mascot-based marketing strategies (the Aflac duck was adopted somewhat reluctantly and, way back when, Tony the Tiger went head-to-head with Katy the Kangaroo, Elmo the Elephant and Newt the Gnu). The take-off phase is often accompanied by a dramatic increase in the physical dimensions of the chosen icon (consider the gigantic, glowering, bull-shaped billboards for Osborne Brandy that stand sentinel on innumerable Spanish hillsides or Ralph Lauren's sporty polo pony, which seems to get bigger with every passing year). Maturity is marked by multiplication, where the original is joined by an extended family of allegedly close relatives (the Jolly Green Giant spawned Little Sprout, Nipper, the HMV dog, begat Chipper, the Pillsbury Doughboy's dog and cat are called Flapjack and Biscuit respectively). The fourth stage, though, is perhaps the most fascinating of all, insofar as it doesn't involve decrepitude and decline. The brand character, if anything, gets younger, more cherubic, more cuddly, more childlike, more and more cute with the passing of the years (the Michelin Man and Mickey Mouse are classic examples, as the late great biologist Stephen Jay Gould (1979) famously explained in an essay on neoteny).¹⁰ Just as all art aspires to the condition of music, so too brand icons converge on the cuteness of Hello Kitty.

Brand animals may come and brand animals may go – as I write Monster.com's fiddle-playing beaver is being lauded and Innocent Drinks' bunny rabbit is being excoriated – but the urge to anthropomorphise is always with us, like death, taxes and Woody Allen movies (one of which features

¹⁰ This trait, incidentally, is no less evident among domesticated animals, which are demonstrably "cuter" than their wild counterparts. As Gibson (2009, p. 89) observes, "*domesticates are plumper and more rounded...more docile, more submissive, far less hardy, and complex behaviours (such as courtship) are greatly simplified. The sum effect is arrested development, which is to say that domesticated animals have been infantilized*".

unforgettably personified spermatozoa). So incessant is the urge that a comprehensive museum of brand mascots is now considered necessary. Situated adjacent to Country Club Plaza, the world's first suburban shopping centre, the newly opened Kansas City museum contains approximately 3,000 exhibits in a domestic-themed setting, which is overseen by the much-loved matriarchs Betty Crocker and Aunt Jemima. In addition to the bathroom-, bedroom-, kitchen-, den-arrangement, the museum features the fifteen (thus far) inductees into the Madison Avenue Walk of Fame. These include Mr Peanut, Colonel Saunders, the Serta sheep, the Chick-fil-A cows, the Kool-Aid man and, it almost goes without saying, the importuning Aflac duck.

Luminous as the past undoubtedly is, the future for brand mascots is incandescent. The current socio-economic ecosystem is conducive to the continuing rise of advertising icons. Apart from the obvious multiplication of communications channels, which increases opportunities to view, and the creature-friendly character of Web 2.0 – cf. Facebook's phenomenally successful *Farmville* – it has long been recognised that humankind's anthropomorphic propensity increases at times of stress, uncertainty and rapid technological change (Guthrie 1995). Just as the golden age of advertising (early 1960s) was an age of great global anxiety (not least the thermo-nuclear threat), so too today's terrorist outrages, wars of attrition and apocalyptic economic aftershocks are the postmodern breeding grounds of guiding animal spirits (Akerlof and Shiller 2009). *Pace Goya*, the sleep of reason produces mascots.

Alongside western society's heightened anxiety, the much-mocked infantilisation of consumer culture is also conducive to critters – as is the associated nostalgia boom – since the golden age of childhood is a time when animism runs riot (Jones 2005). The popularity of corporate fables involving mice, squirrels and all sorts of fairy tale characters bear witness to executives' susceptibility to kiddie creature comforts. It seems that there are more than a few middle-aged tweenies in our corporate cubicles and corner offices. Or, as Scott Adams (2003) sardonically observes on the first page of his anthropomorphic bestseller, *Dilbert and the Way of the Weasel*, "a retarded chimpanzee can drink a case of beer and still perform most management functions".

The great chain of branding

Be that as it may, perhaps the most important factor behind the seemingly fantastic future for brand characters in all their furry finny feathery finery is the fact that it is still permissible to stereotype animal species. Whereas interpersonal slurs involving ethnicity, gender, age, religion, social class, sexual orientation, body-shape or nationality are all-but impermissible nowadays – hence the abandonment of, among others, Frito Bandito, the Robertson's golly, the Gold Dust twins and the cheesecake "girls" who once formed part of Coca Cola's communication strategy (Sivulka 1998) – the same is not true of animals. Their characters, their personalities, their "natures", continue to be caricatured with impunity. We are quite happy to talk about obstinate mules, cheeky monkeys, wise owls, sly foxes, stupid cows, promiscuous rabbits etc,

etc, etc (Freling and Forbes 2005). A daffy duck or lazy lion or irritating chipmunk or thieving magpie is perfectly acceptable in a TV commercial but a stupid Polak or idle Irishman or infuriating mother-in-law or light fingered gypsy is almost unimaginable nowadays. True, fat cat bankers are western society's permissible hate figures and Joe Camel's capital punishment proves that laundering questionable behaviour through endearing spokesungulates is socially unacceptable. In general terms, nevertheless, animals remain fair game for brand wranglers and profit poachers and market share trappers. As humankind becomes an ever more protected species, brand managers are bagging wild and crazy animals like there's no tomorrow.¹¹

In this regard, it is noteworthy that the single most striking encapsulation of the recent banking crisis was *Rolling Stone's* unforgettable description of Goldman Sachs as a "giant vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells of money" (Taibbi 2009). Whatever else is said, in years to come, about our great economic cataclysm, *Rolling Stone's* arresting image will surely rank alongside muckraker Ira Tarbell's analogous 1904 depiction of Standard Oil as a "giant grasping octopus". The more things change in western capitalism, the more things stay the same. Anthropomorphically, at any rate.

Advertisers, meanwhile, continue to inform us that Guinness is alive inside, that Kinder chocolate bars call out to peckish passers-by – Buy me! Buy me! – and that Actimel's range of probiotic yogurts is chock full of "friendly" bacteria (though I dread to think what'll happen when the bacteria turn "nasty"). Thank goodness for the recently revamped Pepsi logo, which is much more smily and personable than before, apparently.¹²

It thus seems that fifty years after the renowned anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss famously contended that "animals are good to think with" it's evident that animals are equally good to brand with.

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¹¹ And so it is likely to remain until animal rights campaigners raise the issue of media misrepresentation and species' exploitation by malevolent money-grubbing marketing types!

¹² Despite its popularity, anthropomorphic marketing isn't a universal panacea. Consider the hostile reaction to the hapless mascots for London's 2012 Olympics. Disparaging media descriptions of Mandeville and Wenlock ranged from "partially blinded Tellytubbies" to "terrifying penis monsters" (see Bennett 2010).

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