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The role of spokes characters in contemporary website design:

Using illustration and personality to humanise a service industry web interface.

A Thesis for Fulfilment of a Masters of Design,
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Abstract:

According to recent literature, character identities employed within advertising have played powerful roles in the creation of many a brands personality. In doing so they have established themselves as a graphic representative for the product/service they symbolise. With the advent of digital technologies the ‘spokes character’ has been increasing in popularity. Particularly with control now being given to the user through interaction.

The web, with consumer accessibility now close to one billion (eMarketer. 2005), still only offers limited download speeds for the user seeking greater infotainment based content, even with the implementation of broadband technology. This presents an ideal platform for the drawn character as compared to digital video due to the smaller file sizes. Additionally, the drawn character has the ability to visually align with a service or products core function, along with the capability to present information through the medium of storytelling.

This research hypothesises that an animated spokes character within the online interface would help humanise the web experience for the consumer. Not only would a character evoke greater pleasure (by aligning story and ease of use), it would be preferable to a targeted user in comparison to a non-character site delivering the same information.

In testing this hypothesis the Chiropractic industry was chosen as the trial vehicle due to limited consumer awareness on the subject. Two semi-functional sites (character and non-character) were designed based on feedback from a CIT (Communication and Information Technology) professional and presented to seven consumer participants within a group interview situation.

Two methodologies employing a divergence/convergence approach were adopted within this study: exploratory research in terms of an investigation into literature and business uncovered key qualities of the spokes character from likeability and gender issues to nostalgia and brand. The purpose was to establish design criteria in the creation of a communications tool and the convergence process. This was achieved by action-based research through design where the character was realised within an industry aligned application (prototype).

Consumer predilection of the semi-functional prototype revealed three benefits of the spokes character site over the same non-character site: a more enjoyable user

experience; shorter learning time involved in assimilating the material offered from the site; and a higher level of trust.

However a group interview of the size used can provide only an indicative result. This thesis advocates character potential within web design; not just as a humanising feature, but also as an integral part of the storytelling process.

Dedication:

To Wani

A character herself, filled with personality and a zest for life. Wani would have loved the opportunity to pursue a career in design.

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1. Introduction

Having worked on a range of comic style concepts within the design industry, primarily for print, I have found the comic character to be a fascinating and creative communications tool. Research undertaken within this project has provided me the opportunity to explore the commercial value of the character, to uncover it's historical roots and in doing so speculate on potential desirability within today's interactive marketing environment.

The linear style character grew enormously in popularity over the years reaching a marketing high point by the mid seventies, its greatest growth occurring through the advent of television and animation. However in the later part of the seventies and early eighties the character began to diminish in frequency compared to the thriving position it had held. Claims relating to characters taking on more serious roles in line with a tighter corporate influence were theorised (Dotz & Husain 2003:32). Nonetheless the result was a less entertaining and a simpler style of icon that essentially lost consumer appeal.

In the 1990's a technique referred to as "Retro branding" (Dotz & Husain 2003:33), a term associated with reviving past images, helped bring about a renewed affection for some of these characters. This seemed to rekindle the flame, and together with developing technology, the market for characters appeared to be on the upsurge once again.

The purpose of this study was not just to learn about the history and psychology of character use in marketing, but more importantly to inform the design practice itself when aligning a character to a service using today's technology for today's consumer.

To achieve this, chiropractic health care was seen as an ideal platform to test the value of a character-service alliance. Its purpose is to seek clarification on the actual role chiropractic plays within modern health care. To do this, a web-based information delivery device was developed to a prototype finish in an attempt to communicate the desired message, with a spokes character at its helm.

1.1 Central proposition

The spokes character as an interactive media communicator can through personality, storyline and visual alignment embody the very qualities a service or product may represent. Spokes character representation can help facilitate likeability, consumer awareness, memory and even trust, resulting in an engaging experience for the user.

The research aims to show that:

- Literature and industry regard the spokes character as a valuable marketing tool
- A targeted consumer will prefer a spokes character driven website in comparison to a non-character site containing the same information
- A spokes character within a website interface can achieve likeability and credibility through visual alignment, voice and storyline.