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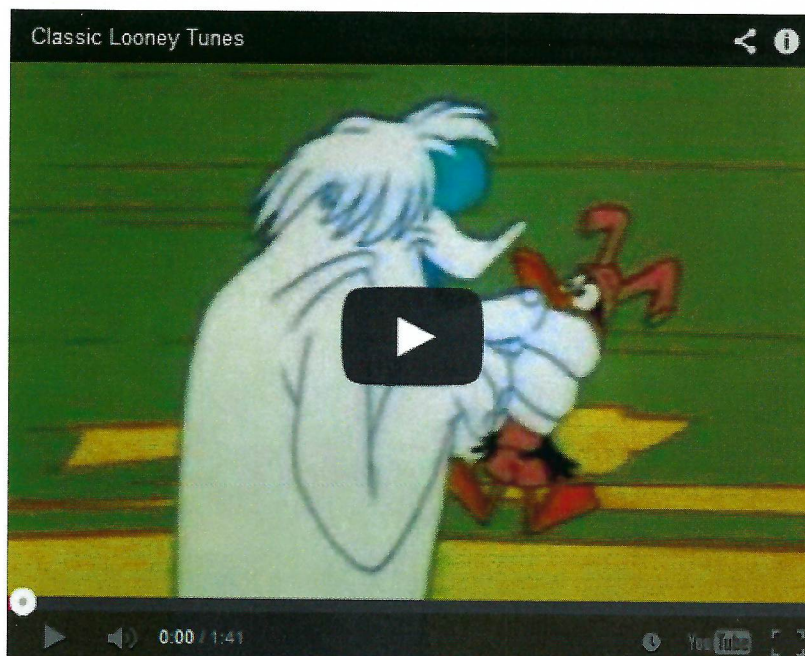
Friday, August 06, 2010

Abominable Brands

by [Ashley Lohman](#)

***Editor's Note:** Spoke partner-in-rhetoric Ashley Lohman waxes nostalgic while blurring the lines between a Looney Tunes classic and modern branding. When not rubbing animated elbows with Bugs and Daffy, Ashley **helps transform** B-to-B businesses (many in the supply chain space) via strategic and creative marketing services. This is Ashley's first time guest-blogging for Spoke. She seems to have enjoyed herself despite our involvement.*

Is yours really a cute little pink bunny rabbit? Or is it Bad old George?



It's old school but still a relevant analogy. Your stakeholders are like Hugo the Abominable Snowman. They will take your brand at face value. If you're naughty to pretend you're something you're not, they will find out.

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And then they will punish you good.

A story...

It was her first day on the job and my friend realized she was working for a very naughty company.

The boss and his office manager carried forth their poetic waxing about **hearts over the bar** and loyalty, caring and fairness—and Fun, Fun, Fun!—those unassailable attributes the company was so proud of. What a delightfully cute little pink bunny rabbit my friend was hired to brand.

But then her colleagues started quacking (yes, quacking). They were snarky about the boss, each other and their customers. They revealed evidence of high turnover—roll-calling the names of those who had quit in protest or who had been fired unfairly. They whispered of blanketing the region with their resumes.

Hearts clearly *under* the bar and with one foot out of the door, these people exemplified a very different brand than the delusional boss and office manager described. My friend decided that she wasn't buying what they weren't selling. She left, taking her considerable connections and value with her.

It shouldn't have been shocking to her that the duck was cloaked in a **bunny suit**. Except it was.

It was because she hadn't seen it coming, and theirs wasn't a particularly sophisticated outfit. She realized she was as much of a Hugo the Abominable Snowman as anyone else, seasoned marketer or not. She took the brand at face value as other stakeholders had done before her.

The moral of this story and countless others like it: *If you're not living the brand, you're dying by the brand*. Try to fool people, and you become the fool. Your reputation takes a beating (not just your business), and the disaffected, duped and disappointed will take great pleasure in exposing you for what you really are.

If your brand is a lie, then what else are you willing to lie about? That's the question your employees, prospects, customers, investors, partners, vendors or anyone else who touches your brand will be asking themselves as they walk out of your door never to look back.

So how do you build a truthful brand? Easy—you build one that does what it says it's going to do, and eschew being something you're not. I'll buy from you if you're insanely talented at producing **what I want** no matter your shortcomings, as long as I know **what I'm in for**.

You don't have to be nice or beautiful or smart, you just have to be unapologetically real. Ask your customers why they would recommend you to their family and friends. Build your brand off of those, and only those, qualities.

If you don't see yourself the way others see you, it's not a fault of perception but a matter of you not **living the brand**. Consciously or not, you're saying one thing and doing another.

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How do you start living your brand? What do you do with those attributes that your customers say they value so much that they're willing to steer their loved ones in your direction?

Most importantly, it's what you *don't* do.

Don't contradict them.

If you're progressive, don't have Fox News playing in the lobby. Don't put fake flowers around the office if you're sophisticated. The employee restroom should not be used as extra storage space if you're respectful. If you're unique, the experience shouldn't have a familiar ring.

Don't be pretty. Be beautiful.

Design (with a big 'D') will put your most favorable attributes on display. *Design is not brand, though it supports the brand.* Customers have given you the brand's true identity. Design is a way to give back. If you look good, they look good.

There is no real brand where the design and the experience don't match. Fully engaging the senses (what we in the biz call "**sensory branding**"), or at the very least incorporating visual cues, will let people know how they can expect to feel when they do business with you:

Design is what they *see*—

The experience is what they *get*—

The brand is what they *feel*.

A brand lives or dies in the spaces in between.

The Bad old George that tried to fool my friend wanted a brand that screamed "Fun, Fun Fun!," although clearly the brand offered none, none, none. Design must promise something the brand can deliver.

Abominable brands are the warts-and-all types, the truthful ones, the ones that are what their customers say they are and the ones that do what they say they're going to do. They may not be pretty, but they're always beautiful—and they should look, act and feel it.

And what if you're tasked with branding Bad old George?

Good luck putting **lipstick on a pig**.

Wait... make that a duck.

filed under: **Branding Design Guest Bloggers**

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