

Anthropomorphism in building brands
- the case of Frank the Cheap Sheep

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the appeal of anthropomorphism to marketers. This is done through reference to three relevant advertising models, the Symbolic Communications Model, the Symbolic Transfer Device Model, and the VisCAP Presenter Model, and one critical case study involving an anthropomorphized sheep presenter for a Swedish mobile telecommunications company. The advertising models are found to support the effectiveness of the symbolic presenter, Frank the Sheep, particularly explaining how meaning is transferred from the presenter to the brand, and the effects the presenter has on advertising communication effects such as brand awareness and brand attitude. We extend previous research on how linking anthropomorphic associations to brands can be employed to increase effectiveness of these common marketing communication tactics. We show that anthropomorphized animals can work effectively and quickly when presenting a new brand to the market, but also offer several cautions for managers.

Summary statement of contribution

We contribute to theory by drawing together three different but related strands of advertising to explicate how the anthropomorphic brand presenter can increase advertising effectiveness, particularly in quickly positioning or repositioning a brand and developing brand equity. We contribute to managerial practice by demonstrating, through the use of one critical case study, how the choice of anthropomorphic brand presenter must be a considered process, but is one that can add to advertising effectiveness if managed appropriately.

Keywords

Anthropomorphic marketing, brand meaning bundle, brand presenter effects, case study, communication effects, VisCAP presenter model

Introduction

During the 2011 financial year, Disney, one of the world's top 10 brands, generated \$US38 billion: a success story that owes its success to an 83-year old anthropomorphized mouse, called Mickey (Donnolley, 2012). There is, of course, more to Disney's success than Mickey, first syndicated in comic book form in 1932, and his bipedal, talking friends, but the company's anthropomorphized creations have provided the corporation a foundation of popularity for generations, entertaining on the large and small screens and selling billions of dollars of merchandise annually. Anthropomorphism is the attribution of humanlike characteristics to animals and nonhuman agents (Epley, Waytz, Akalis & Cacioppo, 2008). Whether animated animal characters, products with humanlike appearance, brand mascots or brand presenters, there is clearly something in anthropomorphism that resonates with humankind, a point not unnoticed by marketers.

Given our relationship with animals it might be unsurprising that humankind tends to anthropomorphise (Baker, 2001), a trait that Guthrie (1995) argues predates history. Researchers, for example Aggarwal and McGill (2007) and Epley, Waytz, Akalis and Cacioppo (2008) have recently turned their attention to the mechanisms behind this tendency and the degree to which individuals display it, but also uncertain is why it might be effective when used as a marketing communications device, that is, why consumers may respond positively to nonhuman agents that have been attributed human-like qualities. Anthropomorphic marketing's appeal is poorly understood (Brown, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to examine anthropomorphism's 'grip on the marketing imagination', and, in particular, to understand how linking anthropomorphic associations to brands might work to increase marketing communication effectiveness, via enhanced

perceived brand image and brand equity among consumer audiences. We do this by considering how the anthropomorphized brand presenter works as a creative advertising device, and reviewing Spears, Mowen and Chakraborty's (1996) Symbolic Communications Model, and through reference to several conceptual explanations in regard to advertising effectiveness, Rossiter and Ang's (1993) Symbolic Transfer Device, and Rossiter and Percy's (1997) VisCAP Presenter Model. We then describe a single case study as a *critical case* (Yin, 1994) in order to determine whether these theories explain anthropomorphic marketing's appeal, for marketers and their brands. We investigate how Frank the Sheep has worked on a visual, verbal and semiotic level for Swedish mobile telephone service brand *Tele2*.

The paper is structured as follows. We first review the Symbolic Communications Model (Spears, et al., 1996) to gain an understanding of the symbolic role animals, including anthropomorphized animals, play in advertising. We then consider advertising symbol selection for building brand equity by turning to Rossiter and Ang's (1993) Symbolic Transfer Device, and follow this with a discussion of the related VisCAP Presenter Model (Rossiter & Percy, 1997). In order to examine these theoretical explanations we present the anthropomorphic marketing case of the Swedish mobile telecommunications company, Tele2, and its brand presenter, Frank, a sheep. We conclude our discussion with a summary of our findings and thoughts on potentially fruitful future research directions. The contribution of our paper to theory lies in our explanation of how anthropomorphic marketing works by bringing together the work of Spears et al. (1996), Rossiter and Ang (1993) and Rossiter and Percy (1987) to explain the role of the anthropomorphized brand presenter. Our contribution to managerial practice is to show, through the unit of analysis of a single but critical case, important aspects as brand presenters, and that anthropomorphized brand presenters must be chosen carefully to work with particular audiences.

Anthropomorphic Marketing: A Brief Review

Anthropomorphism, Brown (2011) observes, “abounds in contemporary consumer culture” (p.39), and is “deeply embedded in the human psyche” (p. 42). Many cultures surround their young with effigies of wild creatures and other animals from birth. The bear, for example, perhaps with music to accompany the onset of sleep, is a favourite soft toy for many infants, despite the nature of bears in the wild. The bear’s early role will later be replaced with the association of fear, through such tales as *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, as initiation into life’s ever-present dangers for the over-adventurous.

Bibendum, the Michelin Man, emerged in 1898 as a novel method to convey the company’s image as a manufacturer of rubber tyres to French consumers (Harp, 2001), and since then anthropomorphism has become more popular as a marketing tool in order to either position new brands or reposition existing ones (Brown, 2010, 2011). Corporate and product brands’ identities and personas are being associated with the characteristics of particular animals and other nonhuman entities in an effort to create a point of differentiation from competitors and build compelling brand equity. These mascots might be silent, like Qantas’s kangaroos that are content to be displayed on the airline’s aircraft livery and other visible elements of its *servicescape*, such as on staff uniforms, suggesting and reinforcing a clear linkage with Australia, or they may be more vociferous, imbuing brands with their own characteristics in order to help present a particular brand identity and foster a particular brand image. Today, ‘marketing critters’ and ‘spokescreatures’ abound, and “brand animals, mascots and icons are all-but ubiquitous, be it the Lacoste crocodile, the Andrex puppy or Coca-Cola’s cuddly polar bears” (Brown, 2010, p. 209).

According to Guthrie (1995), anthropomorphism tends to flourish in economic recessions, and as such can be seen as a sign of a harsh political and social climate. This flight to the furry is perhaps linked to the uncritical physical and emotional companionship we derive from having animals around (Hirschman, 1994; Sanders, 1990; Serpell, 1999, 2002). Other reasons suggested for the ancient and ongoing human-animal relationship are our dependence on animals for food and clothing, and that animals provide us multidimensional symbols from which we have constructed schemas of cultural meaning (Morgado, 1993). Such schemas are displayed in Aesop's Fables, stories from 5th century BC Greece, such as *The Boy who cried Wolf* and *The Tortoise and the Hare*, have served to pass on moral education to children for millennia, and the medieval *beastiaries*, compendia describing animals, birds and inanimate objects and also associating these with moral lessons. Gibson's (2009) *Bedside Book of Beasts* provides an anthological explanation of this human-animal relationship.

The role of animals in children's lives, particularly as companion pets, is considered by Serpell (1999, 2002). Serpell (1999) suggests animals, as children's pets, are seen as a force for good: as therapists, they provide "a relatively neutral medium through which to express unconscious emotional conflicts, worries, and fears" (p. 90), and advances, "given the evolutionary history of our species and its overwhelming dependence on other animals as food, workers, companions, religious icons, symbols, and exemplars, it would be somewhat surprising if children evinced no spontaneous affinity for animals" (p. 92). The benefits people derive from companion animals, that is, animals are "unable to judge or criticize their owners, lie to them, or betray their trust", is believed to be due to the animals' inability to speak (Bonas, McNicholas & Collis, 2000), and therefore anthropomorphism "ultimately is what enables people to benefit socially, emotionally, and physically from their relationships with companion animals" (Serpell, 2002, p. 445). Exploring the degree to which children

instinctively identify with animals in relation to other humans, Levinson (1969) found that emotionally disturbed children relate more easily to animals, primarily due to the animal's "non-threatening, non-judgmental, unconditional attention and affection" (Serpell, 1999, p. 91). In investigating the different kinds of social support people report in their human and nonhuman relationships, Bonas et al. (2000) found subjects reported much less conflict in their relationships with pets compared with other people. Such perceived trustworthiness and absence of judgmentalism is likely to play a role in consumers' responses to anthropomorphized animals appearing as brand presenters in advertising.

The product may be an anthropomorphized entity, as is the case with Disney, Warner Brothers, and other nonhuman creatures, which is ostensibly merchandising of the original comic book or cartoon creation. Products themselves may be anthropomorphized: Aggarwal and McGill (2007), for example, find a perceived smile in a car's grill can enhance brand evaluations of those primed with an anthropomorphic schema. Alternatively, nonhuman brand mascots and presenters might be crafted to have particular characteristics or attributes directly associated with the brand. Spears et al. (1996), for example, note "the cow's symbol of wholesome country living and freshness is demonstrated by Borden's anthropomorphic use of Elsie the cow, complete with daisy necklace, apron and a winning smile" (p. 88). Other marketing examples are presented in a study of 'wild brands' and the animal selection process by Brown (2010), who finds "the closer the creature is to humankind, the more likely it is to be adopted as a brand mascot", with the creature of choice for brand managers often "bipedal animals with binocular (forward facing) eyes, particularly those that tend to sit on their haunches in an upright posture" (p. 217). The development of *animatronics*, a robot technology that permits figures such as anthropomorphized animals to move naturally, as displayed in the movie, *Jurassic Park*, and *computer generated imagery* (CGI) have provided

we anthropomorphise all manner of creatures closer to humankind's attributes and mannerisms.

Spears et al. (1996) conclude "the linkage of animals to mankind is richly illustrated in myths, songs, literature, paintings, and religions of diverse cultures" (p. 88), while Rowland (1973) finds animal symbols proffer "an inexhaustible repository which novelists, poets, artists, dramatists, film makers, and even advertisers draw on, either consciously or intuitively, when they wish to evoke an immediate yet profound response" (p. xvii). This immediate response is sought in advertising. Waytz, Cacioppo and Epley (2010) suggest "given people's natural attentiveness to humanlike cues, anthropomorphism provides an effective way to increase attention to advertising" (p. 227). We now turn to one explanation of how animals work in advertising, the Symbolic Communication Model, in order to shed theoretical light on anthropomorphic marketing's appeal.

The Symbolic Communications Model

In order to describe the use of animals in advertising we first turn to the Symbolic Communication Model, developed by Spears, et al. (1996) to extend previous research by Leach (1970) and McCracken (1986). At the heart of the model is the culturally constituted world, which contains various entities, including animals that are assigned symbolic meaning by people within a culture. These symbols transfer their cultural meanings to products "via Gestalt processes of unit formation creation" (Spears et al., p. 88), to create 'product meaning bundles' which are then shared within the culture via a communication system. These authors argue these unit connections are built, and meaning is transferred between symbol and audience, "when the symbol and the product are perceived to be closely associated" (p. 29). They further argue, based on understandings of source credibility and source attractiveness

for effectiveness of persuasive communication, that when animals are used to endorse products, “consumers are influenced by both the symbolic meanings that have been culturally assigned to that animal as well as the physical attractiveness and likeability of how the animal is portrayed” (p. 90). Animal symbols will therefore be chosen on how well they convey the desired cultural meaning to the product.

While Spears et al. (1996) refer to the symbol’s cultural meaning being transferred to the ‘product’, we suggest a more fitting term is ‘brand’, as meaning is typically transferred for the purpose of brand positioning against competitor brands, rather than to attribute certain qualities to a particular product item. While animals as symbols assigned cultural meaning might transfer their agreed meaning via the communication system, however, the anthropomorphized animal permits far greater meaning transfer as it provides the flexibility to step beyond traditionally accepted meaning boundaries. A talking animal, for example, conforms to our culturally acquired anthropomorphism schemas, and hence allows a broader and more flexible range of meaning transfer to marketers’ brands. While studies show that certain animals are used depending on what kinds of product and/or service is being marketed, with wild animals most frequently associated with services, and, incidentally, more frequently shown in an anthropomorphic state than domesticated animals (Spears, et al., 1996), the use of an anthropomorphized sheep to endorse a mobile telephone service demonstrates how the cultural meaning ‘rules’ may be broken.

Though Spears et al.’s (1996) communication model is presented as a linear and iterative process, implying meaning is provided to members of the cultural audience via the communication system, their model’s interaction between the ‘culturally constituted world’ and the ‘product meaning bundle’, via an ‘appropriation of symbols’, approaches the

alternative, non-linear explanation of how communication occurs via shared ‘codes’ and the interpreted meanings of these codes, or semiotics (Fiske, 2011). The appropriation of symbols from the culturally constituted world is an important part of ‘meaning bundle’ of Tele2’s Frank, a black sheep. The qualities culturally assigned to the *black sheep of the family*, such as rebel, maverick, individualist and non-conformist, are suitably appropriate for the first company to have challenged Sweden’s telecommunications pioneer brand. The animal world, enriched with our culturally-charged meaning schemas, therefore becomes a carrier of symbolic significance (Spears et al., 1996), and fertile ground for marketers. To better understand marketers’ use of these entities, we next look at Rossiter and Ang’s (1993) Symbolic Transfer Device.

The Symbolic Transfer Device

The Symbolic Transfer Device (Rossiter & Ang, 1993) addresses the theoretical and applied research question: how can a brand build brand equity fast? The model is “based on visual imagery and arousal but also has denotative and connotative properties that convey the desired positioning of the brand” (Rossiter & Ang, 1993, p. 125), and consists of: (1) a symbolic transfer device that augments the brand's desired equity-attributes, and (2) advertising tactics for associating the device with the brand and accelerating the equity-building process. Spears et al.’s (1996) ‘product meaning bundle’, wherein cultural meaning, appropriated from the ‘culturally constituted world’ and transferred to the product, or, as we prefer, ‘brand’, might be recognized in the first of these elements, (1) above. According to its authors, the model’s key contribution is that it specifies the mediating mechanisms argued to be necessary for brand equity building.

High-equity brands display: distinctive and salient brand awareness; vivid (Rossiter & Percy 1978; McGill & Anand 1989) or very strong and consistent favorable brand imagery; and high preferential brand attitude. High-equity brands have very high brand awareness. Brand awareness, delineated as either brand recognition or brand recall, is the consumer's ability to identify the brand as being a member of the product category. For brand recognition, 'distinctiveness' is needed, that is the consumer must be able to identify the brand from a competitive display, as in a supermarket. For brand recall, 'salience' is needed is, which is the ability to recall the brand name in response to the product category need cue (see Rossiter & Ang, 1993).

Critical to the notion of brand imagery is the 'brand symbol', described by advertising agency founder Leo Burnett (1961) as "anything that leaves a mental picture of the brand's identity" (p. 53), which he considered the key to effective advertisements. In Spears et al.'s (1996) Symbolic Communications Model, the animal symbol, replete with its culturally constituted meaning, is linked to the brand, imbuing the brand with its 'meaning bundle. Rossiter and Ang extend the role of brand imagery from a mainly an 'identification' role to include not only brand awareness but also brand attitude augmentation, or brand preference. Brand imagery should be vivid, consistent and favorable, depending on how consumers choose the brand. If brand recognition is key, for example, when consumers enter a mobile telephone store, with a dizzying range of service provider brands filling the shelves, brand (package or name) recognition and category recall are critical (Rossiter & Percy 1987). Product choice via brand recall requires name-salience after the product category is considered. For Tele2, it might be assumed that brand recognition will be the more important brand awareness type, as in many mature markets, such as Sweden, the consumer will normally visit a multi-brand-selling phone store in order to make select and purchase their mobile service.

Rossiter and Ang define their ‘symbolic transfer device’ as a “very highly arousing and visual imagery-producing stimulus that serves both the brand awareness and brand attitude functions” (p. 128). To deliver brand awareness, the device must provide “distinctive identification of the brand within the product category (for brand recognition) and also prompt the brand name (for brand recall)” (p. 128). *Distinctive identification* is achieved through attention to and then labeling of the device, and through its capacity to generate intense arousal. An anthropomorphized brand presenter, such as Tele2’s Frank the Sheep is such a device, which, as we will describe shortly, identifies the Tele2 brand distinctively. The symbolic transfer device serves the brand attitude function by either suggesting a key differential attribute of the brand or a favorable overall evaluation, depending on, respectively, whether the purchase motivation is informational, that is, negatively motivated, or transformational, where a positive motivation drives purchase. The negative and positive motivational distinction is further explained in Rossiter and Percy (1997) and also in Rossiter and Bellman (2005).

The symbolic transfer device must first draw attention, but while attention and arousal are sufficient for brand recognition, brand recall requires the brand name to be prompted, and therefore the device should lead to a ‘labeling’ response corresponding with the brand name. To illustrate this, Rossiter and Ang note how, over the years, one tobacco brand’s advertising featuring archetypal cowboys served as a good example of the device: the cowboys elicited the desired naming response, ‘Marlboro man’, and identified the brand and, via the labeling of ‘cowboy’, suggested the attribute association of ‘masculine’ or ‘macho’. In a similar way, Frank, Tele2’s anthropomorphized sheep presenter, elicits the desired association with ‘cheap’, reinforcing the verbal claim with the visual image of ‘sheep’. This association is

made more effective since it is suggested that Swedes pronounce the two words, sheep and cheap, the same.

Pictorial stimuli are powerful devices in marketing communications. Evidence indicates that all except the most complex and novel pictorial stimuli are automatically assigned a verbal label once the consumer has passed early childhood (Pezdek & Evans, 1979). Distinctly presented words may also elicit verbal labelling (Kunen, Green & Waterman, 1979; Paivio, 1971; Rossiter & Percy 1978). Rossiter and Ang argue, however, that pictures make better symbolic transfer devices than distinctly presented words: “pictures are much more reliably likely to produce a visual image than are words (Paivio 1971; 1986); they are less ambiguous than words, and are therefore likely to lead to a more consistent identification response (Durso & Johnson 1979); and they are virtually uniquely encoded and are much more resistant to memory loss via recognition or recall” (p. 129). Pictorial techniques also have the advantage that they bring forward consumers deep, latent, unconscious and emerging thoughts and feelings through the use of metaphors (Zaltman, 1996). Visual stimuli further reveal associations and bring up emotional responses, based on the assumption that the majority of all thought is subconscious and pictures and visual stimuli have the advantage of eliciting rich data from this realm of knowledge. The main contribution of visual stimuli is that they reach deeper than written words when it comes to uncover ‘hidden knowledge’ - the underlying beliefs and feelings that influence the behaviour of consumers (Zaltman, 1996).

Arousal is another necessary brand awareness mediator for the symbolic transfer device. A highly arousing stimulus is recognized faster than non-highly arousing stimuli, helping brand recognition, and is more likely to be free-recalled, helping brand recall (Bradley, Greenwald, Petry & Lang, 1992). Rossiter and Ang conclude that “arousal has to be very high before

memory enhancement occurs” (p. 129). Marketers should therefore employ a highly arousing stimulus and focus on the ‘inherent drama’ in the brand (Durgee, 1988). In a later section, Tele2’s Frank the Sheep will be described to have been employed in a highly arousing way. Rossiter and Ang argue for a two-stage mediating process of the symbolic transfer device for brand attitude. The device must first produce a vivid visual image, that is, one that is as close as possible to an iconic representation of the original visual stimulus (Rossiter & Percy, 1983) and it should be as consistent as possible across consumers. This requirement for consistency is dealt with in Spears et al.’s (1996) concept of the ‘culturally constituted world’, and in Fiske’s (2011) explanation of codes’ importance for semiotics. The concept of black sheep (of the family) is one that is consistent across certain Western markets, including Sweden, the Netherlands and Norway, the three markets where Tele2 have featured Frank, their black sheep, drawing on his cultural connotations to associate the brand with the attributes of the non-conventional challenger brand.

The symbolic transfer device's image should also convey the key benefit the brand on which the brand is to be positioned (Rossiter & Ang, 1993). Further, this key benefit should be an early association, and therefore readily ‘accessible’ from memory (Shavitt & Fazio 1990) when the symbolic transfer device is shown.

To Aaker’s (1991) analysis of three of the main candidates for a symbolic transfer device, a name, a symbol, or a slogan, Rossiter and Ang add a fourth, “an advertising style using one or several ‘key visuals’, concluding that this is the “most widely effective and fastest way of building equity for a new brand” (p. 133). Recent Tele2 campaigns essentially captured all of these: the brand name has become closely associated with Frank the Sheep’s; the image of Frank, the anthropomorphized sheep acts as the symbol; “born to be cheap” is the clever

slogan that plays off the Swedish pronunciation of ‘sheep’; and a key visual image, and auditory tone, has been achieved with Frank, not just cheap, but also depicted in the *archetypal selling proposition* as ‘hero’ (Rossiter & Bellman, 2005). Frank has appeared both as a socially-conscious brand presenter pushing a human in wheelchair and holding and patting a puppy as a humorous lead-in to ‘Frankhjälpen’, a new dimension to the Frank brand promise, and over the recent Christmas period, and since, he also appeared on Swedish television screens reading bed-time stories to a group of children, at times with a black sheep, an ancestor, playing a key role in the brief narrative. Tapping such schemas as the story of the three kings bringing gifts to an infant born in a manger, Frank’s Christmas ad, tap into what Jung (1922) described as the ‘collective unconsciousness’, and provide fast access to the brain (Fiske and Linville, 1980).

According to Rossiter and Ang, a brand symbol can meet all of the criteria for a successful symbolic transfer device: it can “uniquely identify the brand, both visually for brand recognition, and verbally for brand recall if the symbol is automatically labeled by consumers or if the brand name is included interactively as part of the symbol” (p. 134). A brand symbol, that is, “anything that leaves a mental picture of the brand’s identity” (Burnett, 1961, p. 53), is likely to result in an iconic visual image, and, if carefully chosen, “it can denotatively suggest an attribute or connotatively suggest a desired semantic profile or produce positive affect” (p. 134). Rossiter and Ang’s (1993) discussion provides support for Spears et al.’s (1996) explanation of the role animal symbols play as a symbolic transfer device in advertising.

We conclude our review of Rossiter and Ang’s symbolic transfer device model in noting that the device should be employed in a consistent manner in order to aid the consistency of the

visual image formed, but care must be taken as too much consistency may cause audiences to ‘tune out’, and therefore ‘variations-on-a-theme’ should lead to greater advertising effectiveness, and “may help in strategic positioning of the brand” (p. 136). Frank the Sheep’s various message variations since his introduction to Tele2 in 2008 add weight to this point. In the next section, we examine the role of brand presenters, whether human or nonhuman, to understand how this device might work to enhance brand communication effects, and also consider the particular effects an anthropomorphized presenter might have in brand advertising.

The VisCAP Presenter Model

A major strategic decision in advertising is whether to include a presenter (Rossiter & Smidts, 2011). The presenter can be thought of as the audience’s answer to the question “Who says so?” (Rossiter & Percy, 1997, p. 260). Choice of presenter is critical: audience attitude toward a presenter, the perceived source or sponsor of the advertising message, can strongly influence the audience’s attitude toward the advertised brand. Rossiter and Percy’s (1997) VisCAP model summarises the presenter characteristics that are needed for the tactic’s effectiveness.

Rossiter and Percy (1997) describe presenters as “people or characters included in an advertisement to present the brand’s benefit claims” (p. 261), and suggest two situations in which they might be effectively used. First, a presenter can help boost communication effects, such as brand awareness or brand attitude, beyond the level attainable by standard advertising. Second, a presenter may help when the target audience is known to suffer ‘information overload’ when evaluating alternatives and making a brand choice in the product category. The latter situation commonly applies to high-involvement choice

situations, that is, where increased perceived risk accompanies a consumer's purchase decision. The choice of a mobile phone provider in mature markets, where there are typically many competing brands offering seemingly similar offers, presents the average consumers with such an 'information overload' situation. Sweden's mobile telecommunications market, in which Tele2 is but one of many mobile service providers, fits such a context.

The personal, or anthropomorphized, characteristics of the presenter can 'amplify' communication effects such as brand awareness, that is, either brand recognition and/or brand recall, brand attitude and brand purchase intention (Rossiter & Percy, 1997). These authors argue "the presenter merely makes the fundamental process of learning the association between the category need and the brand package or name more probable by increasing attention to the ad's execution", and "if the presenter's likeness is used on the package there would be a direct effect of the presenter on brand awareness, on brand recognition. (p. 261). Tele2's image of Frank the sheep acts as the brand's symbolic transfer device when featured in advertising, and also appears on packaging and point-of-sale promotional materials to facilitate brand recognition. Rossiter and Percy caution that advertisers must exercise care to prevent the presenter attracting too much attention and reducing attention to the brand as a result.

Holman and Hecker (1983) found celebrity presenters can increase category-cued brand recall, however, Rossiter and Percy conclude the principle use of 'presenter tactics' is to boost brand attitude, via brand beliefs. The two main ways in such boosting occurs, which rely on the perceived expertise of the presenter, are "by making the benefit claim appear more extreme and by reducing counterarguing where the target audience is negatively disposed

toward the brand” (p. 262). These authors argue the perceived ‘expert’ presenter, ‘who says so’, can make a stronger brand claim than if the mere ad tells the audience.

In situations where highly complex products categories are advertised to a non-expert audience, such as in high-involvement/informational purchase situations (see Rossiter & Bellman, 2005 for a discussion), a presenter, perceived as expert and trustworthy, can reduce ‘information overloaded’ for the consumer by negating the need to process the benefit claims, and making it easier for them to opt for global acceptance of the total attitude (Jacoby, 1984). In this manner, the presenter might serve to encourage heuristic, rather than more elaborate, processing of the ad message, in line with Petty and Cacioppo’s (1986) *elaboration likelihood* model, and Eagly and Chaiken’s (1993) *sufficiency threshold* principle.

Rossiter and Percy’s (1997, p. 263) VisCAP model captures effective presenter qualities, and is composed of: *Visibility* (how well-known the presenter is); *Credibility*, indicated by *Expertise* (knowledgeability regarding the product category) and *Objectivity* (reputation for honesty and sincerity); *Attraction*, indicated by *Likability* (attractive appearance and personality) and *Similarity* (to target user); and *Power* (authoritative occupation or personality). The latter, power, the authors note, is especially important in public-service advertising contexts.

Visibility, the authors suggest, comes at a hefty price if a celebrity presenter is used.

Alternatively, if a character is used, such as black sheep called Frank, visibility can be developed gradually from cumulative advertising exposure. Celebrity presenters may pose a risk to the brand if they become more visible for the wrong reasons. Characters, even black sheep, typically do not get into trouble as they are within the control of the advertiser, but

advertisers must be vigilant as to what may be ‘done’ to their brands, and brand presenters, in social media, as consumers interact with brands’ marketing communications efforts.

Rossiter and Percy suggest it “helps to use a mnemonic device to link the brand to the category” (p. 264). In Tele2’s use of Frank’s, the sheep born to be cheap, however, the mnemonic device has been used to link the brand with the price-based key positioning benefit of ‘cheap’ instead. The link from the brand to the category is done visually, via the presenter as symbolic transfer device, what these authors describe as a *visibility hook* to the brand or the package, “a visual tie-in between the characters in the ads and package recognition’ (p. 264). The authors’ ‘hook theory of presenter characteristics’ has recently been validated by Rossiter and Smidts (2011).

A presenter’s credibility is measured by their expertise and their objectivity. Expertise helps prevent counterargument against the ad message and thereby increases the likelihood of acceptance of claims supporting brand attitude. It is also important in ‘information overload’ situations, where “the presenter’s expertise seems necessary for the presenter-fallback acceptance process to operate” (Rossiter & Percy, 1997, p. 264). The presenter’s expertise must be immediately perceived by the target audience when processing the ad, which can be achieved by inserting an ‘expertise prompt’, that is, extra copy “telling people what the presenter is expert in” (Rossiter & Percy, 1997, p. 265). Tele2’s Frank, for example, was “born to be cheap”, suggesting a life-long attention to be low-priced through the clever play on being a sheep.

Objectivity, the second component of expertise, requires the brand attitude benefits to be “convincingly presented” (p. 265). Rossiter and Percy suggest this is made easier if the, usually celebrity, presenter has “a ‘hooklike’ reputation for honesty and sincerity” (p. 265)

but that “honesty is a personality characteristic that can easily be found in noncelebrity presenters and can easily be *stage-managed* during commercial production” (p. 266). Tele2’s black sheep was named Frank in order to convey the connotation of sincerity, or frankness, one of the company’s key values, which is reflected in its commitment to social responsibility practices and reporting (www.tele2.com, 2012).

Presenter likability, part of attraction, is made up of an attractive physical appearance and personality, and “can influence the perceived expertise ‘hook’” (p. 266). It is difficult to comment on the attractiveness of Tele2’s Frank the black sheep, but he does stand out in a flock of white sheep, as he has been shown in Figure 2, and his anthropomorphized ‘personality’, typically demonstrated as the confident, hero archetype, who wins the rubber-band flicking contest at the office water fountain and helps the less fortunate in the community, is a winning one. In terms of similarity, the second element of attraction, the brand’s users may not identify with a normal sheep, given their derogative connotations as ‘unthinking followers’ in culturally constituted Western worlds, but they may identify with the associations with the black sheep, which are more ‘independent-minded’ and ‘rebellious’. Rossiter and Percy state, “the target audience must identify with the emotional portrayal in the ad”, the purpose being “to *transform* the target user’s self image” (p. 267). For this reason, Tele2 chose a black sheep.

According to Rossiter and Percy, power is most relevant for products or services sold via an element of ‘fear appeal’, such as public-service advertising campaigns for anti-littering or pro-donor behavior appeals, and therefore can be omitted here. Instead, we now discuss the case of Swedish mobile telecommunications company Tele2’s use of an anthropomorphized advertising presenter, Frank the Sheep.

Sweden's Tele2 and Frank, a Black Sheep, Born to be Cheap

For several years up until 2008, Tele2, the second company to enter Sweden's deregulated telecommunications market, relied on an advertising device based on two men with the name Bill; 'little Bill', played by a dwarf, represented Tele2's cheaper mobile prices, while 'big Bill' represented the high charges of other mobile phone operators in the marketplace. The campaign had mixed success. In 2008, the Bills were replaced by a fresh campaign theme in Sweden, in which a bipedal, talking sheep, animatronically created using the same technologies as used in the movie *Jurassic Park*, featured as the brand's advertising presenter. *Frank*, the black sheep, born to be cheap, entered the Swedish marketplace and imagination, as one of the country's first expressions of anthropomorphic advertising.

In analyzing Tele2's positioning approach, it is necessary to consider the Swedish telecommunications market structure, and the order of entry into that market of Tele2. In 1993, Tele2, as suggested in the company's name, was the second company to enter Sweden's then newly deregulated telecommunications market. Pioneer brands, the first brand to enter a product category, will typically enjoy enduring market share dominance (e.g. Lieberman & Montgomery, 1987; Montgomery, 1978), and a company entering the market dominated by the pioneer must challenge in order to gain market share. The first challenger will attack the pioneer on a consumer benefit on which the pioneer is not doing well, and it must be able to sustain this as a competitive advantage that will prove attractive to a particular segment, or segments, of consumers. *Televerket*, now *Telia*, which had a monopoly in the Swedish market up until Tele2's entry, was vulnerable on price and service, and these were key benefits on which Tele2 could position its challenge. Tele2 was a company founded by the tycoon Jan Stenbeck, owner of *Kinnevik*, an investment company which he had

transformed from a traditional Swedish industry in pulp, paper and steel manufacturing into media and telecommunications. In the Swedish finance market, the unconventional Stenbeck might easily have fitted the 'black sheep' tag.

In 2008, Forsman and Bodenfors, the advertising agency that had held the Tele2 account since 2002, needed a new look and a new hook to Tele2's advertising, and introduced a sheep, Frank, to do the job of branding Tele2 as a more serious upcoming competitor, one that stands for difference and innovation in its service offering. As the market challenger it has always been a company that wanted to be known for its positive aggressiveness. When Forsman and Bodenfors made the choice to use the sheep as spokesperson for Tele2, they wanted a character that symbolized values such as being head-on, direct, explicit, extremely simple, blunt and, yes!, frank. Frank was a suitable name for the sheep since the connotations were easy to grasp, direct and implied no hidden agenda. The fact that the name was a monosyllable was a further strength. The agency also wanted the name to communicate the company's ambition to have the ability to go its own way, not following the stream (Zander, 2012).

The decision to choose a black sheep to replace the two Bills as the symbol for the brand was an easy one for the advertising agency, according to the project leader of the campaign: "If it had not been a black sheep it would not have been a sheep at all". Frank was used to tell the story of Tele2, and, as a sturdy, self-confident male, with an American voice, he soon became a success story. It is worth noting that Frank breaks the anthropomorphic mold, when considered in the light of Spears et al.'s (1996) research findings. Whereas these authors found that wild animals are most frequently used with services, Frank is a domesticated 'animal', but one that might be linked to a 'wild' brand meaning bundle, since he is a 'black

sheep'. Historically and traditionally, the “black sheep” is an idiom used to describe an undesirable or disreputable member of a family, an outcast or a dropout implying negative implications. But the “black sheep” also has other less negative connotations such as: rebel, maverick, individualist and non-conformist (www.thefreedictionary.com). Another anthropomorphic example, the ‘white crow’ is used to describe a person with the same attributes in some other cultures, for example, Russia and Persia.

Campaign Strategy

As mentioned above, the first phase in communicating Tele2’s price-based positioning strategy was to establish it as the cheapest possible brand. This was done in a series of advertisements on the topic “Born to be cheap”, one print ad example of which is shown in Figure 2.

(Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here)

After successfully introducing the brand symbol, Frank, into the market, a long period followed during which the communication strategy focused on products and services, with Frank used to point out specific attributes of the Tele2 products and services. One example of this campaign is the “Electric Shock” ad (available on You Tube, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7QJh4whYqI>, 2012), where the communication goal was to stress the speed of Tele2’s broadband service. The current campaign is back to communication of the brand on a more general level, even though from time to time the individual ads feature specific products and services in the message.

Despite its huge communicative success in Sweden, Forsman & Bodenfors’s Tele2 project

leader of the campaign on, Jerk Zander, states that choosing the sheep as a spokesperson of the campaign has not been the smoothest strategy, especially since the sheep is English-speaking, which can be problematic as advertisements in English can be received as ludicrous by some Swedish-speaking people. Even this likelihood is sent up, however, in an advertisement where Frank tries to speak Swedish but fares poorly, accentuating the ad's humorous tone at the end of the 'message' by asking the question "Who speaks Swedish anyway?", then, with the timing of a good comedian, answering "Swedes" over the ad's 'pack shot' in order to make light of the dilemma (available on You Tube, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGORp3UuhSg>). The point that almost a significant percentage of Sweden's population are immigrants (Sweden Statistics, 2012), with English serving as a strong second language, has probably added weight to the use of English for Frank. An English-speaking brand symbol has possibly resonated with new users of Sweden's mobile telecommunications services.

The Tele2 campaign is aimed broadly, not targeting a particular segment, but an important marketing communications goal is that it is accepted by the young consumers. The campaign with Frank, the cheap sheep, was launched simultaneously in other European markets such as the Netherlands and Norway, both of them English-speaking countries, in markets with similar cultural contexts as in Sweden. In other countries, where there is a different culturally constituted context, Tele2's advertisement strategy differs. In Russia, for example, where the brand has enjoyed recent market penetration success, 'cheap', or low price, is seen as something negative with aspirational consumers, and hence the campaign has avoided black sheep or white crows. Instead, the brand has been built its advertising around a humorous swipe at the Russian mafia. In Russia, a black sheep has been replaced by black humour.

(Insert Figures 3 and 4 here)

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to examine anthropomorphism's 'grip on the marketing imagination', and, in particular, to understand how linking anthropomorphic associations to brands might work to increase marketing communication effectiveness. We have done this firstly by reviewing three strands of related theory, the Symbolic Communications Model (Spears et al., 1996), the Symbolic Transfer Device (Rossiter & Ang, 1993) and VisCAP Presenter Model (Rossiter & Percy, 1997). In doing so, we extend previous research on how linking anthropomorphic associations to brands can be employed to increase effectiveness of these common marketing communications. The managerial implication of this paper is to show how this practically can be done by referring to the Swedish case of Frank the sheep. We show that anthropomorphized animals can work effectively when presenting a new brand to the market, especially where the aim is to quickly establish and communicate brand positioning. In understanding the mechanisms behind the anthropomorphized presenter's associations to brands, and how these are created, managers can effectively transfer meaning between the presenter and the brand.

A limitation of this paper may be its reliance on only one case. The case might be considered a *critical* one (Yin, 1994), however, serving to test whether the three strands of theory might be successfully applied to the anthropomorphic marketing context, and therefore a valid approach. Our explanation of anthropomorphic marketing's success in the case of Tele2's cheap, black sheep could be tested by considered across a wider range of anthropomorphized brand presenters, but such an approach was beyond the scope of this paper. Future research might consider this option, perhaps testing the conclusions we have drawn here. Another potentially fruitful direction for future research might be to compare our observations of the

use of Frank with similar anthropomorphized presenters in other, non-Western culturally constituted worlds.

Conclusion

Animals have long been used to symbolize a range of human characteristics, and “form an inexhaustible repository which novelists, poets, artists, dramatists, film makers, and even advertisers draw on, either consciously or intuitively, when they wish to evoke an immediate yet profound response” (Rowland, 1973, p. xvii).

Frank the sheep was brought to ‘advertising life’ from a culturally constituted world of animal symbols to convey a brand meaning bundle to a challenger brand in the Swedish mobile telecommunications market. It is a clever and playful use of a non-human, anthropomorphized, animatronic figure. Within the three strands of advertising theory we have considered here we provide reasons for why Frank works in the Swedish, Dutch and Norwegian markets, though we have concentrated on the Swedish situation. Brand managers considering such a brand presenter approach might do so in the light of the theories presented here, and consider the best anthropomorphized choice for their context. There is no one guaranteed-to-work anthropomorphic marketing approach, but if the correct choices are made, the benefits to marketing communication effectiveness will be as numerous as the number of ‘marketing critters’ and ‘spokescreatures’ to be found in contemporary consumer culture.

Figures



Figure 1 Frank the Sheep

Figure 2 Frank, from the "Born to be Cheap" campaign



Figure 3 Introducing Frank



Figure 4 For the Love of Cheap

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