



Bladders, guts and feet: The psychology behind anthropomorphic body parts

by Paul Hiebert
March 17, 2016

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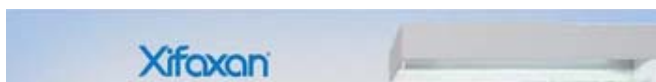


Is it easier to face our grosser anatomical features when they have a life of their own?

If you watch TV, there's a good chance you've recently seen human-like body parts smiling and waving back at you. A commercial for the drug Myrbetriq, for example, features a blue-eyed bladder with arms and legs who constantly nags a woman to drop what she's doing and visit the restroom.

During the Super Bowl, Xifaxan ran a spot starring a bundle of bowels known

instigating a shameful sprint to the toilet. A spot for the topical solution Jublia, which also aired during the Super Bowl, showcases NFL legends Deion Sanders, Howie Long and Phil Simms relaxing in a spa alongside a large fungus-infected foot named Big J, who sports a purple robe and presumably smells fresh despite his visible symptoms.



The reaction to these anthropomorphic creations has been mixed, but loud. While some viewers consider them adorable, others seem repulsed. A sample tweet from the latter camp reads, "Can't decide which animated trade character is more disgusting: Myrbetriq's overactive bladder or Xifaxan's gassy mass of intestines. #yuck."

Indeed, after the Super Bowl, *Entertainment Weekly* deemed Gut Guy the game's unofficial mascot due to the sheer number of people on Twitter either praising or condemning his existence. The Wall Street Journal, however, reported that though Xifaxan's and Jublia's ads generated significant buzz for their respective ailments on social media, many of the nearly 112 million people who watched football's main event last month didn't particularly enjoy the ads addressing "not-so-pleasant bodily functions."

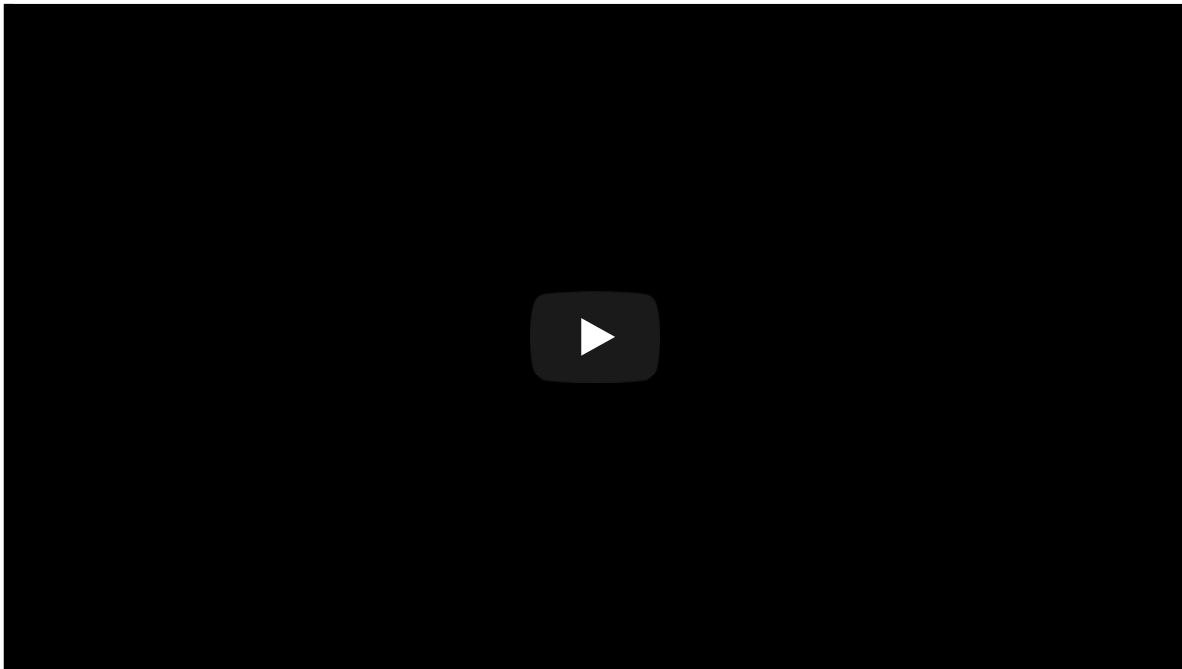
If it turns out, then, that most folks don't want to think about abdominal pain while watching human innards walk around in public, then what, exactly, is the wisdom behind creating such a character?



On one hand, the benefits of cartoon mascots are well documented. Animated spokespeople, from Mr. Peanut to Tony the Tiger to the Kool-Aid Man, provide a brand with personality. They can embody a company's ethos and lend a distinct voice across social media platforms. At the same time, they don't get drunk in public or upload racist rants onto YouTube. They don't demand higher wages, complain about long hours, or fret over compromising their artistic integrity.

As humans, we have an innate tendency to see ourselves in decidedly non-human things, whether that be gods, cars or a nightcap-wearing moon within the pages of a children's book, so it only makes sense to harness this quirk.

On the other hand, the human body can be kind of gross, especially when dealing with illness and disease. So while a variety of brands have long used characters with human characteristics to help sell countless products and services, it's not entirely clear if bladders and feet can enjoy the same level of success.



According to Jay Bolling, they can. Bolling is the CEO of PulseCX, the healthcare marketing agency responsible for developing Myrbetriq's bladder boy, who launched in early 2014. As Bolling puts it, the underlying idea behind the anthropomorphic character is literally to separate potential customers from their ailment, thereby diminishing their sense of shame or guilt.

"An overactive bladder is a highly stigmatized condition, and it's very embarrassing," said Bolling, noting that it's often associated with getting older and is neglected by some physicians. Therefore, the act of turning the problem into something external with a life of its own can, in a sense, shift a viewer's thoughts about herself. "Rather than her feeling like it was her problem or something she had done, it really isn't her; it's her bladder," said Bolling.

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