

Win a \$100,000 Grant for Cause Marketing

The Bemporad Baranowski Marketing Group (BBMG) is launching the "It's How We Live" Grant – a \$100,000 package of in-kind communications services to help a nonprofit and its corporate partner create and launch a breakthrough cause marketing campaign.

BBMG has enlisted some very talented partners – Global Strategy Group, Kintera, Slam Media Group, MediaLink, US Newswire and Quality Letter Service – and this team is ready to help you craft the strategy, message and materials to bring your campaign to life.

BBMG is looking for applicants who are enthusiastic about leveraging creative cause marketing to make a difference. You don't need a huge team or budget – just a compelling vision and a dedicated partnership. To learn more about the grant and to download an application, visit www.ItsHowWeLive.com or call 212.473.4902 x206. The deadline for submissions is July 31, 2006. ■



BBMG IT'S HOW
WE LIVE GRANT



a goodman

GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD CAUSES

444 north larchmont blvd, suite 102
los angeles, ca 90004

Free-range thinking™ is a monthly newsletter for public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses that want to reach more people more effectively. For a free subscription, send your request to: andy@agoodmanonline.com or call 323.464.3956. Back issues are available on the web at www.agoodmanonline.com.

Newsletter edited by Lori Matsumoto.



Learning from Raisins, M&Ms and Goldfish

Not only do you know them, you probably know more about them than you care to admit. They are the California Raisins, who boogied to "I Heard it Through the Grapevine" and became a national sensation. They are Snap, Crackle and

Pop, three remarkably lactose-tolerant fellows who have been co-habiting the same bowl of cereal for decades. They are M&Ms with attitude, Goldfish who

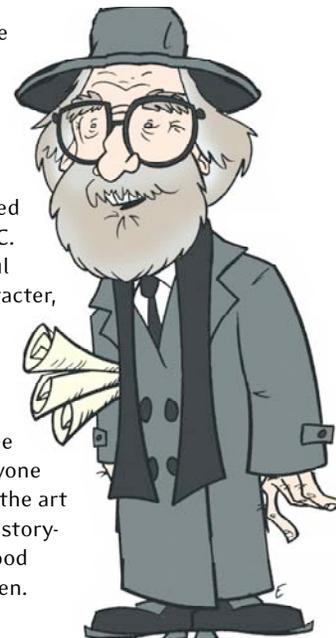
If you want to become a better storyteller, study the masters. Before you eat them, of course.

worry about being eaten, and a giggly guy made of dough who just loves it when you poke him in the belly.

Yes, they are commercial "spokes-things," but before you dismiss them as cute-but-shameless skills for everything from candy to kitchen cleaners, take a closer look. There is a reason

why they have burrowed so deeply into your consciousness (and generated millions of dollars for their corporate parents), and it has everything to do with the carefully conceived story that has been developed around each of them.

Many of these stories have been brought to life or nurtured to new vitality by a company called Character, LLC. David Altschul founded Character, and when he talks about his unusual clientele (as he did with me in March), anyone interested in the art and power of storytelling has good reason to listen.



David Altschul of Character, LLC

▶ David Altschul had been fascinated by characters and their stories since his college days, and his passion eventually led to a job at Will Vinton Studios, the birthplace of the California Raisins. Altschul had a front-row seat for the raisins' meteoric rise, and even though they experienced an equally fast fall (excessive merchandising quickly changed them from cool to common), the fact that they had developed a following *at all* was not lost on him. They certainly hadn't done it on looks, Altschul recalls with a chuckle.

After two decades with Will Vinton, Altschul launched Character, LLC (www.characterweb.com) and set up shop in Portland, Oregon. Since 2002, he and his team have worked on such well-known characters as Mr. Clean and the Pillsbury Doughboy. Corporate clients pay \$150,000 to attend the company's three-day "Character Camp," and while most of the content of those gatherings is confidential, Altschul was willing to share two of the fundamental principles that guide every session:

Stories are driven by conflict.

When Altschul was still at Will Vinton, marketing execs from Maytag came to him with a problem. "Old Lonely," the repairman whom nobody called because Maytag's machines were so reliable, was not driving sales like the old days. Further complicating matters, Maytag wanted to promote all the innovations in its newest washers and dryers, and it was clear that a lonely old man was not the ideal spokesperson for new technology. But the company didn't want to dump a character with so much equity.

To solve the problem, Altschul and his colleagues created a second repairman: a younger, perkier fellow who is obsessed with all the new things Maytag is doing. Place him next to Old Lonely and you have a natural conflict between young and old that allows Maytag to talk about both reliability and innovation at the same time.

Internal conflict can be another way of revealing character and driving the action of a story, says Altschul. The red M&M, one of Altschul's earliest creations, is confident — some might say arrogant — and a bit of a loudmouth, but most of all he craves attention. This poses a problem, however, because attracting human attention increases his chances of being eaten, which is not a good thing in Red's view. In short, says Altschul, Red is a character "who carries his conflict with him," and that is a dilemma that many human beings can relate to.

Candy and washing machines may seem a far cry from your particular issue, but no matter what kind of story you are telling, conflict will always be an essential ingredient. Altschul's experience is an excellent reminder that you can often find that conflict between the people in your story or even within a single person.

Characters who are flawed are more interesting.

When corporations bring their characters to camp, Altschul says, the most frequent problem is perfection. "The characters are charming, friendly, and helpful," Altschul explains, "and the closest they come to having

a flaw is when they're described as a little mischievous." What the marketing managers find delightful, however, is deadly dull to the audience. It's the flaws, Altschul says, that make characters interesting. Or as his partner, Brian Lanahan, succinctly puts it, "Superman is boring without kryptonite."

This principle has helped guide the development of Finn (pictured here), whom Character is bringing to life for Pepperidge Farm. Finn is a worrier, and everything that Pepperidge Farm does to make its Goldfish more desirable — new flavors, colors, etc. — is only more cause for alarm. Altschul and Character are betting that this vulnerability will make Finn more appealing, and it looks like a good bet.

Tim Keelan, who helps companies find and hone their best stories, affirmed the importance of vulnerability when I interviewed him late last year. "When people are willing to share something vulnerable," Keelan told me, "the audience will be more likely to trust them."

Public interest storytellers share the "perfection problem" with their corporate counterparts. Flaws and vulnerability are often in short supply in their narratives,

and the resulting stories are as interesting as Superman without the green stuff. Narratives that fall into the "We came, we saw, we conquered" pattern and that cast the nonprofit in a heroic role may, in fact, be accurate. But it's the mistakes, the blind alleys you walk down, and the surprises along the way that will keep the audience interested.

If there are stories you tell about your organization, try taking another look at them with these principles in mind. And the next time some talking snack pops up on your TV, put down that remote and pay attention. There is probably a story being told in those thirty seconds, and it may help you tell yours better. ■



Finn the Goldfish may be crunchy and cheesy, but the secret ingredient of his appeal may well be his vulnerability.