
March 30, 2007

ADVERTISING

Uncle Ben, Board Chairman

By [STUART ELLIOTT](#)

A racially charged advertising character, who for decades has been relegated to a minor role in the marketing of the products that still carry his name, is taking center stage in a campaign that gives him a makeover — Madison Avenue style — by promoting him to chairman of the company.

The character is Uncle Ben, the symbol for more than 60 years of the Uncle Ben's line of rices and side dishes now sold by the food giant Mars. The challenges confronting Mars in reviving a character as racially fraught as Uncle Ben were evidenced in the reactions of experts to a redesigned Web site (unclebens.com), which went live this week.

"This is an interesting idea, but for me it still has a very high cringe factor," said Luke Visconti, partner at Diversity Inc. Media in Newark, which publishes a magazine and Web site devoted to diversity in the workplace.

"There's a lot of baggage associated with the image," Mr. Visconti said, which the makeover "is glossing over."

Uncle Ben, who first appeared in ads in 1946, is being reborn as Ben, an accomplished businessman with an opulent office, a busy schedule, an extensive travel itinerary and a penchant for sharing what the company calls his "grains of wisdom" about rice and life. A crucial aspect of his biography remains the same, though: He has no last name.

Vincent Howell, president for the food division of the Masterfoods USA unit of Mars, said that because consumers described Uncle Ben as having "a timeless element to him, we didn't want to significantly change him."

"What's powerful to me is to show an African-American icon in a position of prominence and authority," Mr. Howell said. "As an African-American, he makes me feel so proud."

The previous reluctance to feature Uncle Ben prominently in ads stood in stark contrast to the way other human characters like Orville Redenbacher and Colonel Sanders personify their products. That reticence can be traced to the contentious history of Uncle Ben as the black face of a white company, wearing a bow tie evocative of servants and Pullman porters and bearing a title reflecting how white Southerners once used

“uncle” and “aunt” as honorifics for older blacks because they refused to say “Mr.” and “Mrs.”

Before the civil rights movement took hold, marketers of food and household products often used racial and ethnic stereotypes in creating brand characters and mascots.

In addition to Uncle Ben, there was Aunt Jemima, who sold pancake mix in ads that sometimes had her exclaiming, “Tempt yo’ appetite;” a grinning black chef named Rastus, who represented Cream of Wheat hot cereal; the Gold Dust Twins, a pair of black urchins who peddled a soap powder for Lever Brothers; the Frito Bandito, who spoke in an exaggerated Mexican accent; and characters selling powdered drink mixes for Pillsbury under names like Injun Orange and Chinese Cherry — the latter baring buck teeth.

“The only time blacks were put into ads was when they were athletic, subservient or entertainers,” said Marilyn Kern Foxworth, the author of “Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow.”

After the start of the civil rights movement, such characters became “lightning rods” in a period when consumers started to want “images our children could look up to and emulate,” Ms. Kern Foxworth said.

As a result, most of those polarizing ad characters were banished when marketers — becoming more sensitive to the changing attitudes of consumers — realized they were no longer appropriate. A handful like Uncle Ben, Aunt Jemima and the Cream of Wheat chef were redesigned and kept on, but in the unusual status of silent spokescharacters, removed from ads and reduced to staring mutely from packages.

Times, however, change, as evidenced by real-life figures as disparate as Wally Amos, the founder of Famous Amos cookies; [Oprah Winfrey](#); and Senator [Barack Obama](#), the Illinois Democrat who is running for president. In advertising, there are now black authority figures serving as spokesmen in multimillion-dollar campaigns, like Dennis Haysbert, for [Allstate](#), and James Earl Jones, for [Verizon](#).

That helped executives at Masterfoods and its advertising agency, TBWA/Chiat/Day, consider the risky step of reviving the character.

“There’s no doubt we realized we had a very powerful asset we were not using strongly enough,” Mr. Howell said.

So about 18 months ago, the company and agency decided “to reach out to our consumers” and gauge attitudes toward Uncle Ben, Mr. Howell said. There were no negative responses or references to the stereotyped aspects of the character, he said. Rather, the consumers “focused on positive images, quality, warmth, timelessness,” he added, and “the legend of Uncle Ben.”

That encouraged the idea that “we could bring him to life,” Mr. Howell said, sensitive to “the sorts of concerns that are important to me as an African-American.”

Joe Shands, a creative director at the Playa del Rey, Calif., office of TBWA/Chiat/Day, said the freedom to use the character to sell the Uncle Ben's brand was a welcome change from the years when "all we've had to work with is a portrait." "We wanted to know if there was something there we could utilize to talk about new products, existing products, the values of the company," Mr. Shands said, adding that both black and white consumers described the character as someone "they know and love."

"Through the magic of marketing, we've made him the chairman," Mr. Shands said. Uncle Ben's office, he said, is "reflective of a man with great wisdom who has done great things."

Magazine ads in the campaign, which carries the theme "Ben knows best," present a painting of the character in a gold frame with the chairman's title affixed on a plaque.

The painting is also on display on the home page of the redesigned Web site, which offers a virtual tour of Ben's office. Visitors can browse through his e-mail messages, examine his datebook and read his executive memorandums.

"It's important consumers begin to hear from Uncle Ben," said Mr. Howell of Masterfoods, who is based in Los Angeles.

Despite the character's impressive new credentials, some advertising executives expressed skepticism that the campaign could avoid negative overtones.

The ads are "asking us to make the leap from Uncle Ben being someone who looks like a butler to overnight being a chairman of the board," Ms. Kern Foxworth said. "It does not work for me."

"I applaud them for the effort and trying to move forward," she added, but the decision to keep the same portrait of Uncle Ben, bow tie and all, also dismayed her because "they're trying so hard to hold onto something I'm trying so hard to get rid of."

Howard Buford, chief executive at Prime Access in New York, an agency specializing in multicultural campaigns, said he gave the campaign's creators some credit. "It's potentially a very creative way to handle the baggage of old racial stereotypes as advertising icons," he said, but "it's going to take a lot of work to get it right and make it ring true."

For instance, Mr. Buford said, noting all the "Ben" references in the ads, "Rarely do you have someone of that stature addressed by his first name" — and minus any signs of a surname.

Mr. Buford, who is a real-life black leader of a company, likened the promotion of Uncle Ben to the abrupt plot twists on TV series like "Benson" and "Designing Women," when black characters in subservient roles one season became professionals the next.

“It’s nice that now, for the 21st century, they’re saying this icon can ‘own’ a company,” Mr. Buford said, “but they’re going to have to make him a whole person.”

Mr. Visconti of Diversity Inc. Media struck a similar chord. He said he would have turned Ben’s office into “a learning experience,” furnishing it with, for example, books by Frederick Douglass and the Rev. Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

“I’ve never been in the office of African-Americans of this era who didn’t have something in their office showing what it took to get them there,” Mr. Visconti said.

The actual biography of Uncle Ben is at variance with his fanciful new identity. According to Ms. Kern Foxworth’s book and other reference materials, there was a Ben — no surname survives — who was a Houston rice farmer renowned for the quality of his crops. During World War II, Gordon L. Harwell, a Texas food broker, supplied to the armed forces a special kind of white rice, cooked to preserve the nutrients, under the brand name Converted Rice.

In 1946, Mr. Harwell had dinner with a friend (or business partner) in Chicago (or Houston) and decided that a portrait of the maitre d’hotel of the restaurant, Frank Brown, could represent the brand, which was renamed Uncle Ben’s Converted Rice as it was being introduced to the consumer market.

In coming months, visitors to the Uncle Ben’s Web site will be able to discover new elements of the character, Mr. Howell said, like full-body digital versions of Uncle Ben and voice mail messages. The Web site was designed by an agency, Tequila, that is a sibling of TBWA/Chiat/Day, and the budget for the campaign, print and online, is estimated at \$20 million. TBWA/Chiat/Day is part of the TBWA Worldwide unit of the [Omnicom Group](#).

If the makeover for Uncle Ben is deemed successful, could there be similar changes in store for other racially charged characters?

Last month, the Cream of Wheat chef got a new owner when [B&G Foods](#) completed a \$200 million deal to buy his brand, and its companion, Cream of Rice, from [Kraft Foods](#).

“We’re doing consumer focus work right now to understand how important the character is,” said David L. Wenner, chief executive at B&G in Parsippany, N.J.

If any changes were to be made, “you would need to be very careful,” he added, “and you would want to do it with dignity.”

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

