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Alka-Seltzer's Speedy Recovery

With Sales Up, Bayer Brings Back 'Reassuring' Icon for Uncertain Times

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NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- There's an unspoken rule that once you've hit celebrity status, you can always make a comeback. Nowhere is that truism more evident than in brand icons. Case in point: Speedy Alka-Seltzer, the baby-faced mascot sketched out by Bob Watkins for the Wade Agency back in 1951.



The comeback for Alka-Seltzer's Speedy mascot begins in print and will move online.

Yes, Speedy's back -- but without the fanfare that normally accompanies a star's return. Working quietly with BBDO, New York, Alka-Seltzer owner Bayer has revived the character in a print ad -- on the back cover of Playboy (don't ask how we know this) -- and an online "Where's Waldo"-type game. He even has a MySpace profile.

Bayer would not comment on anything to do with the campaign -- or whether Speedy would make a glorious return to TV. But the strategy seems to be in line with recent and successful revivals of old Alka-Seltzer slogans such as "I can't believe I ate the whole thing."

Covert animation

Alka-Seltzer, in fact, has a history of being buttoned-up when it comes to the 57-year-old character originally named Sparky that was created by the predecessor agency to Wells, Rich, Greene. When Speedy made the leap from women's magazines to TV, animator George Pal brought him to life with nearly 30 different expressions, using a filmmaking technique so secret the tapes were kept in a Hollywood vault. That first spot, which ran March 16, 1953, was voiced by Richard Beals, a 24-year-old radio actor who was selected after the agency heard more than 400 auditions, according to the Advertising Icon Museum website.

The rest is history for Speedy, who went on to star in 212 commercials, some alongside stars such as Buster Keaton. (Speedy's also known for singing the jingle "Plop, plop, fizz, fizz," though the author of the ditty is disputed in online histories, credited to both musician Tom Dawes and the father of actress Julianna Margulies.)

By the time Speedy was retired in 1964, Alka-Seltzer had invested \$8.5 million a year in the little tablet man -- the largest investment in any single campaign of that era, according to Alka-Seltzer. By comparison, Bayer spent \$14 million on measured media for the entire Alka-Seltzer portfolio in the first nine months of this year, according to TNS Media Intelligence.

By the mid-1960s, Speedy's fame had spread far and wide; being known as "Prontito" in Spanish-speaking countries. It is a sign of his iconographic importance that the original 6-inch Speedy model -- which was lost en route to the Philippines and found five years later in an Australian warehouse -- has been insured for \$100,000. It is being held in a Beverly Hills vault.

Pitching in for Big Boy

Alas, though, Speedy would not be seen again until special occasions such as the Bicentennial, or the 1980 Winter Olympics, co-starring entertainment legend Sammy Davis Jr. He also was recruited for a cameo appearance in the "Save Big Boy" campaign for Bob's Big Boy restaurant, soliciting the audience to vote to keep the food chain's chubby mascot.

Since Speedy has left the airwaves, the brand has expanded from the original formula to a lineup that includes Alka-Seltzer Plus (Immunity Complex), Alka-Seltzer Cough and Cold and even a hangover remedy called Morning Relief. The portfolio notched \$113.4 million in sales for the 52 weeks ended Jan. 27 among food, drug and mass merchandisers, according to Information Resources Inc., up 2.9%.

If sales are up, why bring Speedy back? For Dean Crutchfield, senior VP-marketing at Wolff-Olins, the question is: Why not? Tapping into retro trends could appeal to younger audiences that were never exposed to the character, and it will certainly strike a chord with older consumers. "The markets today are both so uncertain and saturated with choice that we want reassuring characters to show us what's tried, tested and true," he said, noting that today's interest in all things retro taps into the zeitgeist of uncertain times. "There is an appetite for icons, myths and legends, and if properly executed, we can come to love them. They become anchor points, and we hold them very dear to our hearts."

A Speedy timeline

1951 Speedy Alka-Seltzer created by Bob Watkins for the Wade Agency.

- 1952** First print appearance in women's magazines.
- 1953** First TV commercial taped March 16.
- 1954** Introduction of the "Relief is just a swallow away" jingle, sung by Speedy.
- 1964** After more than 200 commercials, Speedy Alka-Seltzer retires.
- 1971** Original Speedy statue is lost on trip to Philippines. It's found five years later in an Australian warehouse.
- 1980** Speedy returns alongside legend Sammy Davis Jr. for three Winter Olympics ads.
- 1985** Cameo appearance in the "Save Big Boy" ad campaign to save Bob's Big Boy restaurant mascot.
- LATE '80s** Speedy teams up with H&R Block for the slogan "Alka-Seltzer to the rescue for tax-time upsets."
- 2008** Speedy returns in a print ad and online game. More to come?

Sources: [Advertising Icon Museum.com](http://AdvertisingIconMuseum.com); alka-seltzer.com; TVacres.com

Other icon comebacks

HITS

THE RED M&M: Despite being one of the most prominent M&M brand characters, Red was pulled out of the game in 1976 after a public scare over red food colorants. He made a triumphant return 11 years later.

THE BURGER KING: Recently revived by Crispin Porter & Bogusky, his royal highness was frequently seen at franchises entertaining kids in the '70s. His new oversize head, tongue-in-cheek attitude, and tendency for breaking and entering has resonated with consumers.

MISS

ORVILLE REDENBACHER: Though he passed away in 1995, he was brought back to life by Crispin last year, creeping out consumers and earning him the title of Corpstown Deadenbacher. Ouch.

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