How did you get started in the character and mascot field?
I was attending the University of Delaware and was encouraged by my father to find a summer job, other than being a lifeguard, for the summer of 1976. He helped me get a part-time job with the Phillies for that summer and I got to know the marketing and advertising staff there during my two summers as an intern. In 1978, while still a student at Delaware, the Phillies called and asked me to be the performer for their new character. They didn’t know what it was going to look like yet or what it would do, but they were going to have a character. That was my introduction to characters. I worked as the Phillie Phanatic for 16 years.

people were surprised by a furry puppet-like character bouncing around their seats during the game. People completely understand now, because of the groundwork laid by the Phanatic and the Chicken. Prior to us, “mascots” were usually logos or visual figureheads. They would walk out, wave and go back in. We were the first characters who actually entertained.

What are the keys to an organization successfully initiating a character?
An organization has to focus on three specific areas, all with equal weight. If any one of these three areas are ignored or not given equal weight, then the program will fall short. They represent the organization’s commitment to marketing the character. In other words, the organization not only understands the value this character will have in branding their message, but also understands the potential revenue the character can generate. Also, the organization needs to secure a great design. The design not only has to look good on paper, but the two-dimensional design has to be turned into a three-dimensional functional character. The design has to be performer-friendly. By that I mean a design that allows the character to move around in the costume, communicate and do things to be entertaining. The third area is the performer. There has to be a trained and talented performer – someone who knows how to get into a costume, communicate nonverbally and entertain the fans.

Does a character justify a full time position or can an organization get by with random interns
being asked to wear the costume?
Four or five years ago, teams could have gotten by with the intern approach, but that approach demonstrates a lack of commitment from the organization. I recommend to our clients that they find a way to create a full-time position, by understanding the position is not just performance – it is performance/marketing/selling. This individual will not only perform at games, but will use the character to help market the team in the community. With this approach the performer/marketer/salesperson sometimes outperforms not only their lowest performing salesperson, but rivals some of the best producing salespeople, because they have such an effective tool: the character.

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How would you measure the effectiveness of a character, for instance, trying to justify eliminating a sales position?
Just by the numbers. For example, if an organization replaces the lowest performing salesperson with the performer/marketer/salesperson, that person only needs to exceed the revenue of the person replaced. If they don’t, then you try to figure out why they haven’t. It may be that they don’t have all the tools they need to perform all of the tasks. The other way to track it, or to even understand the value, is through market research. Ask your fans why they come to the game. If a certain percentage of fans come to the games because they love the environment and the entertainment, which includes the character, then it is worth it. If that is the case then a percentage of the gross of every person that walks in that door is
Can the character play a significant role in the overall marketing efforts of the organization?

Absolutely. Many organizations think they have a successful program, and it may be successful from a viewpoint that says, "The character works the games and fans like him." Those organizations need to expand that viewpoint. The fans that already come to the games respond to the mascot, but what about the people that haven't come to games? Don't you think they would respond the same way if exposed to the character? You can send direct mailings, do advertising and billboards, but you also can send your character out to do school programs promoting a positive message to kids. They can show up and entertain at any function in a community. The organization can lend the character's valued entertainment to an event. The event will welcome it, especially if they are getting it for free, and your character can distribute the message, either through direct handouts of toys and merchandise, or just through its presence with the team logo on the character. People then discover the character for the local baseball, soccer or hockey team. They think he is really fun and will go to check out that environment. Also important to note: these appearances are affordable and, in some instances, if the character is invited, an appearance fee can be charged. You are delivering your message in an entertaining fashion that is affordable and/or a revenue generator.

What is Raymond Entertainment's primary business?

We provide our clients with a full character-branding program. If an organization doesn't have a character, we can completely implement the whole program. This includes marketing materials, performance training, identifying performers and, obviously, the design and construction of the character. We are a full-service character branding company. We also can do event production or show organizations how to create events using the character's image, whether it is a birthday party, a type of gift delivery or some other outside appearances. If a character is in place we can reconfigure the design, make the costume more performer-friendly, and create costume wardrobes for a character so it turns into a version of Elvis or Santa Claus. We can also create and produce merchandise that reflects a character's image, such as plush dolls, bobble heads and toys.

Raymond Entertainment is expanding into cyber characters. What is a cyber character?

A cyber character is created by taking the principals of character branding, and translating them onto the giant video and television screens that are present in most arenas and stadiums. Even minor league teams spend $800,000 to $2,000,000 for a video board in their environment. It is one more piece of the puzzle of how to make their place more entertaining.

We can create a character that interacts on the video board. We design and create a character that is actually put into the cyber world, or up on the television screen, and the performer moves that character using a joystick and a keyboard. The simplest way to understand it is to just pretend that a video game runs your character up on the scoreboard. He can run, talk, move, dance, do flips, or his head can explode. Virtually anything a cartoon can do we can make a cyber character do. We can make him look any way you want and he becomes one more piece of the sponsored inventory for your arena or environment. He is like the outfield sign that jumps off the board and runs to the seat next to you and dances with your kid. Our clients really understand that a cyber character can be very entertaining and also recognize that it can be an easily sponsored piece of their inventory.

Is it wise to put a sponsorship on your character?

When you slap a sponsor's logo on your live costumed character, he suddenly becomes their mascot by default, and you don't want that. You don't want to dilute your message. If you are the character for the Lakewood Blue Claws, you want to be recognized as Buster from the Lakewood Blue Claws and wearing their jersey all the time. But, what you can do is have more creative sponsorships. For example, the car that the character drives may be a VW Beetle, so he is sponsored by the local VW dealership. The wrap or artwork on that vehicle represents a mixture of Lakewood Blue Claws and the VW dealership, together in a very creative piece of artwork. That is one way that you can bring in a sponsor without slapping it on his shirt or his wardrobe. Another way is that, in his or her environment, you have a physical home for your character. For instance, a crab shack for Buster could be sponsored by a seafood company. Whatever it is, you can try to fit that into the bio and the personality of the character. There are plenty of creative sponsorships that could be done so that the sponsor's message gets through, but the character is still considered your mascot.

With cyber characters (i.e., those characters that are animated for video boards) it is a lot easier, because with one keystroke he can be wearing the sponsor's logo and with another he is back into a uniform shirt. The sponsor's message can be put in the lower right hand corner of the screen or in the background as well. It is a lot easier to describe sponsorship for a cyber character than it is for a live character.

When a character performs at a game, is there a line the character has to be careful about not step-
ping over in regards to the field of play and the action going on the field? How do you determine that?

You get into that dangerous area, or you could get into trouble defining where that is, if you have an untrained performer. Part of the training of the performer is that they must understand the environment and know when they can or cannot go onto the field of play. It is important for the performer to be on the field of play, because part of the appeal is that one minute he is on the field interacting with the players or officials and the next minute he is up there with the spectators. There is a breaking down of that barrier between the stands and the field that occurs vicariously, by fans living through the character. He can go everywhere. If you and I were to jump on the field, we would get arrested. A character must be able to help push that line, but not disrupt the game. A trained performer has the ability to do just that.

The Phillie Phanatic was a lovable, goofy kind of character, while many of today's characters seem more athletic. How much thought goes into that aspect of developing the character?

There are very few new ideas, because people are fearful of trying something new. If something is successful and creates revenue, then people are going to follow. With that in mind, in baseball it seems like the norm is a lot of goofy, fluffy, furry characters because the Phanatic became very successful at that. Meanwhile, in the NBA, the Phoenix Gorilla was one of the first characters that really came to the forefront. He was a gymnast, so the NBA's mantra was "we need to get a gymnast." The physical performance aspect is seen in the NBA more than anywhere else. In hockey, the game is played on ice, so a lot of characters skate. They don't have to skate, but that seems to work. In defining a character, an organization shouldn't put such limitations on themselves. They need to mix that furry, physical, and skilled performance into a character that works.

Overall, do you find sport organizations recognizing the benefits of the characters and what they can do for an organization?

Absolutely. The growth of our company is an indicator of that. Our sales pitch is, "Character branding isn't your core business. You may have hired some great marketing people who can help take this to the next level, but you really need some experts in the field to help you get started right." In regards to the success of a program, it all has to do with the loyalty of the fan base. If you look at it, there is not as much loyalty in professional sport anymore, because of what has happened with free agency. The fans don't feel loyal, because the players don't seem to feel loyal. They bounce around from team to team.

The decision makers are buying into it because they see the value. I see more commitment to that level of marketing in professional sport than I have seen in the past. It used to be, as I told you before, organizations would just find a young intern, put them in the costume and tell them to go have fun. And it worked. You can't do that anymore because the bar has been raised. So now, companies are seeking out people like us and saying, "Not only do we want to do this, but we want to do it right, even though the price may be prohibitive. We are going to figure a way to work it into our budget as long as you can help us grow our business."

That is what is selling us and making our company grow. We are not just creating a design and a costume and saying see you later. We work with the organization. Our marketing people will communicate with their marketing people. We educate them about our type of marketing and then they take it and go. They revisit us when they need new ideas or new programs, or maybe just to find out what we

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