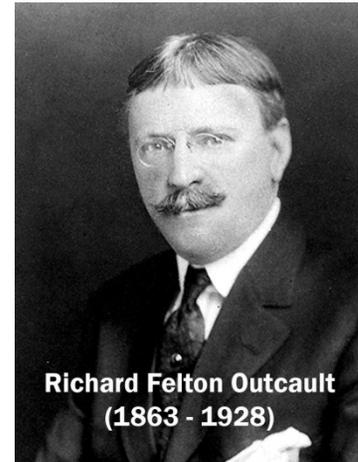


The Marketing of Buster Brown for More Than a Century

Before Bart Simpson and Dennis the Menace, there was Buster Brown. He was the fun-loving mischief-maker of newspaper comic strips who would become highly marketable to the American public. The character was created in 1902 by Richard Felton Outcault who is regarded as the father of the comic strip.

Outcault studied art in Cincinnati and Paris, and produced sophisticated, technical illustrations for Thomas Edison before inventing humor sketches for newspapers and magazines. By the mid-1890s, Outcault started his first commercially successful comic series character for Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst's Sunday newspapers. His "Yellow Kid" of the fictitious Hogan's Alley slum in New York City introduced the era of colorful comics in newspapers.



At the start of the 20th century, Outcault created Buster Brown, a Little Lord Fauntleroy-styled character from New York City with wealthy parents and a talking, side-kick dog named Tige. Though he looked like a sissy, Buster Brown was a prankster who would execute outlandish schemes for his personal entertainment. Buster would often address the viewer with his own commentaries on the behavior of his parents and other authoritative figures. The detailed and elaborately-crafted Sunday comic strips would often end with a personal resolution by Buster.

Buster Brown was an immediate success because the character came at the right time in American history. It was the start of a new century in the Progressive era; a time when household inventions were making lives

more comfortable. It was a time of peace and optimism in the nation. Buster was unique in his appearance with his long hair and the way he dressed; bold in his demeanor, but full of fun. He was funny, likeable, friendly, industrious, creative and ingenious, and very progressive in his thinking.

Outcault, who was middle-aged by the time he created Buster Brown, knew what amused the American public. He had Buster Brown driving a car, smoking a cigar, wearing a girl's dress, and operating an elevator. No matter what Buster did, even though he would often get spanked in the end for his pranks, the optimistic, easy-going lad remained emotionally unscathed.

Not surprising, a lot of merchants wanted to be associated with the popular, comic character. They knew the public would want to buy their brand of bread, socks, cigars, chocolates, boy's

suits, and camera if Buster and his dog Tige were pictured on them. Outcault saw the humor in this situation, and lampooned the commercial success of his character in one of his Sunday comic strips. He was business-minded and knew a good thing when he saw it. He owned the rights to all his characters and had already successfully marketed the Yellow Kid.

Buster Brown and Tige's greatest commercial success came from the persistent marketing efforts of The Brown Shoe Company of St. Louis, Missouri. In 1904, the Company purchased the rights to use Buster and Tige to market their line of children's shoes. They printed illustrations of the characters on shoe boxes, and hired little people to dress as Buster Brown and tour the country. Buster and Tige played in theaters, shoe stores, and department stores across the country to much popular acclaim; singing, dancing, and selling shoes.



Though Outcault ended the comic strip in 1921, Buster Brown and Tige lived on. Merchandisers had their artists continue illustrating the characters, and books and films were produced. Once the American public associated Buster Brown and Tige with familiar brands that brought them comfort through several generations, they were not about to let these characters go.

By 1947, most homes in America owned a radio, and the number one Saturday morning show was "Smilin' Ed and His Buster Brown Gang." The host Ed McConnell and guests joined Buster Brown each week on a new adventure. In the early 1950s, the "Gang" moved to television where they ran successfully for four years. When Smilin' Ed's show went off the air, Buster Brown Shoes became the sponsor for "Captain Kangaroo." In their first four years sponsoring "The Captain," Brown Shoe Co. saw their annual sales increase from \$6 million to \$30 million.



As more time passed since the public last saw a Buster Brown comic strip, Buster's image gradually shifted from "bad" boy to "good" boy. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Brown Shoe Co. had the images of Buster and Tige redrawn with an updated, more contemporary look which reflected the public's current perception of the characters. In 1998, an episode of "The Simpsons" even lampooned Buster Brown Shoes and the character's image in a scene showing a "Goody New Shoes" storefront sign bearing the likenesses of Buster and Tige.

By the 21st Century, the general public no longer embraced Buster Brown as they did in the last century, and many people from the younger generation scarcely knew about Buster. However, from the early 2000s to mid-2010s, Buster Brown children's shoes could be purchased from FamousFootwear.com, owned and operated by the Brown Shoe Co. But in 2015, when the Brown Shoe Co. became Caleres, changes in the organization resulted in the closure of nearly all remaining Buster Brown shoe stores nationwide.

Though he had a long run with the American public, the Buster Brown character and merchandising of his brand are now a part of our past. Still, his longevity for a little more than 100 years is truly amazing, considering the changing tastes of the American public across the many decades and eras of our nation's history.

- By Daralee O.