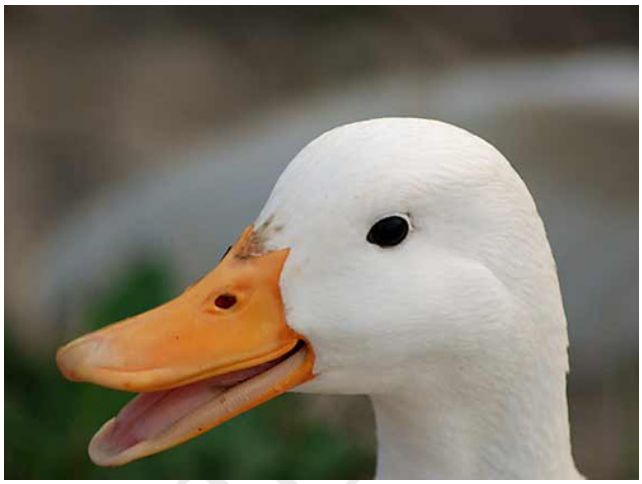
Aflac Quacks at the Competition



In the highly competitive business of insurance some companies have managed to use creative advertising to leverage a position of success. One such company is known as *Aflac Incorporated*. The corporation is more commonly referred to as Aflac and is considered to be the largest provider in America for supplemental insurance.

Aflac has stood far above the rest in the industry due to a most auspicious spokesperson—a talking duck. If increased revenues are a means to measure success, then Aflac's duck out of water deserves an enormous amount of credit for the company's rise to the top.

Although Aflac has strong business ties in Japan, the company was actually founded in the United Sates in 1955. The original name was *American Family Life Insurance Company.* Years later it was changed to *American Family Life Assurance Company*. In 1990, the name was shortened to the acronym "Aflac," which is still used today.

Aflac's product line includes supplemental insurance for Accident, Short-Term Disability, Long-Term Care and more. Even though many companies have struggled in this economy and some have actually failed to survive, Aflac has managed to stay afloat with increased premium sales in Japan and increased revenues in the United States.

The curious question is, if regulatory agencies in the insurance industry set standardized rates for products and the competition is selling the same product line at essentially the same cost, then how is it a company manages to increase its revenues and beat out the competition. Apparently, the key is in developing a strategic advertising campaign. This is easier said than done considering the fact that the subject of insurance isn't exactly a titillating topic, especially when it comes to stimulating the minds of the average consumer.

In 1999, Aflac hired the *Kaplan Thaler Group* to take on the challenge of developing a brand identity. According to a 2009 web article written by veteran television writer, Elliot Feldman, the birth of the Aflac Duck was somewhat of a fluke. The story goes like this. A creative team member assigned to the project was walking around the agency trying to conceptualize some award-wining ideas. While engaged in the musing process he was saying the company's name.

Upon continually repeating the word "Aflac" out loud an epiphany occurred in which he realized the sounds emanating from his own voice were very much like a quacking duck. This

marked the birth of the feathered fanfare known today as the Aflac Duck. Adding to the successful brand identity of a unique animal spokesperson, Aflac embraced the concept and incorporated the duck into its logo with the tagline, “We got you under our wing.”

The quacking spokesperson had its debut via a television commercial in 2000. The first commercial was titled “Park Bench.” Copywriters put together a scenario where two people were sitting on a park bench discussing insurance concerns as the duck chimes in quacking “AFLAC,” offering the solution to their problems. As the quacks go ignored by the people engaged in conversation, the duck becomes even more boisterous and comical.

The park scenario was the very beginning of a series of more than 40 television commercials featuring the adorable, quacky spokesperson for Aflac. The first commercial along with many others can be viewed online at YouTube. While enjoying any one of the numerous television ads, most consumers have no comprehension to the fact that the Aflac Duck is not a well-trained live animal, but a puppet instead.

The timeless feathered look alike is a brilliant creation designed by Jim Henson's *Creature Shop*. It would only stand to reason that one would think the duck’s voice is also animated. Not so, the voice is actually a live person. The voiceover was originally that of well-known comedian Gilbert Gottfried who has since been replaced by Dan McKeague, a sales manager and father of three from suburban Minneapolis who won a contest to become the current quack performer.

The Aflac Duck has gone on to achieve a great deal of notoriety with feature performances on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, the *Saturday Night Live* show, *Lemony Snicket’s a Series of Unfortunate Events* and more. And, as if television stardom wasn’t enough, there are more than 140,000 fans that follow the day in the life adventures of the Aflac Duck on *Facebook.*

There are also duck wingtones (no, that’s not a typo), wallpaper for computer desktops and even a “Duck Gear” store that sells racing gear on the official website [Aflac.com]. Yes, the web-footed Hollywood trendsetter is a proud sponsor of NASCAR. This feathered friend is also all heart. Proceeds from the sale of plush Aflac Ducks from the website go to the *Aflac Cancer Center and Blood Disorders Service*.

One may wonder how it is something so simple such as an animated duck could become a huge, overwhelming success. Perhaps the advertising firm that created Aflac’s brand image (*Kaplan Thaler Group*) embraced the psychological insights of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs—a theory that classifies the motivations thought to drive the innate desires of every human being.

At first glance, the enormous success of the Aflac Duck could be construed as a mere stroke of luck. Yet, upon a more critical review of advertising it can be noted that the personal connection strategy of an emotional appeal with the consumer plays a huge role in the campaign. Moreover, the adorable talking duck concept embraces all audience demographics. Why of course, everyone smiles when they encounter a talking duck.

The emphasis on emotional appeal has certainly proven to be a highly effective form of advertising and overwhelming success. According to Feldman's web article and account of Aflac's statistics, the duck advertising campaign brought about an increased marketable brand recognition soaring upwardly from 13% to a whopping 90%. Surely Aflac has no plans to stop riding on the wings of this quantifiable achievement any time in the near future.

Not only does the Aflac Duck connect with the audience through its warm, cute and funny nature—the duck character also appeals to people's deeper needs with a sense of caring, kindness and provisions for safety. Since its inception, with over 40 commercials, this web-footed star has undoubtedly scored big with consumers. In a world where television often depicts life's struggles, grief and despair, it is little wonder a funny, kind-hearted, lovable duck could become such a superhero.

Humans have an intrinsic need to feel a sense of safety, security and happiness. Aflac has made a proclamation to the world that it can help to fulfill those needs through its insurance products by way of a few good quacks, leaving much of the competition silent. Case in point, name the competition…

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