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UNCLE BEN'S CABIN

If you missed [Stuart Elliott's March 30 column](#) in the *New York Times*, he chronicled how Uncle Ben, the character, has been brought back to life, now as the Chairman of the Board:

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 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.

The Uncle Ben campaign as it currently stands is neither Marketing for Good nor Marketing for Bad. Essentially, it's a traditional spokesman-driven advertising campaign. There is nothing spectacularly entertaining about the advertising or the website. Though it may be good for the brand by generating renewed interest in Uncle Ben's rice it does little to affect the world around us. It's simply advertising. And undoubtedly that's all it was meant to be.

That said, imagine for a moment if the creator's of this campaign were committed to Marketing for Good. They would have considered the implications of calling Uncle Ben the Chairman of the Board. In the real world, there are only a handful of African American Chairman. Certainly, Mars Incorporated could have used this campaign to announce an ambitious commitment to affirmative action and diversity in the board room.

At minimum, they could have used this campaign to create a dialog about the challenges for a family-run company like Mars Incorporated to build a diverse work force. Another approach would have been to establish a scholarship to fund MBA's for African Americans. This scholarship could have been promoted on every box and funded with a small percentage of the purchase price. Mars Incorporated could also commit to hiring their scholarship recipients thus creating the possibility of African American chairman.

Taking an approach like this would have made Uncle Ben, the Chairman, an aspirational figure instead of a disingenuous cartoon. If we start thinking of marketing as a service instead of merely messaging, the possibilities for Marketing for Good are endless.

* * *

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