

# **“Mr. Boffo” walks and talks as cartoonist animates strip for Web**

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LAKE GENEVA, Wis. — Joe Martin thinks his world-record 30,000 comics are already funny on paper. But the syndicated cartoonist believes he can make some of them even funnier by having the characters move and talk on the Web.

Martin is experimenting with animating his comics so starting Tuesday viewers can watch them online in 15-second clips instead of just reading them on a page.

“When you look at a joke, it’s a lot funnier as animation,” said Martin, 61. “To me, it seems like it makes reading a newspaper a lot more fun.”

Martin, whose strips include “Mr. Boffo,” “Cats with Hands” and “Willy ‘n Ethel,” said his idea is simple. He takes the best jokes from his voluminous archives and has a team of three animators recreate the comics with motion and sound using simple Web media called Flash animation.

Martin will charge newspapers a \$25 weekly subscription fee to place a new animated comic on their Web sites each day. But he said the paper can recoup the investment — and more— by selling advertising on those Web pages.

The advertising strategy doesn’t work on pages with static comics because readers spend only a few seconds on those pages, he said. But since viewers might spend 15 seconds on a page with an animated cartoon, advertisers could be willing to pay for that attention.

Martin will have a chance to test his theory Tuesday when his animated strips, which he calls “Web flashes,” debut on the Web sites of 15 newspapers including The Boston Globe and Britain’s Daily Mail newspaper.

Representatives from the largest cartoon syndicates, including King Features Syndicate, United Features Syndicate and Universal Press Syndicate, say none of their humor cartoonists has animated strips. Several editorial cartoonists have used animation as far back as 1998.

Martin lives with Marie, his wife of 34 years, in a sprawling 17,000-square-foot home in Lake Geneva in southern Wisconsin. The house’s 20 rooms are filled with stacks of comics storyboards dating back at least 30 years.

His animation strategy follows an ill-fated idea to videotape actors playing his characters in short movie clips. He stopped after fans panned the videos but he’s confident that animation holds more promise.

Stan Lee, the co-creator of most of Marvel Comics' major characters including Spiderman, knows a thing or two about using comics and movies to appeal to fans. He thinks Martin's animation strategy is the wave of the future.

"People want to look at a moving picture, whether it's live action or animation. Add music and a voice and you're watching a mini-movie," Lee said. "I think it's great."

Martin presumes that other cartoonists are waiting to see whether the idea takes off. He expects his toughest competition would come from Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury" and Scott Adams' "Dilbert" because of the comics' quality.

Dilbert had a short-lived run as a 30-minute sitcom, a format Martin said is ill-suited for comic strips.

"People are used to a quick joke, so that didn't work," he said. "But when you put a joke in a 15-second animation, it enhances the humor."

But would readers, especially those with an Internet attention span, have the patience to watch a 15-second Web flash when they could get the payoff in 3 seconds by reading the comic themselves?

"If people find it entertaining, they won't begrudge the extra few seconds," Lee predicted.

The Albuquerque Journal signed on last month to Martin's Web flash offering. Donn Friedman, an assistant managing editor there, said the paper will spend about six months evaluating how well the Web flashes attract readers.

It was Friedman who gave Martin the idea of customizing his animation with backgrounds that reflect the unique geography of each paper on whose Web site it appears. Martin says that type of customization could present even more advertising opportunities.

The 2000 Guinness Book of Records named Martin the world's most prolific cartoonist. He produces more than 1,300 comics each year.

On the Net: Mr. Boffo: <http://www.mrboffo.com/>

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