

CONSUMED

# Hello, Kitschy

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## Domo



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**This fall, the cable channel** Nicktoons Network will begin showing a series of two-minute stop-motion animation shorts featuring a brown, squarish creature with arms and legs and a mouth permanently thrown wide open to reveal sharp white teeth. Like any other cute character on a kid-friendly TV show, this little fellow, whose name is Domo, is perfect for the crossover into licensed merchandise. What's unusual about Domo, however, is that he arrived in the U.S. retail marketplace well ahead of his debut on American television. He's on T-shirts and accessories at Hot Topic, greeting cards at many Barnes & Noble locations and grocery stores and is expected to be sold as a plush doll at F.Y.E. stores. Then again, Domo is a merchandisable star not so much because he has a TV show in the works but because of his track record in what is arguably the most potent entertainment form of our time: clowning around on the Internet.

About 10 years ago, the managers of NHK, the public television station in Japan, decided that it needed a new advertising icon to help connect with younger viewers. The result was Domo-kun ("kun" being an informal honorific for young

people in Japanese), who starred in a series of station-identification breaks for the channel. He became a sensation: Japanese consumers snapped up dolls, accessories and hundreds of other products featuring his undeniably cute likeness. Perhaps not seeing any reason why U.S. or European consumers would be interested in a Japanese ad icon, NHK didn't devote any particular effort to reaching them.

But around 2001, says Rich Maryyanek, a partner in Big Tent Entertainment, which acquired the non-Asia license to the character about a year and a half ago, "Domo basically leaked out of Japan virally." This was partly by way of video clips of Domo's charming little adventures but mostly thanks to the usefulness of his image in, say, manipulating a picture with Photoshop so that Domo is incongruously present — positioned between a child and a soldier in a news photograph, for instance. Similarly, Domo plush toys (either imported from or purchased in Japan) are popular comic props on the photo-sharing site Flickr. The artist-community site deviantART is crammed with Domo drawings and visual remixes. Someone made an online game, Domo-Kun's Angry Smash Fest. The upshot, Maryyanek says, is that "this whole kind of kitschy, creative, wired crowd already knows Domo."

In fact, any major exhibition on the history of clowning around on the Internet would have to include a particularly infamous image: a stock-photography kitten appears, via digital manipulation, to be fleeing two angry monsters — Domo dolls, of course. Resembling a public-service ad, with text that is sophomoric, funny and not worth printing here, it has been referenced and forwarded so many times that a Wired column suggesting a fanciful course on "Photoshop for the Web" included this homework assignment: "Convince someone that you made that one picture with the kitten running from Domo-kun."

The back story of the Domo character, created by the Japanese filmmaker Tsuneo Goda, is that he was hatched from an egg in front of a TV set; it was, according to an official Domo history, "the very first object he ever saw on Earth." The first thing he heard was an NHK announcer saying "domo" — which can mean hello, sorry or thank you, depending on the context. Bared teeth notwithstanding, Domo proves to be a friendly, innocent, somewhat nervous being who seems to enjoy dancing, daydreaming and lying around in a cave watching television. He

would not be likely to threaten a kitten. And the humor in his new adventures — to be broadcast not just in the U.S. but in scores of countries — will likely be more sweet than irreverent.

The disconnect between Internet Domo and broadcast Domo isn't really a problem. It's a strength. Flexibility, not specificity, is often a key to successful character icons (Hello Kitty comes to mind), and Domo has it: he's mad, nervous, friendly, frightened or joyous, depending on how you contextualize him. This should help as Domo migrates from the realm of the "creative, wired" types into media and products aimed at children and tweens. As Big Tent's Maryyanek points out, many marketers spend a lot of energy and money trying to create brands that will work in the "multiplatform" marketplace, translating to fashion, toys, games, television and so on. Domo is just such a brand, he argues, thanks not to marketers but to fans.