

Celebrity Power: Can Less Be More?

The use of celebrities in advertising, always a popular practice, has been on the rise in recent years, and the trend shows no sign of abating. Yet the risks undertaken by advertisers pursuing this approach seem bigger than ever, as fame and infamy can spread in a matter of days or even hours through cyberspace. Is it still safe to steer brands by the stars?



M I L L W A R D B R O W N ' S P O V

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The use of celebrities in advertising has increased in recent years. According to Hamish Pringle, author of the book *Celebrity Sells*, the proportion of UK ads featuring a celebrity stands at one in five, an increase of almost 100 percent over the past 10 years. Research practitioners in Australia have cited a comparable figure for that country, while it is estimated that one in four ads draws on celebrity star power in the United States.

Based on these trends, one might conclude that celebrity ads must be more effective than others; otherwise, why would they be so popular? However, our observations have forced us to conclude that the simple addition of a celebrity to an ad does not, in and of itself, increase the odds of success. This is not to say that there are not some real success stories among celebrity campaigns—but simply that percentage-wise, there are as many mediocre ads with celebrities as without. Does it really make sense, then, for advertisers to pursue celebrity strategies when they carry additional costs and risks?

These Aren't Our Parents' Celebrities

What is rarely mentioned amidst the discussion of the current glut of celebrity ads is that the nature of celebrity itself has changed. As media and entertainment options have fragmented, new varieties of celebrity have emerged. The stars of our parents' generation were entertainers, beauty queens and sports heroes; today's celebrity ranks are swollen with "experts" from TV programs that tell us how to remodel and redecorate our homes, train our pets and overhaul our wardrobes. These new celebrity experts are joined by the hosts, judges, and contestants from reality TV shows, and a new class of athletes who participate in "extreme" sports.

While this surfeit of new notables may seem bewildering, it presents advertisers with an abundance of options. Understanding the power and the reach potential of different types of celebrity is key. The first decision advertisers must make is whether they need one of the few stars with true "mass" appeal, or a "niche" celebrity who may speak more directly to the brand's target. The most recognized names deliver a high degree of visibility, but in today's advertising milieu, the biggest celebrity may not always be the best one.

When Big Is Beautiful

Many major brands have been well-served by celebrity strategies. On a global basis, Pepsi has effectively used superstars from the sports and entertainment world to convey the sense of being the most current, most relevant brand for each new generation. Advertising in the United States has, over the years, featured the latest, hottest pop idols such as Michael Jackson (1984), the Spice Girls (1997) and Britney Spears (2001). In Asia, film stars such as Pakistan's

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Reema have been used to great effect, while in the United Kingdom, a number of Pepsi campaigns since 1998 have included international soccer star David Beckham.

Ads featuring the biggest names help imbue long-established brands with freshness and excitement. Popularity is enhanced, and the rightness of the brand choice reinforced. Yet associating with big stars can carry big risks, and even Pepsi has been burned over the years. In 1989, a spot featuring Madonna had to be pulled when her *Like a Prayer* video was deemed blasphemous by religious groups in the United States. Pepsi's deep pockets and solidly developed image enabled it to withstand the blow, which could have derailed a lesser brand.

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Who Can You Trust?

Famous names can help prominent brands such as Pepsi maintain their high profiles. But brands of lesser status need more than just high visibility. Brands with news to deliver need credibility, while brands seeking to



shift or reinforce positioning need relevant celebrity values. However, finding celebrities who embody the right values can be difficult on today's pop culture scene, where the 24-hour news media is always on the prowl for a story. Accounts of poor behavior of any sort, real or alleged, scandalous or felonious, are widely available within hours of first reporting.

Such persistent media scrutiny may be creating a rift between the stars and their once-admiring public. According to the NPD Celebrity Influence Survey released earlier this year in the United States, people don't have a high degree of trust in major celebrities. Few of the 86 celebrity endorsers studied received a resounding vote of confidence. While 95 percent of respondents recognized Tiger Woods, only 12 percent endorsed him as "someone I trust." Lance Armstrong received the top endorsement on that attribute—but at the surprisingly low level of 18 percent.

By contrast, it was the lesser-known celebrities who were cited most often as having a positive influence on a purchase decision. Ty Pennington, the star of ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* and spokesman for Sears, topped all others in that regard, being cited by 37 percent of respondents.

As an expert carpenter, Ty speaks with authority; yet as a regular guy, he's approachable to the masses. In his earlier role on TLC's *Trading Spaces*, Ty helped people realize how much they could accomplish in their homes in just one weekend. The Emmy award-winning *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* expands on that theme, by completely rebuilding the home of a deserving family in just seven days. Among the devotees of do-it-yourself reality TV, Ty's appeal is unmatched: men want to be like him, and women want him around the house. One month after his first spots aired for Sears, same-store sales rose almost two percent.

Persuasion Powered by Authenticity

This is the power of the new niche celebrities. As spokespersons whom ordinary people relate to, they ground their brands' communication in authenticity. Fast food giant Subway has leveraged such authenticity to great effect with their U.S. spokesperson Jared Fogle,



who lost 245 pounds by adhering to a diet of his own creation: two low-fat Subway sandwiches every day. After using Jared's story in their advertising, Subway was deluged with testimonials from people who were inspired by Jared to lose weight. Jared communicated not only a differentiating benefit for Subway—healthy sandwich options—but also a message of empowerment.

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Using Celebrities to Boost Your Brand

Clearly, the current crop of celebrities has much to offer today's brands. But in the face of the expanding celebrity universe and constantly evolving media channels, we believe it's worthwhile to offer some fresh thinking on how celebrities can best be used. We suggest the following three principles.

Put the creative concept first

Make sure your creative vehicle works even if your "celebrity" is not recognized. While the national TV audience once shared the same limited news and entertainment options, relatively little of popular culture is widely shared today. Therefore, we need to revisit one of the accepted truisms of celebrity advertising: that the target audience must recognize the celebrity.

Advertisers have traditionally been advised to reinforce a celebrity's identity with audio and video cues to dispel any doubt about who the star is. Not bad advice—but in this time of highly fragmented audiences, we think it makes more sense to focus first on creating an ad that can fly with or without the featured star. People who don't know the celebrity should enjoy the ad and understand its message. Recognizing the celebrity provides a bonus—an extra layer of meaning, and possibly the opportunity to "get" an inside joke.

The current Nespresso campaign in Europe featuring George Clooney is a good example. Clooney enters a coffee shop and overhears two stylish women

talking about something, using the words "intense," "sensual," "rich," "mysterious." Thinking they are describing him, Clooney saunters over to their table, where he is abashed to realize they are talking about their Nespresso. Even if the intended audience did not recognize Clooney, the humor of the situation would be clear, and Clooney's appearance would still lend a style of urbanity and sophistication to the commercial's message.

Fit need not preclude fallibility

While advertisers must be wary of an endorser with a checkered past, an absolutely spotless reputation is not always necessary. In fact, sometimes a famous person's difficulties can have a humanizing effect.



Weight Watchers took a chance when they contracted Sarah Ferguson, the former Duchess of York, to be their U.S. spokesperson in 1998. While Ferguson had been much maligned by the British press for her marital difficulties and indiscretions, Weight Watchers believed that Americans, who are both fascinated by English royalty and always ready to back the underdog, would be willing to grant the disgraced Fergie a second chance. She had admitted to some past mistakes and resolved to make changes in her life—what woman could not relate to that? The hunch proved correct, as meeting attendance increased 60 percent over the first three years of Fergie's marketing reign.

Look outside the mainstream

Consider introducing your audience to someone new. As Subway proved with Jared Fogle, an "ordinary" person can take on celebrity stature if his or her deeds are extraordinary enough. Try to uncover a new voice of

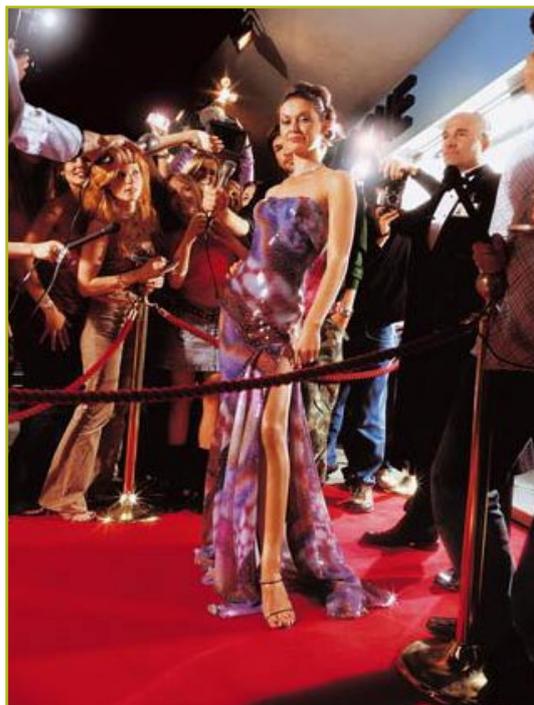


authority, whether it's an up-and-coming athlete in a minor sport, an aspiring artist, a scientist, or an entrepreneur. A credible figure associated with a humanitarian or environmental cause may help enhance perceptions of social responsibility in the current climate of suspicion toward big business.

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What Has Not Changed: Celebrity Branding Power

One important element of strategy has not changed, and that is the need for consistency. While ad campaigns of any type need to be refreshed periodically, marketers often abandon a successful strategy long before it has exhausted its usefulness. When an association has proven successful, stay with it. The “celebrity of the month” approach may work for large global brands, but to justify their investment, most brands need to fully exploit the branding power of their chosen spokesperson. Brands such as Walkers Crisps in the United Kingdom and Priceline in the United States have effectively established their spokesmen, Gary Lineker and William Shatner, as branding icons, but they accomplished this using multiple executions over a period of years.



With the trend towards shorter ad lengths on TV and the Web, and innovations such as brief pre-rolls and “blink” spots, it is now more critical than ever to firmly establish the linkage between celebrity and brand. With many of the most recognizable celebrities endorsing multiple products, it may be difficult for a viewer to perceive the advertised brand in just a few short seconds. A quick glimpse of David Beckham, for example, may bring to mind shaving, sneakers, soft drinks, or mobile phones. The sight of basketball giant Yao Ming might conjure thoughts of fast food, footwear, watches, or GPS services. But, if the viewer cannot discern which product is being hawked before the ad is gone from view, the famous face will have been wasted.

Conclusion

We don't expect advertisers to give up their reliance on celebrity endorsers anytime soon. Too often, the clutter-busting promise of a famous face proves irresistible. But finding the right celebrity ally is as much art as science. The biggest, most familiar names may lend cachet, but they carry a hefty price tag. The character of the trendiest new star is often untested and may prove to be a liability. A brand owner looking for a safe but successful association might do well to look further back in the celebrity pack for the person who can best represent the brand's values and aspirations. The degree to which the character matches the needs of the brand will prove to be much more compelling than fame alone.

To find out more about celebrities in advertising, see www.mb-blog.com.

