

Q&A

Celebrity endorsements only go so far without proper facilitation

October 1, 2015



Jay Z and Hublot, image courtesy Forward

By FORREST CARDAMENIS

Partnering with a celebrity gives a brand an opportunity to reach potential consumers that might otherwise not be as interested in its merchandise, but it is not as easy as picking a face and making a quick phone call.

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Luxury Daily

Fabien Moreau brought his experience from working at an independent record label together with his work in advertising to bridge the two fields, creating Forward to facilitate collaborations. The marketing agency is responsible for some of the most visible collaborations between artists or actors and brands, netting Lady Gaga her first endorsement with Michael Kors and, more recently, bringing Jay Z and Hublot together.

"We tap into jewelry and fashion brands and they know they need to break the routine of what they're doing to acquire the consumer of tomorrow, who is going to buy today the \$5,000 or \$10,000 wristband but will be buying the necklace down the road for \$300,000," said Mr. Moreau, CEO of [Forward](#).

"How do you capture people by reinventing yourself and taking risks but making sure you don't really hurt the long-lasting legacy you've been building?" he said. "They want to take

risks but need someone to help them and push them, and that's what we spend a lot of time doing for our clients."



Fabien Moreau of Forward

In this Q&A, Mr. Moreau discusses the importance of ensuring partners are a good fit, the strategies that make the magic happen and the dialogue had between brands and celebrities.

Here is the dialogue:

What makes partnerships between celebrities and brands effective both in general and specifically? Is there something about the human element that appeals to consumers? I don't think it is one element that makes it very successful, it's a mix of different factors. I'm going to say something cliché, but it's super important to do something that is authentic and organic. The reason is that the new generation is the most marketing-savvy generation and they want to make sure, number one thing, that something is authentic or organic.

Also doing it for the right reasons and being very clear of what the expectations are. Every project I walk into I make sure the brand is clear about what their hope is. That doesn't mean it's going to turn into a collaboration, there could be a number of things that prevent it, but I think from the beginning it has to be clear what each party is expecting.

From a consumer standpoint, it has to bring something fresh and exciting to the equation, so you have to challenge yourself for the benefit of the consumer. It also needs to show the brand and the celebrity in a way that you have not seen them before. I think that's a great element to bring.

For example, we did something with Martell and Andy Garcia. Instead of seeing Andy Garcia in the capacity of an actor he becomes a director and shoots something. If we do something with Fendi and Rihanna, we're not going to ask Rihanna to do a song, we're going to turn her into a fashion designer and have her work with Fendi. There's something to bringing the brand and/or celebrity into some kind of creative capacity that you haven't necessarily seen before.

I think the mix of all these elements makes a partnership that works for all the parties involved and is impactful to the audience.

What makes a particular celebrity pair well with a particular brand?

We're trying to shoot for a balance of quite unexpected and also super-relevant. If you fall into the obvious, that's not going to gather much traction and interest, and if you do something quite out there that doesn't have solid ground in the DNA of the celebrity or the brand, that's too far-fetched that won't work either.



Image from Bally's J. Cole partnership, courtesy Forward

If you see the partnership between J. Cole and Bally, J. Cole had never done anything in fashion. Fashion brands were not looking at him. But J. Cole has a huge legacy in the world of hip-hop.

So here is this fashion brand, Bally, that wants someone that is understated, not showoff, close to the people, simple, and he worked one year with them on creating magic ([see story](#)). It's not like Pharrell Williams with everyone from the fashion world trying to get him, but when you dig into it makes a lot of sense and is really solid.

After a brand and celebrity have been paired, what kinds of promotions need to be done to maximize reach?

It has to be a mix of different types of content. We like to do a lot of video content, whether it's a Web series or anything else, because we think that drives the collaborations; a full use of digital strategy and social media; and a mix of PR and media buy. I think the content created around the collaboration should be supported by some of the media buy but it needs a good PR approach to get good media coverage.

It's equally important to bring a real life interaction into the mix. It's great to have that video that gets a lot of views and a lot of people talking online, a lot of traction on Twitter, pick-ups and all that, but it's good to anchor it.

Whether it's with an event, whether it's with a performance, a Q&A or an art fair for the artist, it's good to have something people can see with their own eyes so we always look into this and add it to the mix.

How can a brand tap into the following of an artist, athlete or other celebrity?

Leave it to the artist in a way that feels right and doesn't feel forced, in a way that is relevant to them and they think is going to be the most impactful.



Image from Fendi's Midnight on Madison event

Brands think, “Oh, I’ve invested in this, I want more or I’m going to get in trouble with my boss,” but if it’s forced it’s not going to work. So they have to learn, which is extremely difficult for them sometimes, to let go.

The more you try to be in control the less you will be. It’s important to leave it to the judgment of the celebrity for how to communicate to his or her crowd or community because nobody knows it better than him or her.

How can each party reassure its consumer-base/fan-base that the pairing is not a mere publicity stunt? What denotes authenticity?

Do what seems right to you. Be transparent and your fan-base will sell it. Anything you do that seems forced or that is not legitimate for you, they will judge you.

I always tell partners, whether it’s the celebrity or the brand, to be transparent, to make clear the reasons, to make sure you have a voice you feel comfortable with. And if all this is done the right way your fans and fans of the brand will understand and celebrate that instead of trashing it.

If you think something feels wrong, don’t do it. That comes back to an interesting point, it’s why you want to make sure the key executives of the brand and the celebrities meet in person.

How can brands maintain creativity and elevate a partnership to something more than “just” a spokesperson or face to sell goods?

On the business standpoint, the recent years have lots of celebrities having skin in the game with the future of the companies they get involved with. It’s very interesting and doesn’t work all the time, but it’s saying “instead of writing a check for doing something right now and then you can work with a competitor next year, why don’t we partner, and if this works and we’re successful, you’re going to make much more money than you would’ve made just being endorsed on a one-time fee or transaction.”

So we’ve seen much more of celebrities wanting to be interpreters, wanting to be their

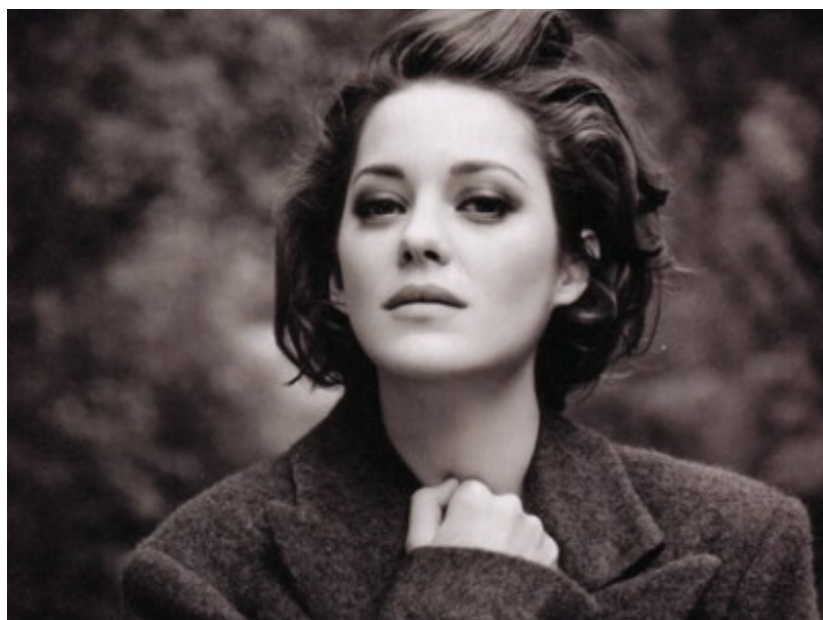
own company, their own trends, and I encourage that. I think it's great because this is kind of the epitome of being genuine, saying "we're going to be in this for a while."

What I will say about that is every party should be even more careful than a regular partnership, because you really need to think this through. You're going to be in it for a while as business partners.

What goes into selling a brand on a particular figure and vice versa?

From my perspective, track record is the first because if you don't want to fall into the obvious and want to do something impactful, you want to show to the client or to the celebrity something that didn't necessarily get thought about or looked at, and that's what really makes for the most exciting and successful partnership.

So you have to have a track record with your client. That's something that helps because you're in a much easier position to ask a client to go off the beaten path and take a risk after you've helped other brands take risks and be successful.



Love by Cartier Season 1, image courtesy Forward

The second point that is extremely important, and is why clients in the world of entertainment and art value what we do, is we get people in the same room to see if they want to have a future in common. Ideally this is not a conference room; this is a restaurant.

Take the CEO of the company and take the celebrity, tell them, "it might make sense for you to explore something, let's go to dinner." So they relax, get comfortable, explain what their passions and fears are, and at the end you hear, "I never would've thought we had so much in common, I am so excited." Or, "you're such a wonderful brand but this is not where I am right now. It looked amazing on paper but it doesn't click as much."

You can't create magic by having someone talk to someone to talk to someone to talk to someone who sends 50 slides and metrics and all that. They have to meet each other, fall for each other's sensibility and vision and see if there is common ground there.

Do brands tend to find an obvious partner, or do they tend to take risks and go with a less expected partner? What are the benefits and risks of each approach, and how can brands ensure they provide something new without going “off-brand?”

We kind of force them not to get into the obvious choice and get them to become more and more comfortable with taking risks, showing them that what we have is bulletproof and it’s solid and it’s genuine and something people will embrace.

There’s a lot of people who know about the world of high-end brands, there is a lot of people who know about the world of entertainment, but when you sit in the middle and say “I understand both sides of the equation and I’m going to walk you through all of this and it’s going to be fine,” you work kind of as a therapist, getting them comfortable with making the jump.

How much collaboration is there between the brand and the individual? Do individuals have their own ideas for, say, a clothing line? Or does the brand make one itself? How much input does each party have on these things?

Every project is so different. Sometimes you think of an artist who is great and you think of one of the brands and think, “this makes so much sense.” Sometimes you have more input from the brand and the artist says “I love this, this is great,” and sometimes the artist is particular and wants so much input and the brand follows because they feel comfortable.



Celebrity-designed Fendi 3Baguette handbags (see story)

Some partnerships can generate strong challenges with the public opinion. Scarlett Johansson is an amazing talent and fantastic ambassador for a lot of great things but ended up in a tricky situation with her SodaStream endorsement.

I also think artists who decided to partner with Tidal did something interesting because artists must have more control on the distribution of their content, but they faced challenges as their message at launch did not come across the right way. But such challenges can potentially be fixed.

Having problems necessarily mean its a bad partnership, I see it as a great partnership

with very positive messaging, but the way it gets presented sometimes hasn't been the right way. So not only do you have to do the right thing, but also you have to present it the right way.

Final Take

Forrest Cardamenis, editorial assistant on Luxury Daily, New York

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