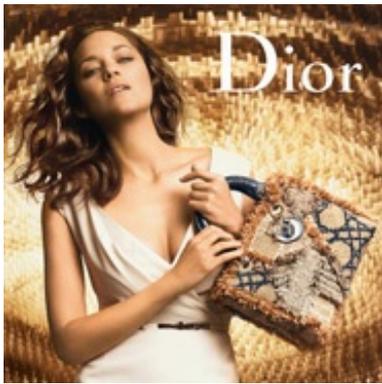


ADVERTISING

What packs more punch: unknown models or celebrity endorsements?

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By RACHEL LAMB

While celebrities have long been favored for luxury campaigns, some marketers are opting for lesser-known models to represent the face of the brand. What it comes down to is the product, the brand personality and who it wants to reach.

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In uncertain economic times, unknown or lesser-known faces can seem more approachable and relatable, which could help influence consumers to buy products. However, celebrity endorsements do tend to reach out to an aspirational audience which admires them while simultaneously reaching an already-affluent market.

“In terms of whether or not it is better for a brand to be represented by a celebrity, model or unknown person depends upon the product,” said Rex Whisman, principal at BrandED Consultants Group, Denver. “In all cases, the spokesperson should be someone who aligns with the brand’s core values and is believable in the mind of the consumer.

“Expectations play a role in the alignment process, too,” he said. “A model would seem like a logical choice to represent a fashion brand, while a celebrity might be an expected connection with a brand that he or she might purchase themselves.

“[However], more and more consumers want to connect with someone that is like them,

so an unknown figure increasingly makes more sense.”

Famed names

Celebrity endorsements run the gamut from print ads to commercials and billboards to voiceovers.

Virtually every luxury marketer has used a celebrity for campaigns, including fashion, cosmetics, jewelry, hotel, hospitality and automaker brands.

However, celebrity endorsements only really make sense if the celebrity aligns with the brand.

For example, Swiss watchmaker Breitling uses actor John Travolta as a brand ambassador. This makes sense because of Mr. Travolta’s popularity with most ages and demographics, but also because he is a trained pilot and aligns with Breitling’s image.



Mr. Travolta for Breitling

Perhaps the most recent example of over-the-top celebrity endorsement is by Christian Dior.

The French fashion label is launching “Stars in Dior,” an exhibition and book that displays outfits worn on- and off-screen by the world’s most famous actresses, including Natalie Portman, Elizabeth Taylor, Marion Cotillard, Penelope Cruz and Marlene Dietrich.

This exhibit is likely aimed toward consumers who follow pop culture and aspire to be in the spotlight, or at least greatly admire celebrities. Dior is probably hoping that consumers will eventually link stardom to the brand.



Natalie Portman at the 2011 Academy Awards

“Celebrities provide value when it comes to defining target market, refreshing the brand image and, most importantly, instant credibility which establishes trust for their potential consumers,” said Dalia Strum, president of Dalia Inc., New York.

“This leads to an increased conversion of sales because consumers no longer need to question the validity of the brand,” she said.

Face off

On the other hand, some marketers are leaning toward lesser-known individuals, or at least models who the average consumer does not know by name, for their campaigns.

For example, Michael Kors, Prada, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Tiffany & Co., Salvatore Ferragamo and Hugo Boss use lesser-known faces to flaunt the brands.



Michael Kors campaign

“In today’s challenging economic times, people relate more to those that are like them rather than an aspirational figure,” BrandED’s Mr. Whisman said.

Whether these models are in print campaigns, on a social media site, in a banner ad or on a billboard, faces of a brand who are not known by name could come off as more approachable to consumers.

The models are beautiful and appear to be of the affluent persuasion, but the fact that consumers do not know who they are give an anonymous, comforting and even relatable vibe.



Gucci campaign

“Given the elements of cost, appropriateness and availability, the majority of advertising is still created using non-celebrity talent,” said Elizabeth DeMaso, managing partner at Brenes Co., New York.

“The message can be every bit as effective, so long as it’s on-strategy and brand-appropriate,” she said.

The real driver

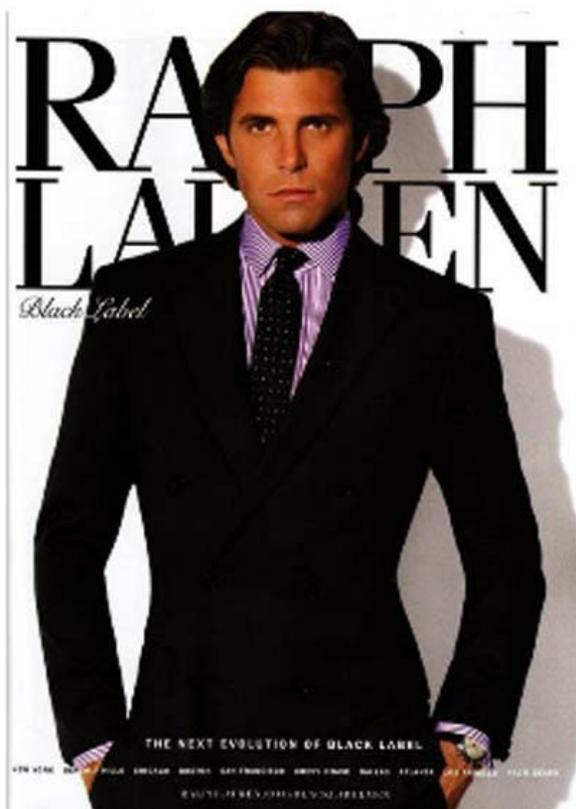
Both techniques have their advantages and disadvantages.

Lesser-known brand faces can seem more approachable, but there is the chance that consumers can miss the connection with the marketer that does not provide an aspirational quality it lends with a celebrity spokesperson.

Meanwhile, celebrity endorsements can help to hook fans of the famous person, but there is always the chance that he or she could make a mistake in the public eye and make the brand look bad.

Furthermore, marketers need to make sure that the celebrity aligns with the brand's core values. If consumers cannot see the ambassador buying or using that brand, it could turn buyers off.

“When selecting a celebrity to synergize with a brand, some considerations need to be kept in mind,” Ms. Strum said. “Their celebrity profession needs to fit with the advertising idea and the celebrity needs to be a brand user to enjoy and, more importantly, enhance the experience of other brand users.”



Nacho Figueras for Ralph Lauren

However, when all is said and done, the person behind the campaign – famous or not – should not make or break the effort.

Instead, the marketing angle and product, especially in the luxury industry, should be the backbone of the campaign.

“With that said, the best advertising is born with a great idea, not simply a celebrity association,” Brenes’ Ms. DeMaso said. “The magic happens when the celebrity enhances the great idea to create a memorable message that resonates and inspires consumers.

“For marketers considering using a famous personality, it’s crucial to ensure that the

brand is driving the message rather than the celebrity driving it,” she said.

Final Take

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