

ADVERTISING

Are brand ambassadors still relevant for luxury marketers?

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By RACHEL LAMB

There is still a huge opportunity for luxury marketers to leverage their products and personalities through celebrity endorsements since ambassadors bring to life the values, image and emotions of a high-end label.



It is especially relevant for luxury marketers to have brand ambassadors who are famous, glamorous and in-line with the company image. While there are risks associated with the public face of a brand, the pros far outweigh the cons, experts generally concur.

“A good ambassador communicates a message and values that resonate with best clients or prospects,” said Chris Ramey, president of [Affluent Insights](#), Miami.

“The main risk is hiring the wrong person, but this transcends anyone that works for a brand,” he said. “However, luxury brands have more to lose because it is about emotion and quality.

“If the person does not emotionally connect, it will put the brand at risk.”

What's in a name?

Choosing a correct brand ambassador is key. The wrong person could send a faulty message to consumers and potentially hurt the brand image.

“The key to choosing a brand ambassador is synergy,” said Michael Silvia, partner at **Evins Ltd.**, New York. “While many ambassadors are compensated handsomely, brands ideally should partner with someone who was a brand fan first.

“There should be a relationship that exists beyond the commercial aspect,” he said. “This will ensure, as much as is possible, that the ambassador will not be representing a competing brand in the near future or forget to mention your brand at a key moment.

“Ambassadors should appear as if they would choose your brand proudly on their own, even if there was no commercial gain.”

For example, Mercedes-Benz likely struck the right cord with its decision to appoint Roger Federer as ambassador.



Roger Federer for Mercedes

According to the automaker, Mr. Federer “declared his intention to one day drive a Mercedes-Benz years before he even had a drivers license.”

In addition, using the celebrity’s personality through marketing can help to personalize a brand.

For example, the recent Christian Dior campaign showing ambassador Mila Kunis surrounded by paparazzi and attending lavish events encapsulates the image that the brand could want consumers to feel while they are wearing products.

Ms. Kunis, though well-known and glamorous, still seems approachable. Therefore, this image also makes Dior seem that way.



Mila Kunis for Dior

“A brand ambassador can personalize the brand,” said Al Ries, chairman of **Ries & Ries**, Roswell, GA.

“People want to emulate other people, not brands, so the brand can serve as a link to a person the consumer feels an affinity for,” he said.

Product placement

Another important component to remember is what industry sector the brand is in, and which products the ambassador will be touting.

“It has more to do with categories than whether a brand is a luxury or a mainstream brand,” Mr. Ries said. “Some consumers, for example, feel more of an affinity with the clothes they wear than for the vehicles they drive.”

For example, Mercedes is using Mr. Federer to flaunt the new GL, a seven-passenger SUV.

The brand used this car with its ambassador not only because of the tennis star’s accomplishments on the courts, but because he is married and has twin daughters.

Therefore, consumers assume that the car is safe and can hold large families, especially if it is being endorsed by a celebrity who is also a father.

Also, Swiss watchmaker Breitling’s ambassador John Travolta is not only an actor, but a pilot.



Mr. Travolta promoting the Navitimer

Mr. Travolta is often seen sporting Breitling models such as the Navitimer, a watch designed specifically to withstand high altitudes and other challenges during flight.

Therefore, Breitling's partnership with Mr. Travolta links not only consumers who admire the actor, but those who aspire to become pilots and, therefore, the appropriate accessories.

Sour grapes

There are obviously some reservations to choosing a brand ambassador.

Obvious examples point to golfer Tiger Woods, whose sponsors Buick and Gatorade quickly dropped him a few years ago after public indiscretions.

Moreover, brands should sway from choosing someone very young, per Mr. Ries.

"Think long-term," Mr. Ries said. "The best relationships are the ones that last for decades, not just years."

"Pick a person who is going to age well, who is unlikely to change his or her personality in the years to come," he said. "There is always a danger when picking a very young person – look at what happened to Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears."

Also, choosing a brand ambassador solely on popularity of the moment is never a smart decision to make.

This strategy will inevitably reap more headaches down the line, according to Evins' Mr. Silvia.

Ultimately, brand ambassadors need to serve as apostles for marketers. It is their responsibility to get people to not only buy products, but the brand lifestyle.

"An ambassador is a 24-hour responsibility, not just for yourself, but making sure that you are living consistently with the brand you are representing," Affluent Insight's Mr. Ramey said.

"Brand ambassadors are extraordinarily important in the luxury sector, but it is about understanding the language and value of the category that is so important and also so

difficult to achieve.”

Final Take

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