

How to navigate the celebrity endorsement minefield

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It is a common strategy for advertisers to imbue their brand with the magic of celebrity. This type of investment has always been fraught with danger – with the potential of the best case scenario to last for years as the heart of a “campaignable big idea”, (think Gary Lineker and his bottomless bag of crisps), but also to crash and burn as the supposed icon falls from grace.

2010 was a year full of cautionary tales in this area, particularly in the sporting world. Falls from grace don't come much bigger and more spectacular than that of Tiger Woods. One day you couldn't get through an airport without seeing exhortations to “be a tiger”, the next he disappeared in a puff of self-pity. Another grandstand example is Wayne Rooney: First he failed to live up to his pre-World Cup billing as one of those who would “write the future”, second his alleged predilection for women who are not his wife ... (Coleen, by contrast, seems to be managing to carve out her own niche in the world of retail endorsement).

Mr Rooney wasn't the only one who failed to live up to his billing during the World Cup. If you look at the players who were most visible in the run-up the event – the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo, Didier Drogba and Frank Ribery in the Nike ad, or Lionel Messi and Steven Gerrard in the other corner at adidas, then most were notable by their absence in the latter stages of the competition.



Of course, the teams at Nike and adidas knew the risks when they were planning their campaigns. No matter how talented the individual, they are not machines, so there is

no guarantee that they are going to behave in a way that marketers will regard as “on strategy”. In a sense it may not have mattered. Data from Sponsortest, Ipsos MORI’s ongoing tracking of brand association with different sports and events, shows that both adidas and Nike successfully increased their association with football over last summer (with Nike not entirely eclipsed by its rival, despite not being the official World Cup sponsor). The advertisers could also control for the uncertainty of the stars’ performances by focusing their marketing efforts in the run-up to the event rather than the event itself.

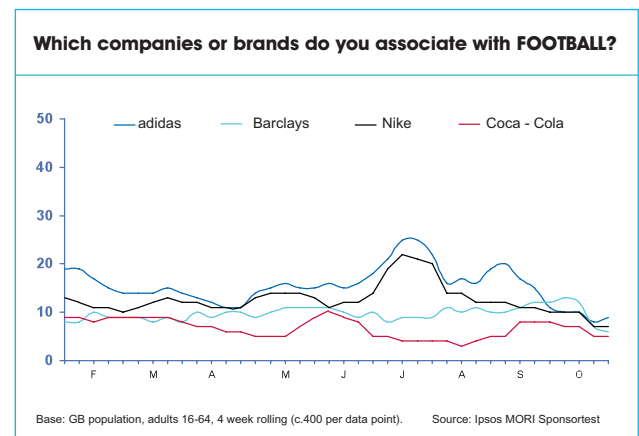
Marketers will understand that they cannot control the celebrities they are using, and so need to have contingency plans if the endorsement is no longer appropriate to their brand. It is this latter point which is key, not just to the “exit strategy”, but also to the decision to use celebrity endorsement in the first place:

1. in strategy, is the celebrity *appropriate* to what you are trying to convey about your brand?
2. in execution, does the celebrity *help* create visibility, or do they *overshadow* the brand?

If the first point is true, then the second is less likely to be a problem – but care still needs to

be taken that the brand has a clear role to play in the ad.

If we look at what is perhaps the most famous and enduring celebrity association of recent years, (Gary Lineker and Walkers), we can go right back to the start of that relationship and observe that there was a very clear, brand-led reason for his presence. Those of us old enough to remember Lineker’s playing days will recall his apparent inability to get a yellow card – he was the gentleman in a game played by ruffians. The original Walkers ad centred around nice Mr Lineker becoming nasty Mr Lineker – and stealing a little boy’s crisps, because they were so irresistible. As so often the case for successful ads, the brand was shown as the agent of change – the action was driven not only by the celebrity but by the brand.



Our databases show that ads featuring celebrities will tend to stand out and be noticed more than the average ad. However, they are not more likely than average to generate the desired brand impact – in part because they tend to have weaker than average brand linkage. Lack of brand linkage in general is the single most common reason for lack of advertising success in market – you’ve seen the ad, but you’ve no idea what it was for. This might be because you were distracted by what the celebrity was up to, with the effect that the ads become showcases for the celebrity rather than the brand (the later Leonard Rossiter/Joan Collins ads are perhaps examples of this). Or it might be because you were wondering who the celebrities are, or what they’re doing there ... Jason Donovan and Iceland, for example.

An advertiser considering a celebrity endorsement for its brand should perhaps ask itself the following questions:

- Can I identify what is *differentiating* and *relevant* about that celebrity?
- Can I link that to what is *differentiating* and *relevant* about my brand?
- Can I turn that link into a campaignable “big idea” for my brand?

For example - Gary Lineker was the nice footballer, who turned nasty because of the taste of Walkers – and he’s been doing that successfully for nearly 20 years now. Similarly, Delia Smith is the champion of simple, good quality ingredients cooked well (boiled egg, anyone?). Who better to front up for Waitrose as they introduce their essentials range?

With this in mind, surely it is only a matter of time before George Michael is lined up as the face of Snappy Snaps. Or perhaps he should have gone to Specsavers?

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