

Luxury Brands & Celebrities: An Enduring Branding Romance

By Uche Okonkwo

Celebrity endorsement of luxury fashion is hardly a new phenomenon, as it has been around for several centuries. Charles Worth, the man who invented haute couture in Paris in the nineteenth century, understood the importance of linking celebrities to brands, even before this was recognized as an important marketing communications tool. To promote his fashion house La Maison Worth, he sought a high society lady and an influencer of the court fashions, Princess Von Metternich, wife of the then Austria's ambassador to France and close friend of Napoleon's wife Empress Eugenie. This celebrity's patronage and connection with La Maison Worth contributed immensely to the success and status of this couture house as the most influential in the world at its time.

Celebrities are extremely important and valuable to brands, especially in the luxury fashion sector. There is no argument about it. They wield enormous power in fashion circles and can contribute to making and breaking brands. Fashion designers pamper them and brand managers recognize their potential to brands and utilize this effectively. Celebrity endorsement does not however begin and end with shooting and printing the photo of a beautiful model in a fashion magazine. There are several factors and dimensions involved in choosing a celebrity to endorse a brand. It is however worthwhile to understand what the true value of celebrity endorsement is.

First of all, who are celebrities? Celebrities are people that exert significant influence in several facets of society, ranging from arts, music, movies and television, sports, culture, politics and even religion. They range from film and television stars to musicians, sports personalities, royals, politicians, and even socialites who have no defined careers apart from looking beautiful and attending the right events. In the fashion world, the list of celebrities would include designers, their muses, models, photographers, and any prominent person involved in the artistic aspects of fashion such as make-up artists and fashion consultants. The celebrities that are most utilized in the promotion of luxury fashion brands are those in the film and music industries as a result of the major role that fashion plays in these entertainment sectors.

According to recent research statistics, the number of celebrity advertisements has doubled in the past ten years. One in four adverts features celebrities now as opposed to one in eight in 1995. Although this statistic is related to consumer goods and services, there has also been an increase in the use of celebrities in the brand message communications among luxury brands. Italian luxury brand Versace has used music icon Madonna and Hollywood stars Demi Moore and Halle Berry in its print adverts between 2005 and 2006. Likewise Julia Roberts appears in Gianfranco Ferre's adverts, Sharon Stone in Dior and Jennifer Lopez, Scarlett Johansson, and Uma Thurman in Vuitton ads.

Also, non-luxury brand Gap has used television star Sarah Jessica Parker to promote its brand in the recent past.

The reasons that these personalities are used in brand communications include making the brand's message stand out among the clutter of advertising from competitors and convincing customers of the credibility of the brand's offerings. In addition to these, celebrity endorsement is important to luxury brands for the following reasons.

1. Celebrity endorsement is a great brand awareness creation tool for new luxury brands.
2. Endorsement by celebrities helps to position and re-position existing brands.
3. Celebrities contribute to sustaining a brand's aura.
4. Celebrities are used to revive and revitalize staid brands.
5. Celebrities generate extensive PR leverage and opportunities for brands.
6. Celebrities are used to create global brand awareness.
7. Celebrities promote a brand's products and appeal.

There are several ways that celebrities can be used to either endorse a luxury fashion brand or show an association with the brand. The classic and most widely utilized method is the paid-for media advertisement mostly found in fashion magazines and on television. This is where a celebrity is photographed or filmed with an often appealing product of the brand in question. The themes of these advertisements often vary but the underlying message is uniform and that is an indication of a direct connection between the brand, its products and the celebrity. Additional ways that celebrities are used to endorse brands include the following.

- a. The already mentioned print advertising found in various magazines such as the 2005 spring/summer and autumn/winter adverts of Versace that featured Hollywood stars Madonna and Demi Moore, respectively.
- b. Television advertising such as the video clip advert of the Chanel No. 5 perfume featuring Nicole Kidman in 2004/2005.
- c. Product use in movies and television programs, especially sitcoms and soap operas, such as the 1980 film "American Gigolo", which was a showcase of Armani designs and contributed to the global appeal of the brand. Recent movie brand promotion includes "Legally Blond II" for Jimmy Choo, "Le Divorce" for Hermes, and the venerable sitcom "Sex and the City," which patently promoted both Jimmy Choo and Manolo Blahnik.
- d. Fashion spreads showing celebrities in apparel and accessories by luxury brands at different events and locations.
- e. Photographs of paid celebrities casually using products from a brand. This tactic of celebrity endorsement works where a brand pays a highly photographed celebrity to appear with their products in an indifferent manner indicating that the product and brand is part of their daily lives. Although this practice might be thought uncommon in the luxury goods category, as luxury products are highly

desirable even to celebrities, the practice exists and is effective as it portrays a true lifestyle which the public can relate to better than a glossy advert.

- f. Photographs of unpaid celebrities using the products of a brand. This is called “gratis” product placement and is becoming a rare occurrence. It is when a celebrity embraces a product or a brand they truly like and visibly uses their products in public. Since these celebrities are often photographed, they become promotional tools and grant the brands exposure that yield short-term benefits and long-term rewards
- g. Mention of luxury brands in music lyrics, such as the cooing of Beyoncé about getting her kicks from her Jimmy Choo shoes. This has become so commonplace that a chart called American Brandstand has been created with the hierarchy of the luxury brands that have been most and least mentioned in song lyrics.
- h. Inviting celebrities to be co-creators and partners in designing specific products, such as Samantha Thavasa who has worked in collaboration with Nicky Hilton in designing bags.
- i. Naming products after celebrities (with their approval of course). Gucci did this with the Jackie bag and Hermes has both the Kelly and Birkin bags named after Grace Kelly and Jane Birkin.

Celebrity endorsement transfers the personality and status of the celebrity as successful, wealthy, and distinctive directly to the brand. Other personality attributes that the celebrity may have such as glamour, beauty, talent, and style will also be ultimately linked with the brand. This factor however appears to a lesser extent among luxury brands than consumer brands because luxury brands already have well-defined and strong brand personalities. This raises the question of the choice criteria of a celebrity for a brand. How can the right celebrity be matched with the right brand to achieve the desired maximum impact and results? The following five rules of celebrity endorsement for luxury brands provide an indication of this.

Rule One: Credibility

The celebrity must be credible. This means that he/she must have a high level of expertise and talent in their field. These merits bring value to the brand and indicate the intent of the brand in being associated with the very best. Actors Tom Cruise and George Clooney have star power because of their talent.

Rule Two: Global Appeal

The celebrity must have global appeal. This means that the celebrity must not only be known worldwide but must also be appreciated and well liked by the majority of the people in the consumer and fashion society. Charlize Theron and Halle Berry are two actresses that satisfy this criterion effortlessly.

Rule Three: Personality

The celebrity’s personality must match the brand’s personality. Luxury brands often

make the mistake of choosing a celebrity to endorse their brands based on their popularity and appeal. Although these attributes are important, it is essential to understand the significant role that a celebrity's personality brings to the brand. A classic brand such as Hermes is most likely to give a clear brand message by using a celebrity who portrays this characteristic through their qualities and demeanor rather than one who exhibits non-conformism. Where a celebrity that portrays a different brand personality is used by luxury brands, it should be for a strategic purpose such as brand re-positioning, new product launch or brand extension. The personality of the celebrity should also reflect a positive brand image rather than a negative one. For example, there is a definite match between Nicole Kidman and Chanel, and between Uma Thurman and Vuitton.

Rule Four: Uniform Power

The celebrity must not overshadow the brand. This is particularly important for new and up and coming luxury brands. Several established luxury brands already have powerful brand personalities, making it a challenge for celebrities to outshine the brand. However other brands that are yet to ascertain a high level of brand strength have to be careful in choosing a celebrity whose strength doesn't surpass that of the brand.

Rule Five: Constancy

The celebrity must have constancy and lasting appeal. This means that the celebrity should have sustainability and the knack to maintain their image and career accordingly. This is often based on how predictably successful a celebrity's career and role as a star is projected to be. It is quite similar to the sales forecast projection that companies make using previous and current cash flows. Some stars might have been in the entertainment business for decades but wouldn't be the appropriate choice for luxury brand communications because of their lack of constancy and lasting appeal.

Luxury brands that utilize celebrity support must maintain high appeal through their products and services offerings even after the celebrity campaign is over. The higher customer expectation level, which the celebrity endorsement has facilitated, must be constantly met and exceeded. Also, the use of celebrities to promote a brand shouldn't be a one-off strategy but should be re-visited periodically.

Luxury brand managers constantly evaluate celebrities using often unclear criteria. This is largely because this strategy has been viewed for a long time as one that doesn't require complex business decision grids. With the increasing complexity of global business, especially in the luxury fashion sector, clear and structured decision criteria is required for managing the celebrity endorsement strategy. The closest thing to this that exists today is the Davie-Brown Index, developed by Davie-Brown Entertainment and i-think Inc. This index evaluates the worth of celebrities through a systematic and controlled method that resembles financial brand valuation and forecasting. It aims to remove the ambiguity that surrounds celebrity appeal. It acts as a guideline for brand managers and advertising agencies to assess celebrities and calculate their suitability for a specific product or brand image before selecting them.

The Davie-Brown Index uses eight criteria in its evaluation.

1. Appeal
2. Notice
3. Trend setting
4. Influence
5. Trust
6. Endorsement
7. Aspiration
8. Awareness

Celebrity endorsement is not all rosy. Several risks are associated with this brand communications strategy; therefore luxury brands should meticulously evaluate all the inter-connecting elements related to this choice. The following list covers some of the potential hazards involved in celebrity endorsement.

1. Celebrities can get into public controversies that can harm the brands they endorse.
2. The image of celebrities can be damaged as a result of professional or personal circumstances, automatically transferring this to the brands they currently represent.
3. Celebrities can disappear from the spotlight before or after the advertising campaign is over.
4. Celebrities can become overexposed and lose their star appeal as a result of endorsing multiple brands.
5. Celebrities can also decide to change their image, which might sometimes be a contradicting image to that of the brands they currently endorse.
6. Celebrities can decide to intentionally damage a brand that they feel didn't meet their extraneous demands or did not give them the star treatment they desired.

Finally, celebrities are getting wise to their star strengths and appeal power and are also becoming more willing to use this in branching out their careers. They now understand the importance and influence of personal branding and are exploiting it and also extending it to commercial branding. As a result, several celebrities have ventured into the fashion and accessories businesses and more are on the way. Jennifer Lopez, Sean Combs, and Jessica Simpson all have clothing lines; Victoria Beckham designs jeans; Elizabeth Hurley has launched a swimwear brand while Kylie Minogue already has a flourishing lingerie brand, called Love Kylie. In addition, the list of celebrities that have launched perfumes named after them is steadily increasing: Jennifer Lopez, Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, Celine Dion, Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, Elizabeth Taylor, Naomi Campbell, Michael Jordan, Jessica Simpson, Antonio Banderas, Donald Trump, Cindy Crawford, etc.

These product and brand launches not only entail an increased and even steady revenue for the celebrities but is also a way of increasing their visibility in the already cluttered celebrity market environment.

Endorsement of luxury fashion brands by celebrities is a strategy that undoubtedly has great importance in the luxury goods sector. Although the short-term results are difficult to accurately measure, if managed effectively, this strategy often yields long-term benefits such as increased brand loyalty and brand equity, which ultimately translate to higher sales turnover and brand value.
