

More Than a Pitchman: Why Stars Are Getting Marketing Titles

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Illustration by John Kuczala

Beyoncé, will.i.am, Justin Timberlake, Alicia Keys and Taylor Swift are all "ambassadors" for various brands.

Who knew there were so many frustrated brand managers walking red carpets?

Working with celebrities used to be a simple matter. Marketers would write a big check for a star to perform a specific purpose -- for Olympian Mary Lou Retton to grace boxes of Wheaties, or for model Cindy Crawford to don short-shorts and sip [Pepsi](#).

Now brands aren't just featuring celebs in marketing campaigns -- they're giving stars a place in the marketing suite. The model for these tie-ups is a "partnership" anointing A-listers with lofty titles like chief creative officer, head of creative design, chief innovator and brand ambassador. The link-ups are so fast and so furious it's hard for the Average Joe to keep track.

Just last week Marc Jacobs was named "creative director" for Diet Coke. A day later Justin Timberlake said he was "looking forward to not only being a part of the creative process, but ... bringing other talented musicians to the forefront" in his role as "creative and musical curator" for Bud Light Platinum. Other bold-face names in marketing-related roles include Alicia Keys (BlackBerry); Beyonce (Pepsi); Taylor Swift (Diet

Coke); Lady Gaga (Polaroid); Gwen Stefani (HP); Victoria Beckham (Land Rover); and Will.i.am (Intel).

"If you wanted to take a very cynical view, you could say these brands are taking borrowed equity to another level, trading on the celebrities' name at a higher level," said branding consultant Denise Lee Yohn. "But in some cases, a lot of value is being provided by these celebrities."

Styling celebrities as ambassadors is an attempt to position the tie-up as more authentic at a time when consumers have become more cynical about endorsements. "There's a greater authenticity that comes with having a celebrity influencing the business so that it's not just a face on the brand. ... Everyone knows what a brand endorsement is. You can pay a celebrity to say anything."

Singer Lady Gaga worked on product concepts for Polaroid.

There can be a catch: Marketers must make sure their "ambassadors" are a genuine match and haven't previously shown loyalty to a rival brand.

In the wake of BlackBerry's recent announcement that Alicia Keys would serve as its creative director, critics pointed to her use of an iPhone days earlier to tweet. Beyonce has been criticized for partnering with a sugary soda brand while promoting first lady Michelle Obama's anti-obesity "Let's Move" effort. And when Justin Timberlake was tapped for Bud Light Platinum, pictures surfaced of him drinking Coors Light. (Bud Light Platinum smartly responded on Twitter: "Justin may have dated other beers but he's married to Platinum.")



Liquor giant [Diageo](#) has experienced the highs and lows of casting a brand's lot with a celeb. Sales of its Ciroc vodka have soared since the marketer made Sean "Diddy" Combs the brand manager, CMO and spokesman in 2007. But when Diageo teamed with singer/songwriter Pharrell Williams to launch a liqueur called "Qream" in 2011, the deal soured quickly, with Mr. Williams recently filing a lawsuit claiming Diageo didn't do enough to support the brand. Diageo disputes the allegation.

So what do real creatives think of celebs getting these titles? "Most is hype," said Pete Favat, chief creative officer at Havas-owned Arnold. "But no doubt some people become celebs because they are truly creative people, so why not experiment?"

That said, he added, "If brands are doing it for PR buzz, it's a stupid idea. ... No one cares who the creative director is as long as the work is great."

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