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### **Why Are So Many Celebrities Now "Creative Directors"?**

by Denise Lee Yohn | 10:00 AM July 9, 2013

From Tommy Lee Jones waxing poetic for Ameriprise Financial to Beyonce boosting Pepsi's sex appeal, celebrities are commonly used by companies to get attention and generate buzz. In recent years, though, celebrities have taken on a more significant role. Some companies now actively involve stars in their product development process and other aspects of their businesses.

These modern-day arrangements are often formalized with a "Creative Director" title bestowed upon the celebrity. Undoubtedly, some of these relationships are simply glorified brand endorsements and can be classified as CDINO (Creative Director In Name Only), but some celebrities are having a bona fide impact on companies.

In years past, the basis of celebrity/brand relationships had been expediency and image. Today, it's about authenticity and impact.

For example, Black-Eyed Peas' front man Will-i-am pitched Coca-Cola on making new products out of its byproducts. The company took on the challenge of producing headphones, clothing, and other gear branded EKOCYCLE to give recycled products a hipper image that resonates with young consumers. And, Lady Gaga partnered with Polaroid to develop a throwback camera and LED photo glasses that act as a camera and are designed for real-time sharing.

Perhaps one of the most significant celebrity/brand marriages is between Justin Timberlake and MySpace, the once-fledgling online music sharing service. A few years ago, Timberlake joined forces with a couple of advertising executives to purchase the site, and he has been an integral part of the company's transformation into a service that helps artists manage their brands and connect with fans. He contributes with industry-insider knowledge, personal connections with artists and music executives, and a celebrity flair that has produced a star-studded, tabloid-worthy launch party and a feature-rich user interface—perfect for the ADD-generation.

These examples demonstrate the shift in celebrity/brand deals from awareness to authenticity and from superficial to substantive. There are powerful forces behind this shift. In the past, signing a celebrity endorser was a quick, easy way for a brand to get attention. Companies could generate brand awareness simply by aligning with a visible figure. For celebrities, providing a brand endorsement enabled them to earn a significant fee for minimal work.

The needs of companies and celebrities have changed. The primary challenge for most brands today is differentiation.

Engaging a celebrity with a unique personality or point of view can help separate a brand from its competitors. Also, today's consumers expect and even demand companies operate with greater authenticity. Doing more than using celebrities in ads enables them to do so.

Companies are also more focused on innovation than ever before, so they need fresh perspectives—especially from outside their industries. Celebrities' ideas and insights can help companies better understand their target markets, and because celebrities are often the ones leading the trends, they can help companies anticipate cultural movements.

At the same time, these deals make sense for celebrities, too. Celebrities now engage with their fan bases directly and need to sustain compelling conversations with them. Working on interesting projects like designing a new product or starting a new program provides a steady stream of news and insider information for celebrities to post updates about. And now that becoming a celebrity is easier than ever before, some stars want to differentiate themselves from wannabes and shore up their credibility as real artists and savvy businesspeople. What better way to do so than with a substantive title and voice at a reputable company?

Then, of course, there's the obvious business case. Compared to previous eras, musicians now make far less money from music sales, so they're looking to diversify their revenue sources. Signing on as a company's creative director usually involves a longer term, more profitable deal than offering their likeness for an ad campaign.

Today, companies no longer simply need bold-faced names and faces to associate their brands with. And many have found the value of such fleeting arrangements easily compromised when their spokesperson is discovered using their competitor's product (e.g., Pepsi-sponsored Britney Spears was photographed drinking a Coke) or caught engaging in inappropriate behavior (e.g., Accenture was compelled to terminate its sponsorship of Tiger Woods after his multiple infidelities became public). While new, more substantive brand/celebrity relationships are not immune to complications such as these, the incidence with which they happen and the impact they have can be minimized since the relationships are formed more selectively and developed over time.

In the new environment of authenticity and impact, it's not just the celebrity endorsing the brand. The brand also endorses the celebrity. This is a fundamental shift that results in a more equitable, and more interesting, relationship between both parties. Consider what the antiperspirant brand Secret did for Olympic hopeful Lindsey Van.

As a female ski jumper, Van (not to be confused with Olympic skier Lindsey Vonn) was blocked from participating in the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver because the Games only included ski jumping events for men. The Secret brand managers picked up Van's cause and lobbied for her inclusion by producing an emotional video that spread in social media channels. Subsequently, the sport was added to the Olympic Games, and Van is hoping to make the 2014 U.S. team, so she seems to have benefitted from Secret's endorsement. By endorsing Van, Secret was able to express with authenticity its brand purpose of encouraging women to be fearless, and significant gains in product sales and customer affinity followed.

With results like these, it's easy to see why celebrities and companies alike are interested in this new way of working together. It's why Red Bull built a special halfpipe for snowboarder Shaun White and why pop band OK Go is actively seeking a "brand partner" to work with on videos, apps, and other content connected to its upcoming record release.

To achieve authenticity and impact, companies need to approach celebrity engagements in new ways. Selecting a celebrity should no longer be based on his or her general familiarity and appeal. There needs to be a meaningful tie, and sometimes selecting a lesser-known person is actually a better choice because doing so can contribute to the perception of an authentic relationship. For instance, Van wasn't well-known before P&G picked up on her cause; and indeed, that's part of what makes the spot so effective: you're rooting for her as the underdog. Also companies should engage celebrities based on the quality of their ideas and their willingness and ability to engage with corporate representatives. Both of these criteria aren't as easy to assess as a Q Score, so the best approach may be to take a few small, selective steps in this direction before making a big public announcement and using a moniker like creative director.

There's also a need for the company to be crystal clear about its brand position and vision before engaging a celebrity—and to ensure the star embraces these. This alignment is critical, since the celebrity will wield more influence on the future direction of the brand internally through his or her contributions and on the public perceptions of the brand externally through their messages about the partnership.

Celebrity creative directors are popular these days because they allow brand and celebrities alike to play on higher ground. No longer are either simply promoting an image. They're making a difference.