

Celebrity Advertising – A Critical Perspective

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Abstract:: Marketers enjoy several benefits from celebrity advertising. No one doubts about the influencing power of celebrities and possible impact of the same on the target audience. Even during pandemic situation, top Indian celebrities including popular cricketer players and Bollywood actors bagged many endorsement contracts. But there is also a flip side of this association. Advertisers must remember that celebrity endorsements come with some inherent risks. They have to decide how far the benefits outweigh the risks associated with using celebrities before over relying on them. Considering the huge money involved in using celebrities, all advertisers need to question themselves whether the huge investments in roping celebrities are really worth it and make the conscious decision.

This paper at length discusses limitations of using celebrities as well as other possible risks with the celebrity association. Paper presents the literature summary by various researchers who have studied the darker side of celebrity advertising.

Keywords: Brand recall, brand shelf life, celebrity, celebrity addiction, Celebrity endorsement, multiple endorsements, unique selling proposition (USP), vampirism

Celebrity Advertising – A Critical Perspective

Introduction:

Benefits from celebrity advertising are plenty. Celebrity advertising can create a buzz and make a consumer feel better about the product but it is a fact that it does not guarantee sales. Advertisers believe that celebrity increases the advertisements ability to attract attention and produce a desire in receivers to imitate their favorite celebrities. However, there is the ever-present risk that celebrity will fall grace and may potentially damage the reputation of the brand for which he was once the champion. If a celebrity can enhance the brand image, he can also tarnish that image. After all, celebrities are human beings.

Wise and conscious advertisers dump or part away with those celebrities who are caught up in the controversy or facing a bad patch in their respective careers.

While relying excessively on celebrity use, one cannot ignore the obvious in-built risk of celebrity overshadowing the brand i.e. whether brand is more powerful or the celebrity.

Critics of celebrity advertising argue that when the marketers are not sure of the quality of their products which would catch the attention of the customers on their own, they depend on celebrities. They criticize this technique and refer celebrity endorsers in the broader sense as mere salesmen. Therefore critics and advocates of non-celebrity advertisements raise the question to the marketers, especially who are lured by celebrities and relying excessively on them, that whether it is really worth to spend such huge (and sometimes unjustifiable) amounts on this unsure marketing technique and is it really a safe bet.

Many advertising experts raise a question about the huge spending on celebrities and ask whether this is an investment in brand building or is it a game that ‘stumps the consumers’.

Limitations of Celebrity Advertising:

There are certain limitations of celebrity advertising. Marketers expect magical effect from the celebrity association. To a large extent audience consider celebrities especially, leading film and sports personalities as their icon or role model. Sometimes even celebrities are perceived as a god, still there is no guarantee that this magic will work for all products in all situations.

Some researchers warn the advertisers who blindly rely on the celebrities about the limitations of celebrity endorsements. They are summarized below.

Friedman and Friedman (1979) suggest that celebrities are best for promoting certain types of brands only and are not effective for all brands. Therefore, celebrity advertising cannot be a sure shot success formula for the advertisers in all the situations.

Ogilvy and Mather's finding is that only one in five celebrity campaigns lives up to client expectations (reported in Miciak and Shanklin 1994) while McEwen (2003) opined that marketers are spending millions to obtain celebrity advertisements for their products but unfortunately much of that money is wasted. This is certainly not any encouraging news for the advertisers.

All celebrity endorsements will not bring any magic and celebrity alone may not do wonders for the brands. Study by Silvera and Austad (2003), concludes that effectiveness of celebrity endorser is dynamic in nature. It depends on the celebrity, the products and even societal conditions at the time and place where the advertisement is shown. Pringle, H (2004) in his book wisely pointed out that celebrity advertising may not be the best solution in every case. Hence, there is no guarantee of a success even after roping the celebrity in the ads. According to him, celebrity is no 'silver bullet' but must be used in conjunction with marketing, brand and advertising best practices – thoughtful strategy, clever creative ideas and a sound product – all of which focus on connecting with consumers and their needs.

Interestingly, while trend of using celebrities in the advertisements is rising, research by Charbonneau and Garland (2005) revealed that the majority of New-Zealand practitioners are making a conscious effort to move away from celebrity advertisements, as illustrated by the following quote - "We find that it is usually too expensive, practically problematic and the celebrity can overpower the brand message. We would prefer to really interrogate the product or service, and make the advertising idea revolve around that, rather than a third party".

Many researchers after in depth study of the practice of using celebrity endorsers, come to the conclusion that signing a celebrity to boost a branding campaign is a powerful strategy which of course come along with the risk. They also suggest that there are many more ways to use the popular faces than just madly running behind the highly exposed stars who can perhaps overshadow the brand or even damage or derail its values with their off-screen behavior or behind-the-scenes antics.

Advertisers must remember that while the positive attributes of the celebrity rub-off on the product, the reverse can also happen. This technique is caught in controversy on whether it really contributes to the brand building process or it is just another tool to make the brand more visible in the minds of the consumers.

Critics point out several weaknesses and limitations of celebrity advertising technique and wonder how marketers can rely so much on endorsers.

According to Singh, R (2005) and Khatri, M (2006), there are five major reasons behind failure of celebrity advertising such as: a) Improper or wrong positioning, b) brand-celebrity disconnect, c) clutter, d) poor product quality, and e) confusion or skepticism.

Mere association with celebrity does not guarantee sales. At the most, they can generate interest in the product or create a buzz around it. If the celebrity represents values that conflict with the brand values and positioning, the advertisement creates a conflict in the minds of the target audience who may not accept the proposition. Overexposure of celebrity can be bad for brand. As there are too many brands chasing too few celebrities, multiple endorsements by one celebrity is bound to happen. Celebrity advertising can be confusing, especially when same celebrity endorses many products. Viewers may be spellbound by the celebrity personality that they completely fail to notice the product/ brand being advertised.

Some of the limitations are discussed in detail in the following paragraphs:

Many advocates of non-celebrity advertisements believe that every time advertisements appear on TV, they interrupt a program. Therefore, they are in intrusion and very few people positively welcome advertisements though many do not reject them. People see advertisements as a part of their normal life. Celebrities alone cannot guarantee success as consumers today understand the advertisement; somewhat of what advertisement is and how it works.

As quoted in the attribution theory by Keller (1967), people assign causality to events on the basis of either their own behavior or the behavior of others. While perceiving celebrity endorsements, consumers might ask whether the endorsers recommend a product because they actually believe the positive characteristics of the product (an internal attribution) or because they are paid for endorsing it (external attribution). Many celebrities are seen using rival brands or other brands in real life instead of the brands they endorse and indirectly suggest the audience to use them. Such incidents dilute the credibility and trustworthiness of celebrities which are actually most important attributes in the effectiveness of celebrity advertising. Today, customers have become more knowledgeable and demanding. Therefore, it is not easy to influence or fool them. Celebrity is said to be fool the public as he is paid to sell and communicate good things about the brand. Hence, credibility of celebrity is becoming pertinent. Now people know that celebrities are being paid huge amounts for the endorsements and this knowledge leads them to cynicism about celebrity advertisements. In many instances, real customers' testimonials have been more realistic and effective than celebrity endorsers as they induce better credibility and helps in carving the rational and knowledgeable customers of today.

Consumers' thirst for additional information never quenches; especially with electronic or technology based products and new gadgets. One wants to explore every aspect of the product before making final choice. Then what role celebrities play by merely appearing in the advertisement is worth considering.

Critics believe that many brands have a higher consumer awareness and liking than celebrities who endorse them and not really need any support from endorsers. For example, Colgate toothpaste is known and popular amongst a large audience. They are well aware about it; in fact many of them still perceive Colgate as synonym to the toothpaste. Then what is the point in using expensive celebrity. A number of brands have been built without celebrity association. For some of their brands, HUL and P&G strongly believe that consumers, especially housewives, are more likely to identify with a lay person on screen than a celebrity, especially for day to day products.

Marketers should always remember that they cannot fool the customers for a long by associating their brands even with the top most popular celebrity if the products are of poor quality and customers are dissatisfied with product quality or performance. Though celebrity is widely used, when either product lacks any unique selling proposition (USP) or differentiation or advertiser lacks creative ideas; this may bounce back on the brands. Inferior quality products endorsed by celebrity may fail faster because the presence of celebrity may create a buzz and more people will know about the ordinariness of product. Thus celebrity cannot save bad products for a long. Their presence cannot do wonder for poor performance of products.

Risks Associated with Celebrity Advertising:

Celebrity association can have some in-built risks which cause serious monetary losses as occurred in many incidents. Celebrity endorsements can be extremely expensive not only in terms of actual monetary outlays to the celebrity but also in terms of intangibles such as how the celebrity may affect the image of the brand. The potential intangible risks include a celebrity becoming involved in a controversy, the celebrity being overexposed through too many endorsement contracts, drop or loss of popularity or a change in the celebrity's image, etc. Celebrity's marketability and fan following is based on many factors such as acting/ playing skills, personal image and media interest, etc. All these can change suddenly due to various factors and reduce the gains for advertisers.

Researchers like Friedman and Friedman (1979), Ohanian (1991), Tripp *et al.*, (1994) and Solomon (2002) who study celebrity advertising, its effectiveness and possible impact on the audience, also warn marketers about the possible risks associated with the celebrity advertising. Though, most research findings support the effectiveness of celebrity advertising, the risks related to celebrities' negative information, multiple product endorsement and celebrity overshadow effect, etc. are also addressed by many researchers.

Some of them are summarized below.

Research by Mowen and Brown (1981), Tripp (1990) and Tripp, Jensen, and Carlson (1994) shows that celebrity endorsement technique might have negative effects on celebrities themselves as well as advertising evaluation, brand evaluation, and purchase intentions.

Research findings by Agrawal and Kamakura (1995), Dyson and Turco (1998) and Erdogan and Kitchen (1998), however are equivocal concerning whether consumers are more likely to purchase goods and services endorsed by celebrities as using celebrities and athletes is not without risk. Erdogan and Kitchen (1998) warn that the increased attention comes with the risk of overshadowing the brand.

Till and Shimp (1998) find that negative information about the celebrity tended to lower consumers' brand evaluations.

Louie and Obermiller (2000) view that celebrities who are blamed for negative events can have detrimental effects on the products they endorse.

While dealing with celebrity image, researchers like Erdogan and Kitchen (1998) and Irwin, Sutton and McCarthy (2002), comment that celebrity images are not static and there is the ever-present risk of image change or loss of public favor. Athletes present the additional risk of injury, which reduces visibility and performance, reducing endorsement potential.

Many researchers such as by Till and Shimp (1998), Veltri and Long (1998), Till (2001) and Pornpitakpan (2003) address the issue of celebrity image. They state that when the endorser is caught in the controversy, it can result in not only a corporate embarrassment but also potentially negative attitudes towards the brand.

Some serious issues and risks related to celebrity advertising are discussed at length in the following paragraphs:

When celebrity endorser is largely unknown and unrecognized by the intended audience, marketer cannot get expected returns from that association. However, many celebrities are almost immediately recognizable. Unfortunately public memory is short. The celebrity who is popular-known today may not be that favorite or influencing for the audience may be in a very short time span due to various reasons. Hence, after having spent the

money and time to hire a popular celebrity, create and execute the advertisement and air it in prime time, audience may forget that celebrity (celebrity may be less recognizable) or the worst can happen that they may remember celebrity but do not remember which brand he has endorsed. Quite often engaging celebrities fails to focus on the real hero i.e. brand. Brands largely depend on popularity of the celebrity. Celebrities like film stars and cricket players are not everlasting. They can payoff better till they are young, popular, performing well in their respective fields. Celebrity endorsement becomes trickier when brands have limited shelf lives. Till the time, the celebrity has a huge fan following, the brands sell like hot cakes. Consumers may be willing to pay the premium for acquiring the brand. But the moment, the celebrity gains negative publicity concerning his personal or professional life, it spells doom for the brand he is associated with. Recovery of cost becomes a paramount problem due to the forced shorter life cycle of the brand.

Due to the influential power of celebrity, often people tend to remember the celebrity but there is no or less or wrong recall for the brands he is endorsing. It is a serious risk to the brand.

Inconsistency in the professional popularity of the celebrity is one of the worries of advertisers signing popular celebrities. Therefore, consistency in performance 'in field' and image of celebrity 'off the field' are very important. Consumers recognize or make association of product through the celebrities or lead personalities. Hence, the credibility of these personalities has to be considered and checked periodically. If their popularity decline for whatever reasons, they should be avoided. Especially when sports personalities are used as the endorsers, marketers have to continuously keep a watch on their field performance as they may commit unacceptable blunders. Athletes present the additional risk of injury, which reduces visibility and performance, reducing endorsement potential (Erdogan and Kitchen 1998, Irwin, Sutton and McCarthy 2002). Celebrity images are not static and there is the ever-present risk of image change or loss of public favor. Many advertisers ditch the celebrities immediately when they are caught in the controversies. They withdraw endorsement contracts if the celebrity's performance is not up to the expected level.

Success of brand broadly depends on three elements: P-D-AV i.e. effective Product, Differentiation and Added Value. Celebrity cannot really do anything to improve or debilitate the efficiency and features of the core product. But can definitely and largely contribute in differentiation and value addition. When there is no or very little value addition from even top celebrities, such advertisements cannot create any waves. When audience view no rational or connect between the celebrity and brand he is endorsing, they refuse such advertisements.

Many times, celebrity advertisements are catchy and entertaining but not that effective as viewers are fascinated by celebrities but do not recall the brand name. Hiring celebrity in such cases is worthless if there are no strong and memorable linkages to the actual brand. Without the brand linkage, it is simply money down the drain. Often celebrity advertisements are heavy on 'glitz and entertainment value' but light on 'effectiveness and actual purchase lead'.

It is necessary to study not only the economic impact but also the social impact of celebrity endorsements. An endorsement or testimonial is an advertising message that consumers believe that the advertisement message reflects the opinions, beliefs or experiences of an individual, group or institution. When consumers feel that a message does not reflect the endorser's opinion, the message cannot be endorsement in a true sense as it can be even misleading. Advertising claims are considered to be unethical if they are false, misleading or deceptive. Celebrity advertising may come under this. It is a perfectly legal strategy in US provided endorser is an actual user of the product he/she is endorsing. However, in India rarely the celebrity who is endorsing the product is actual user of that product or an expert in that field. Authenticity of endorsements especially with poor quality products is being questioned. Often advertisers use a celebrity as a mask that hides the deficiency in the product. Some people view celebrities as demigods and may blindly trust the products endorsed by them. Therefore, celebrities should avoid appearing in the deceptive advertisements as well as when advertisers try to sell dubious products and services by exploiting the sentiments of vulnerable sections of society. Advertisers use celebrities to define their brand and in the entire process, celebrities lend their image to the brand. When the celebrity is negatively publicized, the very purpose of using celebrity gets defeated. When they continue association with the controversial celebrities, not only do they risk their own image but also the life of consumers as the primary logic of using celebrity is to influence the consumers buying decisions. Today's consumers typically youth segment are increasingly preferring 'new and newsworthy' over the 'tried and true'. As celebrities are expected to influence the people, they are morally responsible for what they seek people to behave in a socially responsible manner. A celebrity should not endorse the products that may negatively influence the buyers and are not in the best interest of consumers.

Talking about a darker side of celebrity advertising, advocates of non-celebrity advertising claim that when celebrity is associated with the brand, the cost of product is increased which is ultimately passed on to the buyers. Customers

have to bear not only the cost of hefty packages being paid to the celebrities but also the cost of evils attached to the product.

Cost of hiring a celebrity is very high; hence marketers must be careful in selecting a right celebrity. Success of the endorsement to a large extent depends upon the morale conduct of the celebrity endorser.

Sometimes advertisers are addicted to the use of celebrities. Once the brand is successful by having celebrity association, it becomes difficult to promote the brand without celebrity. Celebrity and brand becomes inseparable. It becomes addiction and marketers are trapped by this necessary evil. It may also force the small players to use celebrity who may not really afford to use this expensive technique. Celebrity trap is when the celebrity becomes an addiction for the marketing team and the task to find substitutes becomes more and more difficult, leading to surfeit of celebrities.

Celebrity advertising could become a 'double-edged' sword for most marketers. A popular star can help immensely in improving brand image and brand recall. But the same star can cause major problems for the brand when he lands in controversy- either in his career or in his personal life. Since the behavior of the celebrities reflects on the brand, celebrity endorsers may at times become liabilities to the brands they endorse. Unsocial or inconsistent behavior or failure to perform by a celebrity endorser adds to the dilemma. As one advertising practitioner notes, "the reality is, with celebrities you cannot control their private life so you tend to be quite careful". Celebrities have more expensive and probably more risky since media nowadays digs out the lives of celebrities. Therefore, public image of a celebrity plays an important role in a success of endorsement. Many celebrities make more news for their private woes than anything else. Having a close relationship with any celebrity can be risky and association with a celebrity whose personal and professional life is troubled can be very challenging for the marketers. The damage is more if that celebrity advertisement is aired across several TV channels, point of purchase (POP) and other print media. However, if it is one time deal, perhaps fewer losses compared to that of long term contracts. When they are caught in controversies, the brand endorsed by them may suffer badly. According to Pati (2002), when celebrities associated with the brand are caught in controversies, they fail to reinforce the positive associations anymore.

Advertisers also must be aware of celebrity scorning. They hold their breath and hope celebrities stay out of trouble and any kind of controversy. Therefore, they prefer proven though expensive celebrities having clean image and consistency over a period of time.

Amongst the concerns shared by researchers and advertising practitioners, multiple product endorsements by the celebrity have been a major issue. Today, celebrities are seen endorsing any damn product to highly sophisticated products of small or big company from pin to piano. The novelty of a celebrity endorsement gets diluted if he does too many advertisements. This has led to 'commoditization' of celebrities who are willing to endorse anything for big bucks. These overused celebrities have a danger of diffusion association. Celebrities endorsing many brands create confusion in customers' mind. As a result, not all brands get benefits from the celebrity association. Everyone wants famous faces for their brands so there is a race amongst the marketers to trap the popular celebrity that leads to multiple endorsements and one celebrity is seen endorsing a wide range of similar or dissimilar products. This leads to overexposure of celebrity, lack of exclusivity, a fair degree of confusion and little room for credibility and hence a possible devaluing amongst the customers. Marketers must have deep pockets to afford the best available celebrities. With top celebrities endorsing several brands it becomes almost impossible for a firm to get a celebrity exclusively for itself. Hence it is obvious that consumers get confused between several brands endorsed by same celebrity. However study shows that if a celebrity endorses several brands in different categories, the consumer is able to assimilate the message without causing any confusion.

Vampirism is the major risk in celebrity advertising where celebrity overshadows the brand. Since the early days of celebrity advertising, celebrities are often seen overshadowing brands. People remember the celebrity but cannot recall the brand being endorsed by him. Celebrities' 'larger than life' image can perhaps derail the attention of audience from brand. If there is no congruency between the celebrity and the brand, then the audience generally remembers the celebrity and not the brand. Many researchers like Tripp et al., (1994), Dyson and Turco (1998), Erdogan and Kitchen (1998), James and Ryan (2001) and Garland and Ferkins (2002) discuss about the risk of multiple product endorsements. They state that celebrities endorsing multiple products risk overexposure, lessening the impact and distinctiveness of each product relationship as well as diminishing consumer perceptions of celebrity credibility and likeability.

While selecting a celebrity, marketers must be careful and determine whether the celebrity associates well with the brand or not. It is important to have a congruency between the persona of the celebrity and the image of the brand. Each celebrity portrays a broad range of meanings, involving a specific personality and lifestyle. The fact is that both the celebrity and the brand risk their respective image by associating with each other. If the chosen celebrity

does not fit well with the brand image, there won't be any impact on the target audience; the huge money spend is a sheer wastage then.

Conclusion:

Celebrity advertising does not come without risk. It has some obvious limitations. It can yield maximum benefits till the celebrity is popular and performing well in his or her chosen field. However, ultimately celebrities have feet of clay as they are human beings. Hence they cannot always give their 'best' and naturally happenings in their personal and professional life can positively or adversely affect the brands they are endorsing.

Therefore, advertisers shall not over rely on the celebrities and allow them to overpower or overshadow the brand. Instead of having blind faith, brands 'first' and celebrities 'later' will be more appropriate strategy for the advertisers.

(Note: In this paper the terms 'Celebrity Advertising' and 'Celebrity Endorsement' are used interchangeably by the author.)

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