

## S GANESH'S VIEW ON LEVERAGING BRAND AMBASSADORS

<i>Local markets need local ambassadors..</i>	<p>Brand ambassadors are required for specific brands. May be Shah Rukh is not required for Santro because he may never use the product but Sachin Tendulkar or Leander Paes are definitely effective for a brand like adidas, because they believe in the product and hence use it with conviction. It is important to remember that brand ambassadors are usually for the local market. US teen idol Kobe Bryant, successor to Michael Jordan, is relatively unknown in India. Similarly, Indian icon, Sachin Tendulkar is unknown in countries like the USA and Germany.</p>
<i>Brand ambassador must fit in the company's over-all communication s plan...</i>	<p>The primary responsibility of the brand manager is to ensure that there is a 'fit' between the company values and the values that the brand ambassador brings. The brand ambassador at no point in time can be bigger than the brand. He/she has to be dissolved in the brand and therefore complement the brand. Also appointing a brand ambassador must help achieve certain objectives. In the case of adidas, the primary objective is to promote its products amongst the sports enthusiasts and sportspersons.</p> <p>Another critical aspect is the clarification on escape clause. When Indian newspapers reported about Hansie Cronje's involvement in match fixing, adidas authorities in South Africa immediately suspended their contract with Hansie. Subsequently the contract was cancelled after his involvement was established. Longevity of association is very crucial for brand ambassadors to get acquainted with the intricacies of the brand and more importantly for the brands to derive value out of it. The minimum duration of association should be five years.</p> <p>A general consensus inside the company about using a particular celebrity accompanied by a well thought out and clear-cut strategy on how to use the celebrity is imperative since a large amount of money spent in signing these ambassadors.</p>
<i>Brand ambassadors can contribute to the development of specialist products...</i>	<p>A high level of involvement between the ambassador and the brand is necessary. The value of the relationship is in using these ambassadors for product development and gain from their feedback. A classic example is that of Jesse Owens and Adi Dassler. In 1936, Jesse Owens specially sought out Adi Dassler, who personally made running shoes with spikes for Jesse, which led him to create history by winning four gold medals at the Olympic Games in Berlin. The trust and understanding created between them continued for a lifetime.</p>

For adidas the key aspect is that Sachin Tendulkar is comfortable in adidas shoes while playing and does not just wear them because he is paid for it. Sachin was taken to adidas headquarters in Germany where technicians spent several days with him to understand the use of the foot, pressure points, etc. and that led to the development of one of the best cricket shoes ever built by adidas.

Communication plays a key role in leveraging brand champions among its target audience. Apart from external communications, international communication often becomes relevant in the context where decision-makers of the company are residing abroad and have a remote understanding of the local market. Other internal communication is directed at all the internal audience like staff, JV partners, dealers & distributors, by using the brand ambassador at annual day and marketing forums where the internal audience gets to interact with him.

Public Relations is an opportunity that allows for interaction and projecting transparency in relationship. Often certain articles about the lesser-known aspects of the celebrity's personality considerably enhance the ambassador's image, lending favourably to the brand being endorsed. An impact can also be created by using the ambassador on consumer open house forums, dealer conferences, contact programmes in schools and colleges. While using a celebrity for endorsing a brand, the element of exclusivity has to be kept in mind. The brand ambassador cannot be seen anywhere and everywhere. His/her presence has to be unique and carefully orchestrated.

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

*Is it advisable for a brand ambassador to stick with one category and is it better to go with endorsements vis-à-vis a brand ambassador?*

S. Ganesh added that establishing company policy guidelines is crucial and cited the example of a request directed to adidas to sponsor Hrithik Roshan's apparel in a movie where he is role playing a struggling sportsman. Despite tremendous mass mileage opportunity that this would have earned adidas, the request was turned down because of a firmly ingrained company policy of not associating with non-sports personalities.

*What measures are being adopted to measure the effectiveness of*

S. Ganesh replied that for adidas to be seen as a serious sports brand in India, a brand ambassador like Sachin Tendulkar and Leander Paes helps establish the desired positioning. The impact of the sponsorship of Sachin can be measured with respect to the increase in Adidas's turnover by

*brand ambassadors, are they worth it?*

265%. Though that cannot be the only factor to which this increase may be attributed

*Why is a brand ambassador equated with a celebrity why not a common user like Lalitaji of Surf*

S. Ganesh added that it helps for certain brands to be seen to have issues that are common to ordinary people.

*If a brand ambassador is considered the custodian of values that the brand stands for, what happens when the brand ambassador falls by the wayside. How can brand reputation be salvaged?*

Checking the background of *would be ambassadors* is a way to prevent such crisis. A pre-hiring application format should be devised and some research needs to be undertaken on the characteristics of the chosen personality. Nevertheless, damage control has to form a necessary part of hiring celebrities. PR needs to consider all possible risks that the organisation may be faced with.

*(Excerpted from the presentation made by S Ganesh, Manager Sports Marketing & PR, Adidas India Trading Pvt Ltd., at PR Pundit's workshop, held in New Delhi on November 2, 2000)*