

SUHEL SETH'S VIEWS ON LEVERAGING BRAND AMBASSADORS

Do brand ambassadors work?

I believe that brands only have benefits and irrespective of the brand ambassador's celebrity status, the attributes of that brand must match those of the ambassador. It is not enough to have Sachin Tendulkar as a brand ambassador for adidas, or Shah Rukh Khan supporting the Santro. What is important to understand is whether the benefits of Santro and the benefits of Shah Rukh Khan are synergistic, do they merge, will they force a consumer to buy? Creating awareness is one thing, but creating awareness to purchase is quite another aspect.

Brand ambassadors need to be used sparingly. In a research conducted in 1998 by ORG MARG, when asked to recall which tyre company Sachin Tendulkar endorsed, 92% polled J.K. Tyres, whereas he endorsed MRF!

Is it worth having brand ambassadors?

The question that inevitably arises after in these deliberations is, *the efficacy of the spend vis-à-vis benefit?* Another key consideration is what happens when the celebrity falls by the wayside – aptly demonstrated by the current cricket fiasco.

Brands are built through benefits...

"The route of brand ambassadors is adopted by those who want the easy option." Brands are not built through ambassadors, they are built through benefits. Brand categories must have ambassadors pertinent to them. If Mother Teresa were to appear in an advertisement urging people to donate some amount of their monthly salary to charity, it is credible, but if Sachin Tendulkar (perched on top of a Mercedes) says the same thing, there is reason to doubt.

Brands that belong to the aspirational life-style product category do better with brand ambassadors than other product categories. Many marketing people use brand ambassadors to perk their brand instantly. Substantial effort is spent in celebrity endorsement rather than effective spending of money in below-the-line activities.

Effective PR management involves credible endorser...

Effective image management is not only management of interface between marketer and consumer but also effective interface between two sets of consumers. To manage PR effectively, it is imperative to check the credibility factor of an endorsement. A Shah Rukh Khan driving a Santro is not credible and rightly so, because to the consumer, a Mercedes or a BMW would be a more likely choice for him. We in India often use celebrities in advertisements which do not result in the desired end result". Some of the finest examples of using a celebrity are the international campaigns for Rolex and Ballerina.

Decision on celebrity endorsements through risk assessment....

Before deciding on celebrity endorsements, it is advisable to go through a risk-assessment. Consumers go through three kinds of risks.

- a) Social – If I buy this, what will others think about me?
- b) Performance – If this fails, how miserable will I be?
- c) Self-Image – If I buy this, how high will I be on self-esteem?

This can be exemplified with two diversified products:

Ship (Match-box brand)

- ❖ The social aspect comes from whether the matchbox is of Ship or belongs to an international label.
- ❖ The performance risk is negligible - if one matchstick from the matchbox doesn't light, it doesn't really matter.
- ❖ It also doesn't matter to an individual's self image whether he is using a lighter or matchbox

Mercedes

- ❖ There is no social risk involved.
- ❖ The performance risk is high because an individual will feel miserable if a Mercedes breaks down
- ❖ The self image risk is negligible because using a Mercedes is an indicator of the fact that 'one has arrived in life'.

Celebrities and media mileage...

The term 'brand ambassador' is flawed. Brand pneumatic is a better term. Those individuals who were hitherto non-entities like Lalitaji of Surf but acquire celebrity status due to advertising are no less brand ambassadors. Across the world celebrity endorsement has witnessed a drop.

Brand ambassadors as advertising icons...

It is incorrect to appoint an ambassador on popularity index alone. They need to be appointed on a relevant and longevity index. For example, Nike looks for potential endorsers at the college league level. However, instead of measuring whether the celebrity has the potential to become the endorser, most of the companies see the celebrity reflecting the brand values right from the start.

The role of a brand ambassador can be leveraged in many other ways than the obvious. Unfortunately, brand ambassadors in our country are largely seen as advertising icons. They should instead stand for the intrinsic value of the brand. Unless that happens, there will be dilution. For example, if Sachin is wearing a Wills logo, Wills should also ensure that he speaks at their tobacco convention. Likewise, when a celebrity is used for inaugurating a chemist shop or a health centre it is not an endorsement, but a means to gain limited media mileage.

Relevance of

Brand Kernel is a term used to signify the essence of a brand.

*brand
ambassadors...*

Unless the brand ambassador represents this kernel, it will ultimately lead to confusion in the minds of consumers. Thus, before deciding on a brand ambassador, companies should have answers to questions such as:

- ❖ Does the brand really need an ambassador?
- ❖ Is he/she worth it?
- ❖ How to get him/her more involved by relating with every aspect of the brand?

Unless there are answers to all these, brand ambassadors will just be an excuse for lazy marketers.

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?*

Suhel Seth stated that this was a fundamental flaw in brand ambassadorship because the same individual endorsing different brands leads to consumer confusion, brand dilution and to questions like how do I identify him or why do they do it? Thus, brand custodianship is vital.

*What measures
are being
adopted to
measure the
effectiveness of
brand
ambassadors,
are they worth
it?*

Commenting from a marketing perspective, Suhel Seth said that brand ambassadorship often works because of the tremendous media and advertising support that the company puts behind the person.

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

Suhel Seth responded by saying that Lalitaji was a hit because she spoke our language on screen.

*If a brand
ambassador is
considered the
custodian of
values that the
brand stands
for, what
happens when
the brand
ambassador*

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.

*falls by the
wayside. How
can brand
reputation be
salvaged?*

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Suhel Seth, CEO, Equus Advertising, at PR Pundit's workshop, held in New Delhi on November 2, 2000)