

Marketing Week - trends

Reference celebrity

By Charles Vallance, Founding Partner of VCCP

There used to be a time, not so long ago, when young boys doffed their caps as their headmaster passed by; when the bank manager was held in such high regard that it was inconceivable to question his authority; and when politicians were revered as the custodians of a civilised society.

In short, we all used to defer to a higher authority, one composed of our leaders, in both class and wealth. Our elders, too, were seen as a source of knowledge; to be listened to and followed. In the age of deference everything so was much simpler – a small band of professionals and ‘betters’ were lionised as the spokespeople for a generation, their views espoused and sanctified as gospel.

However, the consumer no longer feels the need to reference its behaviour against a small band of individuals and has slowly changed the shape of the ‘authoritative’ pyramid it so longingly coveted. There is an ever increasing chasm of trust between the historical mandarins and today’s consumer. Today the trust in the aforementioned has wavered considerably and in many cases vanished altogether.

It seems we are now influenced by a series and continuous stream of persuasive reference sources, rather than one single branded message. Sources of influence might include other customers, employees, intermediaries, friends and family, third part endorsement, experts, TV personalities, the media, brand experience, but most worryingly celebrities.

For instance, the opinions of Fern and Philip are more likely to carry weight and influence as to the efficacy of a new drug than a leading physician or politician. Colleen is now the face of a super market chain, having replaced her boyfriend Wayne, and many newspapers are devoid of news, replacing it with a constant flow of celebrity chitchat. It is not that trust has dissolved but just the sectors and individuals of society that we place most trust in have.

Hence the rise in the number of celebrities - the new bastions of society and de facto doyennes of taste - who are seen as a replacement for the more mundane former pillars of life. How far celebrities represent a good investment for marketers and the brands that they represent is up for debate.

Recent research, for example, seems to err on the side of using celebrities cautiously and that the consumer is less susceptible and more sceptical about the supposed link between product and superstardom. So why is there still such a rush for product endorsement by so many brands?

The simple answer is that brand marketers believe that some of the infamy of the celebrity along with their unquantifiable brand values will somehow rub off on their product. Healthy foods choose sporting legends as allies; fast cars use formula one drivers; cosmetic companies use beautiful actresses; and financial services use presenters

with a cerebral bent. All very obvious. Unfortunately the celebrity, all too often, becomes centric to the ad, leaving the product as a bystander. Agencies and clients must remember to put the idea first and the celebrity second, if at all.

In addition and widely reported is the obvious damage a celebrity can do to a brand. The latter's poor behaviour, or ability to be mired in sexual allegations, a drink driving scandal or some act of wife beating does more to damage a product than the use of the celebrity in the first place ever did to enhance it. Combine this with the fact that many viewers quickly forget what product a celebrity is promoting or are often more mesmerized by the sight of them that they never make the link in the first place.

There is simply never a perfect match between product and person. Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction at the Super Bowl not only hurt her reputation but damaged that of the sponsors so that many, including AOL, requested way over half their fees back. There just wasn't synergy between nudity and an internet provider. Compare this though with Virgin's brilliant campaign using the alleged drug snorting Kate Moss. The brands values are all about bucking the establishment and Ms Moss' inclusion is sure to bolster this image.

But where is the correlation between so many products and the celebrities that endorse them. Whilst I am sure David Beckham shaves and thus promoting a razor seems credible, the link between Tiger Woods and a financial consulting firm has never been proven, except, as one enlightened commentator said 'perhaps he and the CEO play golf together'.

Jamie Oliver's link with Sainsbury's was reported to be on the rocks until he became a beacon of hope for the reduction in child obesity and the ever popular Gary Linkear's relationship with Walker's crisps has been unaffected by the tabloids expose of his unfortunate divorce,. Both, however, have remarkably secure and enviably large credits of faith with the public.

Whilst there are distinct and real changes in the way we gather information these days, who we listen to and what influences our behaviour it should not be forgotten that celebrity is short lived, very fallible and all too often the link with the promoted product very tenuous.

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