Celebrity Endorsements

By Dr. Jaime S. Ong

Celebrity endorsements are a ubiquitous feature of advertising today. Examples abound: Pierce Brosnan for Omega; Sharon Cuneta for Superferry; Tiger Woods for Tag Heuer; Edu Manzano for Lucky Me; Alicia Silverstone for Kamiseta; Britney Spears for Skechers; Bata Reyes for San Miguel Beer. One estimate is that up to 20% of all commercials use some form of celebrity endorsement.

Consequently, one intriguing sidelight of the media coverage of Kobe Bryant’s indictment last month for sexual assault is the speculation that he stands to lose millions of dollars in endorsement fees.

Bryant is reported to have signed a deal with athletic footwear and apparel giant Nike worth $45 million over the next five years. Other corporate sponsors that pay megabucks to attach his face and name to their products include Coca Cola, McDonald’s and Spalding.

It is Nike, more than any other company, that has anchored its marketing strategy on incorporating technological innovation into its footwear, and then identifying it with the world’s stellar athletes. Nike means more than shoes. It trumpets passion, performance, and attitude---“Just Do It!”

Will Nike drop Kobe from its celebrity stable? The company’s spokesman has thus far declined to comment on the possibility, but there’s little doubt Nike can if it wishes to. An endorser’s contract generally contains a clause that lets a sponsor back off if the model is indicted for a crime involving moral turpitude.

Sponsors are truly skittish about using celebrities who turn controversial. In the mid-90’s, Pepsi Cola and Asia Brewery dropped Michael Jackson and Robin Padilla, respectively, after the latter figured in bizarre behavior or brushes with the law.

Then again, no one seems to mind that actress Elizabeth Taylor promotes her own line of perfume, despite her history of stormy marriages and multiple liaisons. For his part, Bryant admits to consensual sex but not to rape. Does his indictment or confession mean the end of his endorsements?

Here is what the textbooks have to say on the subject of endorsements:

1. Celebrity endorsers are widely used because people identify with emulate them. Consumers associate the celebrities’ known characteristics with product attributes that coincide with the consumers’ own needs (Hawkins, Best and Coney, Consumer Behavior: Building Marketing Strategy, McGraw Hill, 1998).
2. An endorsement works best when the product is readily identified with the celebrity promoting it. TV sitcomedian Bill Cosby, a family role model, was effective for Jell-O but not for a financial brokerage service (Assael, *Consumer Behavior and Marketing Action*, Southwestern College, 1998).

3. An endorser’s credibility derives from two characteristics: a) expertise (how much he knows about the product) and b) trustworthiness (how honest he is about what he says). (Schiffman and Kanuk, *Consumer Behavior*, Prentice Hall, 1994). Hence the more products a celebrity endorses, the less trustworthy he/she becomes because the obvious economic motivation starts to offset the genuineness of the testimonials.

4. A celebrity carries within himself a cultural meaning that is “passed on” to the product being endorsed. Schiffman and Kanuk cite a study comparing supermodel Christie Brinkley and singer Madonna as endorsers of bath towels. Towels featured with Brinkley were judged to be more attractive, softer, more feminine; Madonna’s towels were seen as less pleasant and of lower class.

This study’s implications are what spell trouble for Kobe Bryant’s relationship with Nike. The product match remains suitable. Bryant’s sportsgear expertise is undiminished. But his trustworthiness has been impaired, because up till last month, his public image was one of “clean and keen,” the thoroughly wholesome kid who graduated from good grades in high school to pro stardom without scandal. That image has changed forever.

He is legally innocent until proven guilty, but even if he beats the rap, his public confession of marital infidelity leaves him less than squeaky clean. Worse, he no longer has that prized modern-day virtue known as WYSIWYG (what-you-see-is-what-you-get). And that diminishes his endorsement value, to the target market and to Nike.

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