

COMBINING LITERARY AND MARKETING THEORY: AUTHORS AS PRODUCT ENDORSERS¹

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ABSTRACT

Many posit that the celebrity can aid with influencing purchase if he or she is a credible source and is relevant to the advertised product. However, many advertisers are questioning the value of using these celebrities. Not only do many spokespersons become lost in the "clutter" of celebrity use, but these expensive people have the potential to embarrass the company. Most studies evaluate the effectiveness of entertainers and athletes as endorsers. No discussion takes place regarding the effectiveness of using literary figures as endorsers even though we are aware of the fact that they are extremely important celebrities in our popular culture. This paper discusses the rationale for using authors in modern advertising, incorporating theory from the field of literature. One author, Ernest Hemingway, is used as an example. Not only does this avenue of investigation have enormous interdisciplinary research potential, but classroom applications exist as well.

REVIEW OF PAST RESEARCH

A variety of scholars and marketing practitioners are concerned about the effectiveness of using celebrities as product endorsers. In all previous studies, the types of celebrities have been either athletes, entertainers, or executives of the companies they are trying to promote. In an extensive review of literature, not one study has been found which investigates the use of celebrity authors to promote products, even though it is well accepted that both present-day and deceased authors have celebrity advertising potential and are used in modern day advertising. However, no systematic theory exists surrounding their use. If an understanding of the use of literary figures in advertising is to be accomplished, we must embark on a truly interdisciplinary endeavor—investigating not only relevant advertising literature, but authors' writing, biographies, and works pertaining to literary criticism as well. The result could be joint efforts with colleagues across campus in both research projects and discussions in the classroom.

Celebrities as Product Endorsers

A recent recommendation from the Wall Street Journal [1990, p. B1] was "lay off celebrity commercials." Kestnbaum [1991] recently suggested that Coke and Pepsi should release their CPM (cost per thousand) figures of consumers correctly identifying celebrity spokespersons with their brand. He predicts that the costs would be astronomical. A serious question is just how effective are these celebrities. Any research endeavor which attempts to answer this question and to suggest alternatives to the traditional athlete/entertainer celebrity or company executive endorser could be valuable.

Use of cartoon characters is popular around the world. In France, over 2,000 companies have used the comic book hero Asterix to promote a variety of products [Arbore 1981]. The popularity of cartoon and comic book characters appears to be a reaction to human celebrities embarrassing their employers. Recently, Bruce Willis was seeking help for an alcohol problem as he was a spokesman for Seagram's Wine Coolers and Cybill Shepherd admitted that she rarely eats meat while appearing in ads for the National Beef Council. In contrast, cartoon characters can be controlled by the advertiser. Furthermore, any well-known character who is not alive can be more easily controlled than can real people. Famous literary figures who are no longer alive would fall into this category of celebrity endorsers as well. McCracken [1989] suggests that future researchers should address the issue of what happens to celebrities and their effectiveness as endorsers after they are disgraced.

Perhaps the concern in the academic literature investigated most often is the "match-up" hypothesis [Kamins 1990] which states that celebrities will only be effective if some intrinsic relationship exists between product characteristics and the celebrity image. Recent findings [Kahle and Homer 1985] [Kamins 1990] indicate that a match-up with the product influences whether a physically attractive actor influences various dependent measures of effectiveness, such as spokesperson believability and

¹This is an abbreviated version of the manuscript. For the complete paper, please contact the author.

credibility, advertiser believability and credibility, ad recall, attitudes toward the ad, and purchase intention.

Recently, Ohanian [1990 and 1991] summarized the relevant literature and concludes that three components of source credibility exist: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. The three dimensions can either make combined or independent determinations as to how effective a spokesperson is. She found that celebrities were perceived as significantly different in terms of the three dimensions, but no differences exist due to a consumer's gender or age. Physical attractiveness and trust-worthiness of a celebrity do not relate significantly to the intent to purchase a product but a celebrity's perceived expertise with the product was significant. She concludes, "For celebrity spokespersons to be truly effective, they should be knowledgeable, experienced, and qualified to talk about the product" [Ohanian 1991, p. 52].

Interdisciplinary Theory Which Examines the Effectiveness of Celebrity Endorsers

The Literature field and certain areas within Business are being joined together in many ways. Clemens and Mayer [1987] use excerpts from literary classics to teach leadership skills in management. More and more, marketers are turning to past research in the fields of literary criticism and semiotics in order to understand marketing phenomena. Mick [1986] emphasizes the importance of investigating the meanings of signs and symbols as embedded in their cultural environment as a way of understanding consumer behavior. Bertrand [1988] applies the concept of "narrative schema" to the analysis of specific advertising campaigns. This theory holds that the organization of the discourse of any text will utilize only a small fragment of an overall schema, but meaning will be produced only by integrating it with an overall "ensemble" in the consumer's mind. Stern [1989] proposes literary criticism as a way of "knowing the consumer, and a way of shedding light on little explored areas of interest." It can "provide a point of entry into advertising words, sounds, and shapes as a mirror of consumer values and behavior" (p. 332). Speck, Schumann, and Thompson [1988] were the first to apply the concept of "schema" to the investigation of the effectiveness of celebrity endorsers. As McCracken [1989] mentions, the field of social psychology has been used to explain the source credibility and source attractiveness models.

Booth's [1963] classic description of the different roles narrators have in fiction can aid us in understanding the role that endorsers play in modern day advertising. He is one of the first to point out how narrators can manipulate readers. Davis [1987, p. 193] describes the development of narratology during the last twenty years. He claims that the field has been regarded as a "linguistic or semiological structure with a grammar to be analyzed" and that narratives have been treated independently from the medium in which they occur. Thus, many scholars argue not only that literature deserves narrative analysis, but other writing such as journalism does as well. The writing of advertising copy could also fall into this analysis.

There are varying degrees of involvement, sympathy, and identification that we have for the narrator, and these variables may overlap. For example, Booth states that "the deeper our plunge, the more unreliability we will accept without loss of sympathy" [Booth 1963, p. 164]. In an advertising context, this may suggest that if the product is a "high involvement" (i.e., the product is expensive, the purchase can have serious social consequences, or it could reflect on one's social image [Berkowitz, Kerin, and Rudelius 1989] one, then maybe the celebrity does not have to be a reliable source in order for us to feel an intimate relationship with that celebrity. Maybe this last assertion does not seem intuitive, but its reverse (if the product is low-involvement, the celebrity must be a reliable source in order to be effective) is not true either. Ohanian [1991] found that celebrity spokespersons showed similar impact on consumers for both high and low-involvement products.

RATIONALE FOR THE USE OF LITERARY FIGURES AS CELEBRITY ENDORSERS

Exxon once ran an ad which showed a likeness of Mark Twain running away from home as a boy. Interestingly, Exxon was relying on the likeness to attract attention, because Twain's name was never mentioned. General Electric presented a "folksy" anniversary gala for itself in a commercial. The only real-life characters shown were Will Rogers and Mark Twain [Budd 1983]. Both Twain and Hemingway have had movies made about their lives and both have been the main characters of fiction novels. As with some other authors of the past two centuries, Hemingway was a "culture hero to millions of his countrymen, not all of them intellectuals or even readers of books" [Raeburn 1984, p. 1]. When the author died, his death was considered "the most difficult death in America since Roosevelt" [Raeburn 1984, p. 167].

In short, advertisers have been using references to many literary figures to promote products for over a century. After all, who would be the best example of the "intrusive narrator" than someone who really is a narrator—an author? However, studies measuring the effectiveness of celebrity endorsers have been limited to measuring the impact of mostly entertainers and athletes, not authors. And, as a result, these celebrity-focused studies also have not benefitted from theoretical models drawn from the literature field (e.g., narratology). Just as marketers have more control over Snoopy, Garfield, and Bugs Bunny than they have over real celebrities with the potential for embarrassing their employers, their control likewise can be ensured through reliance on famous authors from the past. While these figures cannot be current users of the product, they can serve advertising roles entertainers and athletes do not. As with entertainers and athletes, the author's name or picture can be attached to the product promotion. Additionally, titles of their works and famous characters created by them can be used as marketing references. Also, the author's words themselves can be used to draw attention to the particular product. Sometimes these quotes are identified as the author's, but they not always are. In the recent series of commercials by Calvin Klein for Obsession Men's Cologne, quotes from famous authors about romance were read after the author's name was briefly put on the screen. Sometimes, the advertisers may not know that a phrase is attributed to a particular author. For example, within the past year an automobile manufacturer used the words, "Grace under Pressure" as the slogan in its television commercials. Even if the general public may not know that the phrase is particularly associated with Hemingway, Hemingway followers would recognize the connection. In this case, the unintentional link to Hemingway could still have some of the advantages of "celebrity advertising," even if for a minority of the population.

The next step for marketers interested in ascertaining if authors can make effective product spokespersons is to use the Ohanian [1990] or similar valid measure to determine an endorser's credibility. This is where our colleagues from Liberal Arts could prove to be valuable. Professors of Literature should know better than anyone else what perceptions of authors and their works the general population maintains. They could provide access to groups of experts who study the authors (e.g. The Hemingway Society, The Fitzgerald Society).

CONCLUSION

Many advertising experts are questioning the value of the continued use of celebrities to promote their products, and more research concerning celebrities' effectiveness is necessary. However, researchers have ignored an entire category of celebrity endorser even though advertisers have used this type of famous person to promote products—the literary figure. A variety of theoretical explanations exist concerning how authors might be appropriate product promoters and it is time that they be included along with athletes, entertainers, and well known company executives in future research.

Ernest Hemingway was considered as a potential advertising celebrity and a preliminary analysis of his perceived success as an endorser was discussed in the complete paper. It was proposed that most of his effectiveness (credibility) might lie with his perceived expertise of certain types of products during his lifetime. Using one of the validated measures available to determine celebrity effectiveness is the next step to determine how important any author might be in this field of promotion. Marketers will certainly benefit from the knowledge leading to a possible expansion of advertising opportunities, and those associated with authors and their estates will have clearer indications of some of the benefits of licensing the author's name and works for marketing purposes. Those involved with the teaching and research of literature could benefit from future empirical studies concerned with the application of the Source-Credibility Scale. These studies could help to indicate whether a writer's popular reputation is a function of his or her literary works, public personality, use as a product endorser, or a combination of all three variables.

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