

Celebrities and branding

 By [Percy Shangase](#)

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For a qualified period of time, brands have strived to tell their own stories, establish themselves in the market, create a unique identity and engage their target markets on both functional and emotional levels. I would be the first one to agree that brands have evolved, as well as consumer behaviour. This is to sync the brands with the changing psychographic profile, stages in life, preferences/tastes and a complete lifestyle adjustment.



Source: www.unsplash.com

The advent of the rise in digital media landscape, the uptake from both marketing and branding perspective – is yet a clear demonstration of the brands' willingness to remain focused, fresh, top of mind and most of all - relevant. Eventing and promotions have had to take a different approach to embrace the unavoidable metamorphic changes in the marketing landscape.

The creative landscape has been hard at work trying to help brands gain more leverage, build credibility, induce trial, build strong affinity and resonate with the market in the ever increasing world of branding and marketing noise. One thing for sure is, the louder the noise becomes, the more difficult it is for brands to differentiate themselves from the evident sea of sameness.

Using celebrities in branding

This brings me to the topic at hand - the use of celebrities in endorsing brands in the hope of increasing brand awareness, induce trial and build long-term affinity. One thing that has struck my marketing & branding mindset is that some of the brands that affect the 'endorsement' of a celebrity have been in the market longer than the celebrities themselves.

Is it perhaps a case of reinventing themselves as being 'young and vibrant' – have they not done enough to entrench themselves in the consumer headspace?

On the contrary, the Harvard Business School' research indicated that celebrity endorsement has a potential of increasing sales by up to 4% and 0.25% increase in stock value. Celebrities by the nature of their craft, fame, popularity, personality and social standing have the power to become strong brand spokespersons and certify their claims. The endorsement by celebrities has the potential to build credibility and expose the brand to new markets. However, in reality, exposure does not equate to conversion.



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Within the South African context, the marketing landscape is littered with brands that have used celebrities to endorse their product claims. These brands include but are not limited to:

- Outsurance; using Katlego
- Status deodorant; using Doctor Khumalo
- Kiwi shoe polish; using Lucas Radebe and later Itumeleng Khune
- Cruz Vodka; using AKA
- Samsung; using Bonang Matheba
- Sanlam; using Jose Mourinho

The point I am putting up for debate is whether brands that have been in the market for a long time, that have created presence, credibility, have worked 100 times harder, created their own narratives and core values – is this cost/benefit ratio justifiable or at the very least sustainable? Can brands self-correct when celebrities falter?

The sad reality is that the euphoria of celebrity endorsement has the adverse effect of obliterating the long standing brand equity when celebrities are found wanting.

Celebrity endorsement is nothing more than a short-term exploitation of popular culture with the hope of building and/or enhancing brand image in the short run. This then raises the morality issue which would be hard to ignore. Celebrities' fame does not mean they are infallible, without fault, do not say controversial things in public or fall short of proper value judgement.



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A case in point, Katlego from Outsurance was caught in a moral dilemma – this then forced the brand to completely disassociate him from the brand and yet include another well famed lady. AKA recently launched a signature banana

variant with Cruz Vodka - and his personal and moral value judgment have put him in the spotlight for the absolute wrong reasons.

In conclusion, the immorality issue is brought to the fore as celebrities get paid inflated amounts of money and off-late with added long term benefits for products that they do not even use. Is seeing a celebrity in a tv commercial compelling enough to invoke a call to action? Perhaps, it is time we let our brands continue telling their own stories which is more believable than putting a face that can only do harm in the long term.

ABOUT PERCY SHANGASE

Percy Shangase is the 1st Black person to win the Prestigious Alan Paton Literary Award. He runs a Marketing and Research Consultancy, despite living with a disability - below knee amputation, however he drives and flies wherever is necessary. He has an insatiable appetite and passion for Marketing meshed with Research and has elaborate experience spanning over 20 years. However, he fails to fathom why Marketing/Research spend are always the 1st to get chopped when market conditions are not conducive.

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