

# The enigma of the eternal appeal

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By and Celebrity appeal is nothing new to India. With the digital platform getting diffused and the proliferation of app usage (for instance Tinder in its first year of launch was used among its users to rate themselves 13 billion times, as reported By Bloomberg Businessweek, Sept 5,2013) brands will initiate celebrity appeals with unique apps, while they may have to also deal with the trolls associated with the celebrity chosen.

Amitabh Bachchan became the first celebrity to use non fungible token (NFT) comprising of his film posters.

Is there any commonality (as observed from the lens of consumer behavior) between the James Bond character in the latest film “No Time to Die” and Elon Musk?

Both are celebrities in their respective domain, one from the entertainment domain and the other an entrepreneur who is well into rewriting the history of transportation on earth and space! And both inspire millions of consumers/start up founders. The point to be noted is that one may be inspired towards a role model who may not be a part of the world of brands. A person from a small town looking to make it big can be inspired by the likes of a Dhoni, who come from humble beginnings but made it big in the international arena. Brands partner with them to draw from the aspiration, on to their own equity.

## **The Indian cultural context**

Essentially, celebrity appeal is to do with aspiration and with social media getting rapidly diffused, the influencer power of celebrities is perhaps on an all time high. This is evident from the number of new brands picking up celebrities who may not be as popular as the established ones (cosmetic and apparel brands are examples of product categories that are reflective of the trend). The interesting aspect of the Indian context is the diversity of brands that have used celebrity advertising over the last several decades. Almost every advertised category from colas to hosiery to mobile phones continues to follow this trend.

Some brands have managed the celebrity transition innovatively. Lux brand of soap by using the reigning celebrity from films (since 1941 Leela Chitnis as reported by Mint, Aug 21,2017) had managed the intergenerational connect with the brand, making it difficult for a competitor's brand to follow the same strategy It is also interesting to note that the character of James Bond evokes a fanatic following across the globe, regardless of the actor who had been playing the role over sixty years, in a fantasy ridden, make believe world. Omega, Rolex and Seiko premium watches have used the James Bond character with the reigning actor portraying the character, over the last sixty years!

## **“Logic” associated with celebrity appeal**

Over time consumers have become more aware, more conscious of ads and in general much smarter, when it comes to buying brands. It is only natural to think, by any logic, consumers may not be taken in by the paid celebrity appeals associated with brands, as they are fully conscious of the fact that the edible oil or the watch or the bank endorsed by the celebrity is based on the brand's deal with the celebrity. In the examples of Omega -James Bond association, consumers know that that the high- tech gadgets used by James Bond along with the watch may not be used by most consumers under such "hero" challenging conditions that are portrayed in the film. And it is also uncommon to find a luxury watch being associated with a character liked by the mass market audience, besides the appeal cutting across most psychographic segments.

But the mind for what it is, we believe with conviction that we would like to follow our attitudes, beliefs and values rather than plain logic. We read almost every day about a celebrity being onboarded by a brand. There are three reasons why we are taken in by celebrities – the first being trustworthiness. For instance, when Sachin said "Boost is the success of my energy ", he embodied the proposition of the brand, and consumers were able to link Sachin's claim with his competence to speak about the energy.

Likeability and credibility are the other two factors. Likeability, or appeal of the celebrity, is a catalyst to the consumer building an emotional association with the brand. Credibility is more associated with the belief of consumers with respect to the source credibility of the celebrity, and may not rest on the competence of the celebrity. For instance, Amitabh over the years, has appeared in several diverse categories from chocolates to incense sticks (agarbathis) to banks.

### **Complexities of using celebrities**

While the theoretical explanations still hold good, especially taking into consideration the sub conscious effects of consumer behavior, there are certain practical considerations to be considered when a brand manages a celebrity.

- 1) What should a brand do if its celebrity is trolled? (may force a brand to change, or drop the celebrity)
- 2) Does the brand choose a celebrity for the fear of missing out (FOMO) in the competitive clutter?
- 3) Does the brand have a long term sustainable strategy, when using a celebrity (Lux).
- 4) Does a brand use a celebrity as a known face to provide just product related information in a low interest category? (Kent)
- 5) Does a brand use a celebrity for persuasion or entertainment or both?
- 6) Does a well- known brand with a historical past choose a celebrity that is appropriate to its past associations or is it just to connect with a younger population?
- 7) Does a brand choose a celebrity for damage control associated with a product?

8) Does a brand choose an appropriate celebrity after establishing itself on the functional platform (Asian Paints)?

With the Indian film industry (Bollywood, Kollywood etc.) producing more films than all other countries combined, and cricket being a religion by itself, there is no dearth of celebrities. Celebrity's usage in this digital age, may have to be reassessed by brands to get the maximum mileage out of them.

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