



BY KEVIN O'DONNELL

MAKE THE ENDORSER STRATEGY WORK

I'M AS FOND of Mrs. Butterworth and her syrup as the next person. Splashed on pancakes or waffles? Delicious. As a special sauce to make my insurance bills a bit more palatable? Maybe not so much.

Welcome to the world of celebrity endorsers and spokesfolks in an era when marketers are seeking any way to gain an edge, solidify points of differentiation and maybe, when it works, build a brand and a business at the same time.

Mrs. Butterworth is one of the, er, celebrities joining Average Joes and Jills to promote GEICO insurance, along with Michael Winslow ("the guy that does funny sound effects"), comedian Joan Rivers and, of course, the GEICO gecko that is becoming as ubiquitous as the other guys' duck.

The GEICO campaign serves to illustrate how the concept has stretched, the only limits seeming to be marketers' imaginations. Suffice it to say that marketers are an endlessly imaginative group. But there comes a point when art and science must meet. For all these gambits that have worked marvelously well for brands and businesses there are others where the "science"—or a strategy grounded in a thorough, research-based understanding of your market—seems to have gotten left behind.

Think about it. Does Joan Rivers' in-your-face angst over her face advance anyone's positive perceptions of the GEICO brand and why—other than an unusual commercial use of endorsers—it's any different than any other insurance company?

Put simply, your choice of endorser has to be strategically aligned with your business and marketing objectives. And the endorser strategy can't be expected to, on its own, make a sustainable difference in invigorating or reinvigorating a brand. Things like customer service and product quality are, in the end, among the ultimate deal-breakers.

It's hard to argue with the kind of lift that the right personality paired with the right brand (and product) can give you, in both enhancing, by association, brand perceptions and by making the cash registers ring. Soccer great David Beckham, a finely tuned athlete with a posh lifestyle, epitomizes sex appeal. So his choice as an endorser for Giorgio Armani briefs was inspired, which was proven out when sales reportedly jumped 30% worldwide when he nearly bared all for the ad campaign.

Some classic models should guide the celebrity endorser strategy.

Start, of course, with the Michael Jordan/Nike pairing, which set the standard. You can argue that Nike's long-term success has been as rooted in that partnership decision as it was to run with that first shoe designed with the distinctive waffle sole. Take a classy, incredibly talented athlete who's a positive role model worldwide and blend the power of his personal brand with art, sport, fashion and glamour; that's how you build a brand and a business.

American Express has taken a different tack with its "My Life" campaign. Here, a series of celebrities noted for their iconoclasm—M. Night Shyamalan, Ellen DeGeneres, Robert DeNiro—tout a credit card that fits their individual needs in a highly personalized way, and thus support the equities that the credit card wants to keep building in its brand. A special relationship. A connection. Not only does this "multiple endorser" approach capture the natural fit between these particular celebrities and brand styles and representations, but American Express gets the added bonus of a campaign with very long legs.

Wendy's might still be wishing today that it had adopted the multiple endorser strategy instead of the "CEO as the spokesman" approach, since it has never found the same magic sparked

by Dave Thomas in its subsequent ploys. The CEO approach is tried periodically—think Volkswagen and Sprint—but the trick is finding the same degree of authenticity, passion even, that Thomas brought to the table. His down-home delivery, rotund appearance that spoke to his fondness for his own food, and ownership (in every sense of the word) of the Wendy's brand made him as powerful for Wendy's as Ronald has been for McDonald's.

Unfortunately, live celebrities tend to fade from view, die or make lifestyle decisions that remove the luster from their endorsements. It's the risk you run with the endorser strategy. While, on one hand, model Kate Moss is the perfect face for glamour and fashion brands, by publicly falling prey to the industry's darker side with substance abuse she was no longer the kind of representation companies like H&M wanted for their brands. And while Rosie O'Donnell's polarizing personality can have the benefits of creating added buzz around the brand, it depends on the brand. It was her stand against guns, not her outspokenness on other issues, which made her unpalatable to Kmart's shoppers and as an endorser.

It may be that the brands that have adopted characters as their endorsers have it right. Snoopy's never been caught by cameras doing illegal drugs. Tony the Tiger is just as grrrrrrreeeeeeaaaaat today as he was when he was conceived. But I'd still argue that Mrs. Butterworth does sweeter service with pancakes than with policies. **m**



Kevin O'Donnell is a senior partner of Prophet, a global brand and marketing consultancy with offices in Chicago, Hamburg, London, Madrid, New York, San Francisco, Tokyo and Zurich. He can be reached at kodonnell@prophet.com or news@ama.org.