

## ALTERNATE MODES OF CORPORATE BRAND ENDORSEMENT: NEED OF THE HOUR IN INDIAN CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT

India is emerging as an economic power. Several domestic and international Corporate came forward with innovative brands in the product and service segment during the last two decades. Competition is inevitable at this juncture. Eventually, business houses handed over the responsibility of ensuring their market headship to brand ambassadors. Now this model is not going in the right direction as many instances of facing setbacks either by the brands or by the celebrities is reported. This paper tries to narrate the emergence of celebrity brand ambassador concept in Indian corporate context. It also describes the recent down-turn of this model and explores the possible alternatives.

**KEYWORDS:** Brand, Celebrity Endorsement, Brand Ambassadors, Brand Mascots

### INTRODUCTION

A “brand” is the company's product or service, combined with a unique positioning and key company equities that fills a need for consumers. ( Ric Sweeney, President- American Marketing Association). Having a strong brand is vital to any company's success. Nowadays we cannot imagine a brand without the support of brand ambassadors. 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed many corporates wrapping deal with brand ambassadors even before finalizing the product. Affinity towards brand ambassadors is that much there in the Indian business world, no difference, whether it is an international, domestic or local player and/or whether it is in manufacturing or service sector. In due course, it became a habit of Indian customers to depend on the brand ambassadors to rely the brands.

### CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENT

Celebrities are people who enjoy public recognition. That may be on account of their extraordinary skills, values, character, attractiveness, popularity etc.

Using celebrities for promoting products is not a new concept. Several American and British film stars in the 1920s posed for advertisements of soaps and fragrances. 1940s showed many actors standing for cigarette companies. Bob Hope, an English born American comedian was linked with American Express, the famous financial service company, in the late 1950s. In the 1970s Joe Namath, American footballer and actor, extended hands to promote the products of Hanes, the clothing company.

India was also not far beyond celebrity endorsement. For instance, the very first launch of Lux soap, now a Unilever brand, in 1929 featured Leela Chitnis, the actress. Lux soap has been heavily advertised in India using top Bollywood actresses during yester years with Madhubala, Saira Bano, Meena Kumari, Helen, Mala Sinha, Sadhna, Babita,

Asha Parekh, Hema Malini, Rekha, Zeenat Aman, Rati Agnihotri, Vidya Sinha, Sridevi, Jaya Prada, Madhuri Dixit, Juhi Chawla, etc.

Brand endorsement is a process in which the firms use a current celebrity to push their product in the market; usually it will be through advertisements. These may be achieved by short term contracts with celebrities. Here the celebrities do not have much role other than that of a 'super' model.

## **BRAND AMBASSADORS**

Brand ambassador is a marketing jargon for celebrity endorser or spokes model, a person employed by an organization or company to promote its products or services. The brand ambassador is meant to embody the corporate identity in appearance, demeanor, values and ethics. The key element of brand ambassadors lies in their ability to use promotional strategies that will strengthen the customer-product/service relationship and influence a large audience to buy and consume more (Wikipedia). Brand ambassadors can be endorsed for products, services or for a mission. Brand ambassadors are being used by Corporates, Government Departments, NGOs etc.

A brand ambassador has more vital role when compared to brand endorsement. He/she is the integral part of the brand mix. He/she has to hold more roles other than appearing in TV or print media commercials. Brand ambassadors have to involve in press releases and have to actively participate in any sales promotion campaigns. Their contractual obligations are comparatively for a long time period.

## **THE INDIAN SCENARIO**

The concept of "brand" and "brand endorsement" were not new to Indian marketing setup as mentioned earlier. There are two scenarios which nurtured and developed these concepts in favor of "brand ambassadors" in Indian market.

### **Globalisation and Liberalisation in 1990s**

Post liberalized era has seen a number of products flowing into the market. Several domestic and international manufacturers set their manufacturing facilities and introduced newer and newer products. Similarly several service providers were come forward with innovative services which were once ruled by public sector. This led to a steady competition among a number of manufacturers / service providers who found it hard to get their products noticed amidst the pre-existing brands. It was assumed that integrating a celebrity to a brand would increase chances of it being sold, which made companies value the business ideal of a brand ambassador.

### **Growing Middle Class**

According to NCAER (National Council of Applied Economic Research), 20% of the Indian population is middle class. These are the people with great purchasing power and vast product preferences.

Growing middle class in the country and their consumption pattern has changed the market situation. Commodities such as cars and air-conditioners, which were in the past considered as luxury items, are now considered as necessities. There are shift in preferences for products also. For instance, in the case of apparels the trend of getting shirts stitched has been replaced by a rising demand for ready-made shirts. Such trends forced the corporate to gear their products and business models to cater to the demand of the middle class. This has opened environment in favor of brand ambassador model from the simple celebrity endorsements.

## A TWO WAY PROCESS

Credible brand ambassadors provide visibility to a brand, boost brand awareness and ultimately sales. Similarly a celebrity can gain a lot from being a brand ambassador. Associating with good brands will help a celebrity to expand their professional network. Also such relations help to influence their own audience/viewers/supporters. In Indian context, it is not only the money that matters for a celebrity while finalizing contractual obligation as brand ambassador.

Generally, we can describe three different models related to brand ambassadors. This is based on the strength of brand and influence of celebrity:

### Powerful Brand & High Profile Celebrity

These are the brands with strong presence in the market and wider consumer acceptance. Here the celebrity brand ambassador is also a very well known figure. This is the case of tie-up between equals. Here both the side uses good will of other to increase their reputation and acceptability.

**Ex:** Recently, Colgate- Palmolive India Ltd., a market leader in oral care, has signed renowned Bollywood actress and former Miss World Priyanka Chopra as brand ambassador for its Colgate Active Salt Neem tooth paste.

### Introductory Brand & High Profile Celebrity

Here the brand is looking forward to gain maximum benefit from the high profile celebrity. Literally speaking, it is the responsibility of brand ambassador to reach the new brand to customers. In the initial phase, the celebrity mostly concentrates on the credibility and reliability aspect of the firm along with monetary gains.

**Ex:** In 2010, Sachin Tendulkar in his career high has signed with Luminous Power (now, a part of Schneider Electric), manufacturers of inverters, batteries and renewable energy systems. While signing the agreement, Tendulkar stated that he was excited about the association with Luminous, as according to him, Luminous is known for innovations, with proven reliability and performance.

### Low Profile Celebrity & Powerful or Introductory Brand

Association of comparatively a low profile celebrity with a brand having proven track record or a new one is almost equivalent to the case of simple modeling. Here the brands may note reap many benefits as mentioned in earlier cases. At the same time a 'model' can take advantage of strong and reputed brand to build his/her image.

**Ex:** Case of 'Liril Girl' Sonali Bendre in 90s, who became a super model and famous bollywood actress.

It is very rare, a celebrity signing-up with a feeble brand as its brand ambassador. The fear of losing their reputation always prevents celebrities from such suicidal attempts.

## SELECTION OF BRAND AMBASSADORS

In the selection of brand ambassador for a product, physical appearance, character, withholding values etc. of a celebrity plays vital role. Wrong selection of celebrity may lead the brand into deep trouble. Some of the fine selections in Indian business world are narrated below:

- Lux uses Bollywood stars Katrina Kaif and Aishwarya Rai Bachan, who are fair and beautiful for their fairness soap and female products.

- Thumps-up signed with strong and daring Akshay Kumar for their product ‘for strong people’.
- The soft drink brand Pepsi is mainly attracted by youth and hence they feature young and stylish Ranbir Kapoor and Deepika Padukone as brand ambassadors.
- Fit and healthy M.S.Dhoni is brand ambassador of Reebok shoes and fitness products.
- Kareena Kapoor , who is slim, light weight and beautiful stands for stylish- light weight- sleek Sony Vaio laptops.
- Sporty and trendy John Abraham is the celebrity endorsement for Yamaha bikes.
- Music and tea – are they related? Taj Mahal Tea says ‘yes’; both are refreshing. That is why they have used tabala maestro Ustad Zakir Hussain for many years as brand ambassador and now classical zitar player Niladri Kumar since 2014.
- Snapdeal, the online retailer, has recently roped Aamir Khan as their brand ambassador. The brand as well as brand ambassador is characterized by dedication, value and ethics.

As in rest of the world, most Indian brand ambassadors belong to the category film actors and sports personalities.

## RECENT DOWNBEATS

Some recent developments and incidence proves that things are not in favour of brand ambassadors from both corporate perspective and celebrity point of view.

### Celebrities in Trouble

The number of celebrities coming under controversies and allegations are being increased day by day.

- Actor Aamir Khan’s remark on “growing intolerance” in India has created ripples on many brands he was endorsed with. There was even online campaign against the actor and the e-tailer Snapdeal for whom he is a brand ambassador.
- Former IPL chief Mr.Lalit Modi, in June 2015, has alleged that Suresh Raina and Ravindra Jadeja were involved in IPL betting. Due to this Adidas stopped airing TV commercials involving Raina, one of their brand ambassadors. India Tourism forced to remove the images of Jadeja, their brand ambassador, from many of their print media ads.
- Supreme Court’s judgment on M.S.Dhoni in connection with the same IPL spot fixing case had created panic among many corporate. The several brand endorsed by him like Reebok, Aircel, Cello, Ashok Leyland, Sony etc. are in actual sweat.
- Leading hosiery manufacturers Rupa and Company had stopped many times the campaigns featuring their brand ambassador Bollywood star Sanjay Dutt as he was in controversy on account of his suspected link with Mumbai blast.
- The situation is much more critical for the brands endorsed with Salman Khan. After 13 years, the verdict of car hit case following drunken driving is awaited at any time. Various brands like Thumps-up, Revital, Wheel,

Suzuki, Astral Pipes, Yatra.com etc. for which either he is a brand ambassador or having endorsement is under real stress.

This does not mean that Bollywood stars and cricketers are only getting into issues. The above mentioned are examples only. The case is not much different for regional actors, models and other sports personalities.

In the West the consumers have usually been less tolerant if brand ambassadors get into controversies. But, in India, where the celebrities are treated like demi-gods, situation is entirely different. The loss in this account will come in two different forms:

- Failure of reputation: Letdown of image of a brand ambassador automatically affects the brand he/she stand for. This is especially true in the case of some 'value' based product. Decreasing market share will be the end result.
- Direct Loss of Money: Most brand endorsements even involves crores of Rupees. When a celebrity put himself in the midst of controversies, the firms are forced to give-up the endorsement or to withdraw the advertisement campaign featuring him/her.

### **Brands under Fire**

There were several instances in the past also, where, either brand or its advertisements getting into controversies and which had affected the credibility of celebrity brand ambassadors. The gravity of the situation has increased now.

- In 2007, Emami Fair and Handsome has appointed Sharukh Khan as its brand ambassador and launched a TV commercial featuring him with content 'fair skin is a prerequisite for successes. The advertisement led to an online campaign titled *Dark and Beautiful* which criticised the star and urged to stop promoting and encouraging fairness creams.
- Though Sharukh didn't move away, following a school girls question why he chose to endorse a product that her parents and teachers labeled "poison", Amitabh Bachan has decided to quit from his 12 year old endorsement with Pepsi in 2014.
- Deepika Padukone, former 'calendar girl' and later brand ambassador of Kingfisher Airlines lost her credibility when the airline became a most unreliable service provider.
- In July 2015, several reports were came against Complian as insects and worms were found inside the pack. Suriya, the Tamil Actor, who endorsed as brand ambassador in the South was criticised severely by many of his fans.
- Aishwarya Rai Bachan was in trouble after featuring in a print ad for Kalyan Jewellers in April 2015. The 'racist' advertisement was invited open criticism from prominent social activists and public on her. (Later Kalyan Jewellers had withdrawn the ad.)
- The worst is that related with Nestle Maggi noodles issue. After finding MSG above allowable limit in the packs, Govt. authorities decided to ban the product in June 2015. Maggi's brand ambassadors Amitabh Bachan, Madhuri Dixit and Priety Zinta, who used to promote the product through advertisements as healthy food for children, really lost their face. A criminal case was also filed against them. Govt. authorities have confirmed that brand ambassadors are liable for action if advertisements are found to be misleading.

Here the fact is that, what any may be the legal part, a brand ambassador has ethical obligation over the brand they are promoting. Thousands of consumers may be using the brand only because it is promoted by them. While models are simply enacting some roles in the advertisements, celebrity brand ambassadors are coming as such to support the product. Hence, failure of a brand will directly affect the celebrity value of brand ambassadors and ultimately their career.

### **THINK BEYOND...**

We have seen the issues faced by the corporates when their brand ambassadors come into controversy and vice versa. Now, we have to check are there any alternative for brand ambassadors. It is high time to think beyond brand ambassadors. More literally, we have to 'think back'.

#### **Brand Mascots**

Many of us may be still remembering yester year iconic brand mascots. Air India Maharaja, Amul Girl, Gattu of Asian Paint, Boomer Man, Nirma Girl, Onida Devil, 7Up Man etc. are some of them. Amul is the only brand which never gave-up trust on its mascot during the years. Air India Mahraja, created in 1950s by legendary Mario Miranda, is in revival path after years of silence. Mascots lost their glory as a result of celebrity endorsements. Still, some brands have taken enough courage to use mascots as their brand ambassadors. Vodafone Zozoos, Hutch Pug, Chintamani of ICICI Life Insurance, Sunfeast Sunny and Pilsburry Dough Boy are examples.

#### **Cartoon Characters**

In India, about 40 crore children are there under the age 15 years. They play a big role in purchase decisions not only in the case of foodstuffs, toys, clothing etc., but also in the matter of big purchases like consumer durables and vehicles. Nowadays, using cartoon characters for promotion of the brands is almost nil. Years back, Parle promoted Poppins through 'Ramu and Shyamu' series of cartoon strips. Indian corporate should explore the possibility of using Indian origin cartoon characters as brand ambassadors. Schemrock Group of Schools' attempt of appointing Chotta Bheem as its brand ambassador may be a beginning.

### **ADVANTAGES**

There are several advantages by using Mascots and Cartoon Characters as brand ambassadors.

- Mascots are least expensive compared to cartoon characters and celebrities.
- Cartoon characters are more influential on children than celebrities.
- Mascots can reflect brand values and brand personalities better.
- Mascots and cartoon characters are never disturbed by ageing or popularity as in the case of celebrities.
- They provide greater scope of creativity.
- Most important, they never fell in controversies!

Monotony may be the only stigma attached with 'new' brand ambassadors. This can be overcome by using new ideas and creativity. Developments in the field of animation technology and visual effects can provide greater scope in this area

## CONCLUSIONS

We have seen the corporate-brand ambassador duo's drop from a win-win situation to loss-loss situation due to many issues either related to brand or linked to the celebrity. A trouble on any one side will definitely affect the other also. A win-loss situation is totally ruled out. Hence, it is the real time to move apart. Corporates can reap many benefits by using mascots or cartoon characters as its brand ambassadors. Celebrities may lose few bucks, but, it is better for them as they can get away from possible legal issues.

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