

The **bigger** they are, the harder they fall

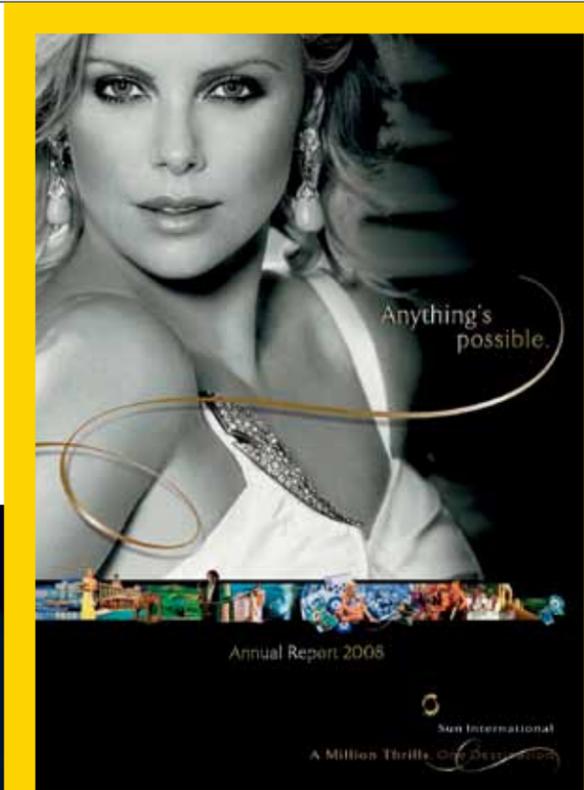
While South Africa has few marketable celebrities of global stature, local brands are not immune to the celebrity endorsement culture. **Cara Bouwer** reports.

WHETHER IT'S CHEF REUBEN Riffel's endorsement of Robertsons Spices, former Bafana skipper Lucas Radebe's Aquafresh smile, 1995 Rugby World Cup-winning captain Francois Pienaar punting Lays Simba Chips or Hollywood star Charlize Theron reminding us why we love Sun International, it seems marketers adore putting a famous face to a business brand.

But does it work? And what happens when things go wrong?

Hansie Cronje, Joost van der Westhuizen, Ben Johnson, Tonya Harding, Marion Jones – and not to mention a certain Oscar Pistorius. As each of these sporting superstars fell from grace, so the brands that hinged themselves to the stars backed off, cancelling sponsorships and distancing themselves from the fallout.

Speaking in February, as the full impact of the Pistorius saga unravelled in a South African court, Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) senior lecturer in marketing, Michael Goldman, had this to say: "I was surprised how long it took some global brands to make a statement and take some management action. Typically, research suggests you have five or six days (to react) ... and many of them passed that deadline then started getting a lot of questions about why they weren't taking more specific action."



The key takeaway for brands is to undertake constant monitoring and evaluation of their celebrity endorsers and partners

The key takeaway for brands is to undertake constant monitoring and evaluation, said Goldman. "We certainly see it with Nike as they are constantly measuring how people are evaluating their brand ambassadors.

An analysis of the 10 days after the Tiger Woods story broke shows that \$12-billion (around R120-billion) of value was taken out of the share value of those companies that continued to support the golfer. But Nike was able to constantly monitor how their core golf audience perceived Tiger, and that wasn't negative."

Speaking to *Strategic Marketing* via Skype from New York, Daniel Scheffler, owner of The Idea Consultancy, was less than sympathetic about the fallout for brands making use of celebrity endorsements. "It's super lazy. I know because I used to do this myself; convince clients that this would work ... but it's a lie, because how do you measure it? Rather take the R4-million you're going to spend on some cricketer and fix your customer service. Use it for things that matter to a South African audience."

Rather spend money fixing your customer service

Scheffler, who divides his time between Cape Town and New York, does admit that "if the correlation (between brands) is deep and meaningful, then I can understand that these things are important". For example, if Angelina Jolie became a celebrity spokeswoman for the World Health Organisation following her elective double mastectomy. But all too often marketers don't do the necessary strategic planning beforehand, nor do they follow up effectively.

In the US, Scheffler says the Davie Brown Index lists more than 2 800 celebrities and looks at the influence

a celebrity may have on consumer purchasing decisions. In South Africa the situation is less advanced.

HB Klopper, associate professor in marketing at Monash University's South African campus, notes that while research firm Ipsos-Markinor does track the popularity of local celebrities, there isn't a local marketing body gathering this information. Without quantifiable data, many local endorsement deals are hinged on a lot of "educated guesswork", says Klopper. This may explain a local trend that tends to favour team endorsements rather than individual ones. So Primedia backs soccer but not a team or an individual, he notes.

In Scheffler's view this has everything to do with the fact that South Africa doesn't actually have 'celebrities' in the global sense of the word. Scheffler believes there's a lot of 'faux-lebrity' in South Africa and "unless you've done something on a world scale, like Chris Barnard or Nelson Mandela, I feel like it's arrogant to use the term. Plus brands don't benefit unless you've done something on a world scale... If you are going to get a model to endorse your product it doesn't work. It doesn't go anywhere and it can't be measured."

Without this ability to track, Scheffler wonders why companies would even take the risk of associating with a celebrity brand, which, if things go wrong, could cause their own brand untold damage. "If you want to do this with your brand, you must know there is a high risk," he says.

If you want to mitigate that risk, be ballsy and hook up with someone like American radio 'shock-jock' Howard Stern or controversial SA businessman Kenny Kunene – individuals you don't expect to behave well. Otherwise go the route of upmarket Swiss watch company IWC Schaffhausen, which has 'friends of the brand' rather than celebrity endorsements. "So Kevin Spacey can do whatever he wants in his personal life, but he's >>



Rather have 'friends of the brand'

wearing an IWC watch. The relationship feels lighter," says Scheffler.

Klopper has a more optimistic view of the local use of celebrity endorsements. He points to some successful tie-ups, such as former *Generations* soapie actress Connie Ferguson and her Ricoffy and Garnier associations. Or L'Oréal's well-known 2008 campaign with actress Terry Pheto, a star of the 2005 Oscar-winning feature film *Tsotsi*.

"One of the things you consider when using a celebrity is that it doesn't come cheap," says Klopper. "L'Oréal actually predicts the market two years ahead, so they start manipulating marketing in that direction. They have a very proactive strategy and they are willing to take a risk. So they don't always go for the most expensive celeb, rather someone they can build up."

A 2009 University of Pretoria survey ('Celebrity Endorsements Versus Created Spokespersons in Advertising') supports the view that "celebrity endorsers were perceived to be more attractive" than created spokespersons. However, another 2009 study – this time by the Witwatersrand University and headed by Guillaume Johnson – explored the impact of local celebrity endorsements by examining the responses of black female consumers to cosmetics advertising. This study unearthed widespread suspicion and scepticism towards the use of local celebrities in advertising: "They described these ads as a 'lie', 'fake' or 'dodgy' since they represented a false and computer-generated image of the celebrities."

Again this talks to the importance of "finding a good fit between the celebrity and your product brand," says Klopper. "Nike, for example, always goes for the more controversial celebrities – like Oscar Pistorius. They look for people who aren't afraid to push the boundaries. The celebrity needs to support the things you want to drive into the market. Another local example is Trevor Noah and Cell C; Cell C wanted to lighten its brand and it was very successful in appointing a comedian."

There was a time-frame to the Noah-Cell C relationship, which Klopper feels is also important. "Nike structures deals for a year or two, so their personalities don't hang around for very long and there is no one face to the brand," he says.

Finally, Klopper recommends that brands going the endorsement route seriously ask themselves if they are prepared to walk the extra mile with their celebrity of choice and, if a crisis does unfold, whether there are strategies in place to deal with these effectively. "Some recent research from Northwestern University in the US looked at celebrities with Twitter followers and, irrespective of what they did, people kept following them. So is the brand prepared to walk the mile too?"

As South African branding expert Thebe Ikalafeng told *The Sowetan* newspaper last year, in the wake of the Dark & Lovely brand's global ambassador Nonhle Thema's well-documented Twitter breakdown: "Any brand association is risky because human beings, by nature, are fallible." And when they fall, the often fall hard. ■

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Pros & cons of celebrity endorsement

HB Klopper, associate professor in marketing at Monash University, South Africa: "Celebrity endorsements are a worthwhile tool for gaining exposure, and for celebrities it's about building their personal brand. If the company gets good exposure, then the celebrity will benefit. Think of Gillette, which helped to build Springbok rugby player Bryan Habana's brand."

Daniel Scheffler, owner of The Idea Consultancy, New York:

"I don't necessarily believe in celebrity endorsement as a strategy. I think there are much smarter and easier ways to quantify a marketing solution. There are things that show off the value of your product or service in a much better way than using a celebrity."

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