

Celebrity Endorsements in Hospitality

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Introduction

Hospitality organization owners and marketers have, for decades, sought unique and creative ways to attain a competitive advantage. Recently, a number of hospitality firms have employed celebrity and social media influencer endorsements in an effort to enhance or solidify their competitive positions, and to recreate or reinforce their brand's image among consumers (Magnini, Honeycutt, & Cross, 2008). Hospitality companies that have utilized the services of celebrities to enhance brand image include, but are not limited to the Mandarin Oriental, which has contracted the services of Vanessa Mae, Elle McPherson, Bryan Ferry, and even I.M. Pei; Red Roof hotel brand, which has used Martin Mull; and Hilton Garden Inn, which has utilized the services of Judy Greer to endorse their properties.

The definition of a celebrity endorsement is "any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement (McCracken, 1989). According to Holmes (2019) "the average modern person is exposed to around 5000 advertisements in a day, a number that has increased by a factor of 10 since the 70's". While the human brain has the capacity to retain a vast amount of information there is an over saturation of advertisements that has led us to disregard any banner ads on the web; this disregard has been termed "Banner Blindness". Due to the oversaturation of advertisements and banner blindness, companies have been forced to identify strategies that increase brand image, reach their target market, and differentiate their offerings. Using a celebrity endorsement is one such strategy.

Spry, Pappu, and Cornwell (2011) state that celebrity endorsement is a common form of marketing communication strategy for creating and enhancing brand image, while Till, Priluck, and Stanley (2008) affirmed that celebrity endorsement impacts everything from advertising effectiveness to brand recognition and recall, and even purchase intentions and behavior. These assertions are corroborated by Dean (1999) who showed that the use of celebrity involvement is a way to positively influence people's perceptions on products and brands. In addition, research has demonstrated that celebrity endorsement is reliant upon a core group of dimensions that in-

clude trustworthiness, likeability, familiarity, expertise, personality, appearance, attractiveness, competency, relationship, power, and identification (Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2008; Kelman, 1961).

Since, celebrity endorsements can be seen as a communication strategy for reaching the consumer's interest towards a certain brand or product in a congested marketplace, the use of a celebrity as an endorser allows a company to better reach their desired customer or target market. This study uses the case of Hilton Garden Inn and Judy Greer to analyze and understand the basic principles of using a celebrity as an endorser in the hospitality and tourism industry. The study shows through theoretical and practical implications how a celebrity endorsement can influence the consumer's intention to purchase hospitality and tourism goods and services. Positive and negative consequences will be explored, and competitive advantages offered by this marketing tactic are discussed.

The Hilton Garden Inn and Judy Greer

The Hilton Garden Inn brand has a global presence in roughly 50 countries and was the first member of the Hilton brand family to open properties in countries like Botswana, Eswatini, Latvia, Lithuania, and Uganda. The brand opened 50 new properties in 2019 and has a pipeline of over 300 hotels projected for 2020, thus furthering the overarching Hilton goal to "serve more guests in more locations around the world" (Procure travel, 2020). The Hilton Garden Inn offers business and leisure guests upscale, affordable accommodations and unique amenities, touting an experience that is 'Simply on Another Level'. As a burgeoning leader in the food and beverage realm, Hilton Garden Inn serves locally sourced food and hand-crafted cocktails at its full-service restaurants and bars. In addition to fresh food and beverage, the brand has also added a fresh face to their brand image campaign.

In 2016, Hilton Garden Inn partnered with character actor Judy Greer to refresh their brand. They leveraged her celebrity to bring to life an advertising campaign that they believe is relatable to their targeted consumer. With dozens of spot ads and commercials having aired since the partnership, the story lines range in topic from saving time, identifying the right hotel, comparing vacation choices, breakfast options, bar and cocktail amenities, and much more.

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The use of Ms. Greer in the advertisements for Hilton Garden Inn promises a celebrity representative who is at once recognizable, but perhaps not at first glance. In fact, Ms. Greer's self-deprecating humor spawned the authoring of a book titled, "I Don't Know What You Know Me From: Confessions of a Co-Star." Judy Greer has appeared in television shows including *Arrested Development*, *It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia* and *Californication* among other t.v. shows. She has also appeared in multiple movies including, but not limited to, *What Women Want* (2000), *The Wedding Planner* (2001), *13 Going on 30* (2004), *27 Dresses* (2008), *Love & Other Drugs* (2010), *Jurassic World* (2015), and *Ant-Man* (2015).

One of the most viewed Hilton Garden Inn advertisements using Judy Greer is titled, "The story of how we met". The story of how we met (2017) which has aired in the United States 11,107 times since it was filmed features Judy Greer as the Patron and Mark Sual as the bartender. The scene transpires at a Hilton Garden Inn Garden Grille and Bar Concept where Actress Judy Greer enjoys a cocktail and requests that the bartender regale her with the story of how they met. "Eddie" the bartender surprises her with an extra fizzy gin drink which turns out to be "so [her] drink." It is the cocktail that bears her moniker at Garden Grille and Bar and is called Judy's Garden Gin. And while Judy wanted to explain how she asked for the cheese plate, she doesn't mind that Eddie beat her to the punch because he happens to be a great storyteller. The narrator explains how "craft cocktails and glowing service" are just a few of the amenities a patron can anticipate experiencing during a stay at a Hilton Garden Inn.

A more recent spot advertisement featuring Ms. Greer is titled Judy eats breakfast. The spot first aired in 2020 and has been aired nationally 989 times since its debut. The ad begins with Judy explaining how the breakfast omelet she is eating is even tastier than the one she had the day before. The server reminds her that she said the same thing the day before. She remarks, "but that was yesterday!". He taunts her with "Same time tomorrow Judy?" to which she smiles and asks for more coffee. These are just two of many examples of the comedian's playful and whimsical persona and how they interplay with the brand and its image.

Theoretical Background

Through a theoretical lens, scholars have identified celebrities as effective platforms for endorsement due to what they represent and the frame of reference from which consumers associate their celebrity (Soloman & Assael, 1987). Part of the allure of using a celebrity is that notion of a consumer wanting to aspire to be like them. This is why athletes are often used in sporting good product endorsements. The underlying premise is that there is a transfer of the celebrity's abilities or personality to the product or goods that the company endeavors to sell (Atkin & Block, 1983). The transfer of one's image of a celebrity to a

brand is theoretically underpinned by the associative learning theory, which posits that one's memory of the individual is linked inextricably to the brand through repeated association (Biswas, Biswas, & Das, 2006; Collins & Loftus, 1957; Magnini, Honeycutt, & Cross, 2008). Thus, it is important to understand the behaviors and attitudes necessary for a celebrity to exhibit in order to successfully influence a consumer group of a product. Byrne et al. (2003) and Kelman (1961) have attributed the success of this transference phenomenon to three key attributes: credibility, attractiveness, and power.

Credibility

Credibility is defined as the way in which an individual perceives the source of information as containing the experience, knowledge or skills necessary to offer an objective and unbiased assessment of the situation (Byrne, Whitehead, & Breen, 2003). Credibility can be dissected into two important factors: expertise and trustworthiness. Accordingly, a celebrity endorsement may be deemed effective if the individual assessing it perceives the celebrity as trustworthy and an expert on the information in some capacity. The areas of alignment may include the celebrity's attitudes, behavior, beliefs, and opinions, and the way in which the individual perceiving these attributes internalizes them as accurately associated with the brand or not. The less an individual likes the brand, the more important credibility becomes in terms of the endorser. While credibility is an important factor to consider, it alone is not enough to persuade an individual, as scholars have shown there are three key attributes for a successful celebrity endorsement (Byrne, Whitehead, & Breen, 2003; Erdogan, 1999).

Attractiveness

Attractiveness is the second pivotal attribute that is important for a successful endorsement. Attractiveness is comprised of three attributes of its own, including familiarity, likeability and similarity, and it has been shown to lead to an individual's motivation to establish a relationship with the company based on an alignment between the individual's attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and preferences (Byrne, Whitehead, & Breen, 2003). Familiarity occurs through one's awareness of the celebrity and through the repeated exposure to the celebrity or the ad or both. Likeability transpires when there is appeal due to physical, behavioral or personal characteristics. Similarity is representative of the perceived alignment between the celebrity and the individual. The physical attractiveness of the celebrity has been used by past companies to leverage the dual positive impact of status and looks to bolster the brand (Byrne, Whitehead, & Breen, 2003).

Power

Power is the final of the three essential attributes. Power occurs when the celebrity is able to offer some sort of reward or punishment, thus prompting an individual to act on the request of the celebrity.

Scholars have asserted that power has been shown to have been exercised when the recipient of the endorsement is compliant with the wishes of the endorser (Byrne, Whitehead, & Breen, 2003; Kelman 1961). Therefore, hospitality marketers must align the brand's image with the image of the celebrity and the makeup of the targeted market in order to ensure that the message will be well-received. The messages put forward by the celebrity image and the brand message must be congruent in order for the audience to recall the product properly.

The TEARS vs. The No-TEARS Model

The TEARS and No-TEARS models are useful tools to employ for companies to select the right endorser. The TEARS model allows companies to see which traits are more important towards the company goal when selecting an endorser. These traits or attributes are Trustworthiness, Expertise, Attractiveness, Respect, and Similarity. The Tears model is supported by Byrne et al. (2003) and Kelman (1961) who identified credibility, attractiveness, and power as fundamental to a successful meaning transfer.

The No-TEARS approach is ostensibly the opposite of the TEARS model since it does not base itself on the attributes of the celebrity endorser, but rather on the process on how to select the right endorser through alignment with the company. There are eight variables that comprise the No-TEARS model. These eight measures help brands to determine the right celebrity fit for their organization. Shimp (2003) explains that managers following the No-TEARS approach select particular endorsers using the following guidelines:

- **Celebrity and audience matchup:** the celebrity must be properly identified as matching up the target's market
- **Celebrity and brand matchup:** The celebrity's behavior must be aligned with the image of the brand without impacting it.
- **Celebrity credibility:** The credibility or trustworthiness of a celebrity is one of the primary reasons a company would employ a celebrity's services.
- **Celebrity attractiveness:** Attractiveness does not only include just physical features but it also focuses on the credibility and the endorser's alignment with the audience and the brand.
- **Cost consideration:** Celebrity endorsement can be expensive. A careful financial analysis needs to be conducted to ensure using the celebrity will result in a net-gain.
- **Working ease and difficulty factors:** Some celebrities are easier to work with than others and they establish these reputations over time. The ease with which one can work with a celebrity may influence a company's decision to employ them.
- **Saturation factor:** A celebrity endorsing multiple products and brands might impact his credibility towards a product.
- **The Trouble factor:** Organizations cannot control how the celebrity will behave in the future.

Pros and Cons of Celebrity as an Endorser

As with all marketing endeavors, there are benefits and drawbacks to using a celebrity as a company spokesperson or brand ambassador. While most companies agree that the use of a celebrity endorsers will generate a better desirable outcome towards a brand or product than will a non-celebrity endorser, thus creating a real intention or not to purchase a product (Erdogan, 1999), the use of a celebrity as an endorser may have some risks and be of a high cost. Erdogan (1999) developed a list highlighting the potential pros and cons in the use of celebrity endorsement as seen in Table 1.

In favor of the use of celebrity endorsement, customers identify with their favorite celebrity in many ways. To have a celebrity endorsing a brand or product reassures the fan about that product's quality and usefulness. The underlying thought is that a celebrity risks damaging their own credibility and reputation if their product endorsement is for a low-quality offering (Elbersy, 2009). Having the right celebrity as the face of a company may also facilitate penetration into a new market segment for the company.

Contrarily, while celebrities bring many advantages, their usefulness to the brand or product they are endorsing is closely linked to their reputation and expectation in their fans' eyes. If the celebrity does something to tarnish their reputation, it will negatively impact the brand they are endorsing by association. Another setback that could occur is the overshadowing effect of the celebrities themselves; indeed, when an ad focuses too much on the celebrity rather than the product or the brand they are endorsing, it may undermine the brand recognition in their customer's awareness. This can also happen when one celebrity is endorsing multiple products or brands at the same time. Finally, the cost associated with this communication strategy can reach staggering numbers (e.g. a \$10 Million contract between Jennifer Aniston and Emirate Airlines).

Celebrity Endorsement and Cultural Attributes – A Brief Overview

The use of celebrity endorsement and how the advertisement will convey a message will be greatly influenced by the perspectives of different cultures around the globe. Celebrity endorsement will fall into a different cultural dimension (e.g. low versus high context; individualism versus collectivism) depending on the culture of the audience. By looking at the West compared to the East it is possible to see that advertisements in Asian countries will likely tend to picture collectivistic values in different settings rather than individualistic values for Western countries such as the European Union or the United States (Abhishek & Sahay, 2016). Chang (2012) suggests that Asian advertisements using celebrity endorsement as a strategy should feature narratives that promote relationship benefits and invoke emotions like empathy and harmony. Because the hospitality and tourism industry is

Table 1

Pros & Cons of Celebrity Endorsement

| Potential Advantages | Potential Hazards | Preventive tactics |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Increased attention | Overshadow the brand | Pre-testing and careful planning |
| Image polishing | Public controversy | Buying insurance and putting provision clauses in contracts |
| Brand introduction | Image change and overexposure | Explaining what is their role and putting clause to restrict endorsement for the brand |
| Brand repositioning | Image change and loss of public recognition | Examining what life-cycle stage the celebrity is in and how long this stage is likely to continue |
| Underpin global campaigns | Expensive | Selecting celebrities who are appropriate for global target audience, not because they are “hot” in all market audiences |

a global enterprise, hotel brands, like Hilton Garden Inn, need to consider the global and cultural influence and relevance of their celebrity endorsers (Magnini, Honeycutt, & Cross, 2008).

In a case where the cultural attributes are presented in a high context culture the information can be transmitted without being explicitly stated; whereas in a low context culture, information must be more overtly explained (Abhishek & Sahay, 2016). In fact, it is ill-advised to employ an ad with low context, particularly if the company is spending the money for a celebrity endorsement. Because lifestyle has been shown to be an integral part of Asian culture, for example, many Asian advertisements emphasize a context in which a product is associated with a desirable type of lifestyle (Cho et al., 1999). Because cultural attributes and perceptions of celebrities as endorsers are viewed differently across cultures, it is important for companies to identify the attributes and perceptions of the target market segment so that the message and the focus are not lost in translation.

While celebrity endorsements are mainly seen through brand and product advertisements the use of this communication strategy can be applied on a larger scale, such as tourism destination promotion. For example, in the past the Hong Kong Government used celebrities to promote some famous spots in Hong Kong to domestic and international tourists (in 2017 actor Sean Lau was hired to promote the natural scenery of Hong Kong in a video done by the Hong Kong Tourism Board) (Chan, Lee, & Wong, 2018). Lee, Scott, and Kim (2008) argued that the use of a celebrity would result in a positive influence over tourists' affective image of the destination as well as their perceptions and attitudes toward traveling to that location. Ultimately researchers have

demonstrated through classical conditioning that celebrities can and do produce positive feelings and attitudes in customers toward the desired brand or organization (Till, Priluck, & Stanley, 2008).

Conclusion

Hospitality corporations are finding it extremely difficult to reach consumer awareness in a crowded marketplace (Magnini, Honeycutt, & Cross, 2008). This difficulty stems from the constant bombardment of advertisements across the various advertising platforms (e.g. primetime television 24% ads; magazines 50% ads, and newspapers up to 64% ads) (MPA, 1995). The use of a celebrity serves to make one's product stand out from the barrage of ads and help the brand rise above the crowd. Researchers have suggested that the use of a celebrity endorser will bring higher advertisement ratings, higher product evaluation, and substantial increase in financial returns for the firm if employed properly (Dean & Biswas, 2001; Erdogan, Baker, & Tagg, 2001). Endorsers have been shown to be more effective when consumers believe that celebrities are motivated by a genuine liking of the product rather than by endorsement earnings (Atkin & Block, 1983).

Celebrity endorsement can be a great communication strategy when trying to influence the perception of a brand or product in the consumer's mind. However, while there are a lot of positive outcomes such as the creation of buying desire supported by the trustworthiness of the celebrity, the polishing of the brand or even the opportunity to reach a new segment market, the entire endorsement process can be highly costly. Additionally, celebrity endorsements can have some negative effects in the future if the image of the endorser is

diminished or tarnished through poor behavior and reputation in the public eye. Using a model like the No-TEARS model may help hospitality organizations like Hilton Garden Inn to discern whether or not a celebrity endorsement is right for them, and why.

Problem Statement

While there are inherent benefits to using celebrities to endorse a brand, there are also challenges that may hinder the viability or success of the partnership. Hilton Garden Inn's partnership with Judy Greer has helped the brand reenergize in 2016. The hotel company has leveraged her celebrity to add a certain appeal to the brand by linking her credibility, attractiveness, and power to the hotel brand. However, she is self-admittedly not the most recognizable actor. To what extent do Judy Greer and Hilton Garden Inn synergistically fit together? How does her specific celebrity add to or detract from the credibility of the Hilton Garden Inn brand? And what is the brand image that the hotel chain is seeking to advance?

Additional Discussion Questions

1. To what extent can celebrity endorsers imbue international hospitality brands with their own personalities and values?
2. What are the potential limitations that can arise from hotels using celebrity endorsers to advertise their offerings?
3. Are there specific celebrities that can transcend culture? If so, who and how/why?
4. Is it better for a global hotel brand to use different celebrities depending on the culture and location of the advertisement?
5. How can a global hospitality firm ensure alignment between the celebrity and the brand?
6. How does a firm ensure that a celebrity ticks all the proverbial boxes in terms of credibility, attractiveness, and power?

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