

celebrity goldminers

Eye-popping endorsement deals in Japan great for celebrities, dodgy for products.

Japan's love affair with Hollywood celebrities is well known, and few sports personalities have ever rivaled the fame of those media icons. David Beckham, the flamboyant goal-scoring captain of the English team in the 2002 World Cup, has done just that, reaching superstardom in just a few short years. His blond hair, blue eyes, boyish good looks and pop-star wife (not to mention brilliant ball handling on the soccer pitch) have given this pop-culture icon megabucks stardom here.

Even as the world's second-largest advertising industry struggles to get back on its feet after years of belt-tightening, there seems to be no limit to the fees being paid to international stars to promote products here. The price that the Tokyo Beauty Center (TBC) cosmetics chain reportedly paid to land Beckham and his wife, Posh, is a perfect example. As the winner of a fierce bidding war, TBC reportedly coughed up ¥400 million (US\$3.6 million), the highest ever for a foreign celebrity in Japan. The ads to promote TBC salons were shot over a three-day stopover as Beckham made his way to Southeast Asia to show up at a few soccer pitches and to star in some other ads. Last year, he reportedly made between \$43 million and \$50 million from advertising, far more than his \$17-million salary as Europe's highest-paid soccer player.

Film stars still fly in to promote their new movie, as Japan is a huge and receptive market for Hollywood blockbusters. And, like Beckham, they just as often stay a day or so longer to shoot an ad or two. Sure, they realize it's potentially embarrassing, especially if the news leaks out and their fans hear about it. But the money's good. Real good.

Foreign celebrities command fees in the hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars for a 15- or 30-second spot. It's dead simple: Stand by the product

and say a couple of words. And safe: Agents make sure there's a riot-for-export clause to bar the TV commercials (TVCs) being shown outside Japan.

Now it's the sports star's turn. Thanks to the success of the World Cup – and Beckham – they are back in the limelight. There's golfer Tiger Woods, retired sumo grand champion Akebono, Seattle Mariners' right fielder Ichiro Suzuki (who again signed up for a big pile of cash in 2004) and a rash of Japanese soccer stars like Masashi Nakayama and Hidetoshi Nakahara, who both play for European clubs. But none come close to the moneymaking power of Beckham.

Muscling in on the ad stakes

Good looks aren't always a key to success, though. Bob Sapp, today's Horatio Alger of the sports world, has picked himself up again and again after failed attempts at pro-football and boxing, and made \$3 million here in less than a year. How is that possible, you may ask, for a guy that nobody knows in the U.S.? Why, of course, by promoting K-1 combat shows, appearing on television talk shows, hawking branded merchandise, and by doing endorsements, TVCs and ads for products ranging from game show action figures to Panasonic plasma display panels. Sapp's average TVC fee: \$300,000 to \$500,000.

The use of foreign celebrities in advertisements in Japan dates back to the early 1970s. One of the first was actor Charles Bronson, in an ad for Mandom cologne. In the 1980s, during Japan's bubble economy, the market was flooded with dozens of European and American movie stars appearing in TVCs and print ads endorsing everything from fishing rods to cigarettes, foodies, vitamin drinks, ham, whisky, airlines and cars.



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Even in the post-bubble mid-1990s, Michael J. Fox, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Harrison Ford, Mel Gibson, Brad Pitt, Sylvester Stallone, Peter Falk, Richard Gere and Steven Segal, were among the Hollywood stars in Japanese commercials. Among the female stars were Naomi Campbell, Madonna, Farrah Fawcett and Jodie Foster.

Now, there's a clear new trend. Commercials have moved away from big-name movie stars to sports personalities, of which Japan can claim its share of heroes.

Desire for heroes

"Talent or celebrity advertising is used more in Japan than in any other country [and] sports celebrities are one category of this," says Koh Sakata, director and chairman emeritus at McCann-Erickson Inc. "I think it's an overall global trend that sports celebrities are becoming more and more popular."

Alex Lopez, chief creative officer at Beacon Communications K.K., believes Japan has found a need to find heroes within its own culture.

"Japan has struggled to identify itself post-bubble, because it is no longer this 'golden child' that could go out and buy everything," he explains.

"They've started to look for Japanese heroes that went abroad, who were successful. The most evident are the sports heroes in major league baseball and soccer."

The reasons tie not only into the growing importance and increasing popularity of sports in general in Japan, but also into a renewed interest in personal health. Sports stars radiate positive energy, and have down-to-earth personalities.

At Hakuholdo Inc., Japan's second-largest ad agency (and the agency with the Beckham accounts), Casting Division Executive Manager Tomoyasu Nakamura and Casting Director Ken Agarida agree that attention in Japan has shifted to sports stars since the World Cup. Because consumers have a "high evaluation" of such stars, they say, "we can cover various targets using well-recognized sportspeople."

The re-emerging trend of using sports stars to pitch products here, says Jeremy Perrott, Asia-Pacific regional creative director for McCann-Erickson, is also because using superstars makes everything easy.

"You put all your money behind the star, spend very little on production, and let the media do the rest. It's a no-brainer," he says.

Shunsuke Nakamura of Japan's national soccer team gets super wet for Kirin beer.

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However, Perrott adds: "It's a shame because a lot of [advertisers] go through a superstar in one hit. It's only rarely that you see a superstar being used with some wit and charm that makes you think, 'That's a great spot; now look at the way they used that!'"

An additional reason, says Beacon's Lopez, is the shorter duration of so many Japanese TVCs. "Here, there's a huge amount of 15-second spots," he says. "I believe this has been one of the driving factors in terms of getting into talent usage."

Athletes trump actors

Yuya Furukawa, a creative director at Dentsu Inc., Japan's largest ad agency, agrees that 15-second spots favor the use of action figures like sports stars to promote products. It's a way to capture the attention of the TV viewing audience who might otherwise channel surf during commercial breaks.

A Beckham or Ronaldo, because they represent a whole sports category, has broader appeal than a movie star, Furukawa adds, so the ad can capture a wider and more receptive audience.

"If the plan is good enough, if the creative idea is great, then athletes will be more powerful than actors and actresses in commercials," he says.

A recent Toyota TVC featuring soccer ace Shinji Ono, a star on Japan's World Cup team and now playing for Dutch soccer club Feyenoord, has won advertising awards for its clever storytelling.

Still another reason for the growing sports-star phenomenon, not only in Japan, but also worldwide, is the increasingly strong influence of sports media and the proliferation of specialized sports channels on cable and satellite TV. This has been possible primarily because of product endorsements, and because the money is there for it.

"Many sports have exploded because advertisers' money has been poured into it, as opposed to film, as opposed to movie stars," says McCann's Perrott.

The sports business is now totally image-driven. Even the traditional tales of play in many games - from football to ice hockey - have been adjusted or changed to fit television broadcast hours and the need for regular commercial breaks. The constant addition of more (so-called) sports to the summer and winter Olympics is for the same reason - to attract more viewers in more countries to generate greater advertising revenues.

Despite all these reasons - and regardless of whether the spotlight hits a movie star or sports

David Beckham and Posh team up with TBC to break some billboard-space records.



hero – the question remains: Do stars actually help in building a brand?

Paul Anders Schwamm, a Tokyo-based international marketing and management consultant who has closely analyzed the tarento (as the Japanese like to call them) fixation, does not think so.

Within a sample of 518 TVCs that he taped for dissection last April, he says, the overkill was obvious. Rie Kikukawa appeared in 12 spots representing five different brands. Nanako Matsushima was in 11 spots, representing five brands. Ken Shimura represented four brands. Uro Kanda and Rena Tanaka, each representing three brands, were respectively in 11 and 10 spots. The ubiquitous members of SMAP appeared a total of 15 times, representing four brands.

Agencies, Schwamm says, often explain that they use tarento because it is “necessary to break through the competitive clutter to get noticed.” The irony, he comments, is that the clutter consists of other tarento.

Beacon estimates that around 60% of Japanese ads use a celebrity. “Aside from 15-second spots,” says agency president Michelle Kristulla-Green, “the economic recession is a decisive factor.”

“With the emphasis on fighting for short-term

results, rather than building a brand,” she says, “it is not uncommon for a client to start the brief for a project by talking about the celebrity they would like to use.”

Consumers may not be so dumb

Advertisers, Schwamm says, should question the assumptions of the tarento-based industry.

“One assumption is that Japanese consumers’ brand choices are more swayed by superficial entertainment value than by fundamental brand attributes,” he says, noting mobile-phone ads featuring soccer players, singers and actresses. The Japanese are world leaders, with plenty upon which to build brand equity, he points out, “but advertisers seem more concerned with having their star endorsers look good in commercials than with communicating product benefits, and more intent on style than substance.”

Schwamm suspects that a lot of advertising does more for the featured star than for the product. He points to the example of singer Ayumi Hamasaki, who appears in ads for canned coffee, various consumer electronics, cosmetics, rice and other products. It seems likely, Schwamm argues, that the exposure boosts sales of her recordings and concert

Former middleweight boxing champion Shinji Takehara gets it on for a pachinko chain.

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tickets, while the effect on the advertised brands is open to question.

“I believe the overuse of tarento-based advertising in Japan is symptomatic of a general lack of the advertiser’s strategic brand marketing knowledge and skills,” he says.

There have been successes, but there have been real flops as well when using TV personalities, movie stars or sportspeople in commercials. The costly downside of the celebrity-as-pitchman business is that if it bombs, the advertiser can lose not only his money, but also, if a scandal involving the celebrity goes with it, his name.

Trend rides on few successes

“I can’t think of anyone who particularly stands out [as a real flop], but I’d bet that if you did the math on it and really investigated it, it’s probably a majority,” says Lopez of Beacon. “They actually don’t move the business. I’d say a minority are successful, and some of them probably hurt the business.”

Despite the mediocre success rate, says Sakata of McCann-Erickson, advertisers continue to use celebrities because of the successes.

“In Japan, since there are so many media, it is more effective when you use a celebrity compared to when you don’t use one,” he says. “But, as an ad agency, we say, ‘you cannot build a brand overnight.’ It needs continuity, and I think many have failed in that sense.” In the end, he adds, it is whether the brand is properly built or not that determines winners and losers.

How, then, is the success of using a personality measured by an agency? And how do clients measure their return on investment? “The agency is always evaluating its strategy and reevaluating its work against the strategy,” says Perrott. He refers to the use of a Bud Lite ad featuring Baywatch star Pamela Anderson, noting that her presence would not be a key reason for buying the beer, but rather “for the sake of adding some sparkle.” The point is that the advertiser did not wrap the ad around her.

“If an agency creates a commercial with a superstar in it, and that ad relies solely on the

superstar,” he says, “you’d expect that superstar’s presence on-screen to immediately influence focus groups to say, ‘Yes, I remember that spot because of him or her! And, yes, I’d buy it because he or she said so.’”

Lopez agrees that the product will be promoted effectively when the celebrity has a relevant role. It will work, he says, if it is “someone who can speak in very human terms” about what the product has done for him or her.

“But,” he stresses, “we always start with the idea. Always! What’s the idea that can grow the business? What’s the concept behind it? What’s the communication going to be? Then we think, if it’s appropriate, we’ll use a celebrity. And then we ask: How can that person further that idea?”

As a positive example, Lopez mentions the use of actress Kaori Momoi to promote Max Factor SK II skincare products.

“She’s been using it for 15 or 20 years. We use her as a real spokesperson who avidly uses it and the results are very visible,” he says, adding that he believes this is not a case of using the fame of the star to sell the product. “Rather, [the TVC] shows the way the product helped her to be as beautiful as she is. She’s a fan of it. I think it’s the most appropriate use.”

Thus, the use of tarento does have benefits. An ad can break through the clutter, reach a broader market segment, appeal to consumer sentiments and add memorability. But, unless that individual becomes “part of the brand,” and consumers identify with him or her in that role, and then buy the product, it may be just a short-term fix. More often, it is a tremendous waste of money.

For now, the advertising cycle of using famous personalities as pitchmen has swung back to sports stars after a long ride with foreign actors and actresses. Another trend will surely take its place. Meanwhile, soccer star Beckham is cashing in at levels unmatched anywhere.

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