

Brands are made popular by people



By Veli Dlamini

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When talking about the power of influence and word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM), I always mention the [Hush Puppies](#) story. I believe that it is a true demonstration that for any brand to reach a tipping point, success is not only dependent on big above-the-line budgets. A great marketer once said: "Traditional marketing has companies speak to many to reach one, but today we speak to one consumer to reach many."

I have sat in meetings with advertising agencies and marketing executives who are either arrogant or live in a delusional state of thinking that they have the power to make brands popular. Well, as I always say to them, your "creatively executed TV ad" or "out of the box strategy" remains precisely that. The fact of the matter is that for any campaign to go viral, brands depend on the *right people* to spread the message in their circles. People 'on the ground' make brands popular - not necessarily marketing executives.

Realistically based on a consumer's experience of the brand or service they can either become the unofficial brand ambassador or enemy of the brand. Through word-of-mouth they can build or destroy the brand's reputation within their circle of friends. WOMM has the power to quickly build up or tear down the reputations of products, services and organisations.

In '[The Tipping Point](#)' by Malcom Gladwell, he tells a story of how a group of opinion makers started wearing Hush Puppies shoes. Others started copying the style and the brand 'tipped' to a point where people did everything in their power to stock up on Hush Puppies. Some fashion designers then started using it on the catwalk and visibility reached the 'tipping point'. The brand then experienced a renewal that, to this day, astounds even those in the company who had been ready to throw in the towel.

Power of celebrities, connectors

When you take a look at social network sites like Twitter and Facebook, celebrities continue to gain much bigger followings compared to corporate brands. This trend is also seen on content sharing sites like YouTube, Pinterest and Instagram. Music also still remains a universal cultural language enjoyed across demographics regardless of the impact of digital media on record sales.

Gladwell states that, "The success of any kind of social epidemic is heavily dependent on the involvement of people with a particular and rare set of social gifts." According to him, economists call this the "80/20 principle", which is the idea that in any situation roughly 80 percent of the 'work' will be done by 20 percent of the participants (Source: '[The tipping Point](#)' [p.19](#)).

'The Tipping Point' explains that 'connectors' are the people in a community who know large numbers of people and who are in the habit of making introductions. A connector is essentially the social equivalent of a computer network hub. They usually know people across an array of social, cultural, professional, and economic circles, and make a habit of introducing people who work or live in different circles. They are people who "link us up with the world ... people with a special gift for bringing the world together". They are "a handful of people with a truly extraordinary knack [... for] making friends and acquaintances".

At Celebrities and Brands we understand the importance of being current, relevant and in tune with what is happening 'on the ground'. We have our own team of connectors. We call our connectors the G2G (go-to guy/girl). Their job is to help us track youth culture trends and to use word-of-mouth to give authenticity to our clients' brand campaigns.

These individuals include influential celebrities, campus ambassadors, as well as outspoken and credible individuals on social media. What puts our team in control is that it has a combination of curiosity, self-confidence, sociability and good energy.

Not only are these people socialites, imperatively they are also regarded as the go-to people for information. They are trusted to know the coolest parties, fashion trends, hangout spots and their opinions on trending topics on social media are valued. 'Cool' is the essence of the G2G, their personality exudes 'coolness', they don't fake it, neither do they try too hard to be cool.

The right celebrity with the right brand

As I always say when it comes to the youth, 'cool' is not something that brands can fake - no matter how much money you invest on radio, print, television, billboards. These platforms only allow you to establish your brand's voice, not your brand personality.

Cool brands are seen in the circle of other cool people, it all boils down to who knows your brand and what their social class or influence in their circles is. Celebrities and musicians can add so much value to your WOMM.

Matching the right celebrity with the right brand based on shared values, aligned objectives and, ideally, a balanced exchange of assets can translate into good ROI for brands. However, failure to ensure that the talent/celebrity loves the brand, or is really interested in getting to know your brand, may lead to a case of "doom and gloom" for the campaign with no impact in the culture.

There is nothing worse than someone endorsing something they either know nothing about or clearly have zero enthusiasm for. The brand needs to ensure that the celebrity uses their personal channels and social networks for amplifying the partnership. This gives both additional reach and, more importantly, shows consumers that the brand and the personality have connected at a deeper level.

Important points

1. Understand the shared values between the celebrity and brand.
2. Figure out what is the commonality that the consumer believes so that the partnership is natural and doesn't seem like it's forced.
3. Today's consumers are very smart, they will know when the relationship is forced and, instead of having a positive effect, the brand could be viewed negatively.
4. Celebrity power is subjective, but for brands power is ultimately measured by increased sales and an authentic representation of the brand in culture.

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