



Send to printer



Close this window

Published: Wednesday, June 18, 2008

Brands: Layering on the Exposure

By Whitney Beckett with contributions by Amy Wicks

Any publicity may be good publicity, but what publicity is best?

For brands with little or no advertising budget (and even for those with sizable ones), that's a critical question that can shape how to focus marketing energy. Winning editorial credits, having your dress worn by a celebrity and — the mother of all placements — getting picked up by Oprah can put a product on the map overnight and create credibility.

The buzz machine of media can be a powerful force, observers agree. Juicy Couture, now owned by Liz Claiborne Inc., didn't advertise for its first decade, and many up-and-coming brands, including Tory Burch, Alice + Olivia and Lululemon, rely on placements on celebrities and magazine credits. But experts stress that, in the long run, such activities should only be part of an overall marketing program that includes advertising.

"For now, not advertising has been a business decision: We couldn't afford it as a start-up," said designer Tory Burch. "We haven't been able to advertise, so we had to be creative."

Part of that creativity has involved getting the brand on celebrities. The celebrity weekly magazines that chronicle the who, what and wear of "It" girls have become a valuable tool for brands.

"Celebrities are walking advertisements," said Burch, whose brand has been sported by everyone from Cameron Diaz to Sigourney Weaver to Blake Lively. "There's a direct correlation between what celebrities are wearing and what is selling."

Stacey Bendet, owner and designer of Alice + Olivia, said demand after a dress is shot on a celebrity in a magazine like *Us Weekly* can be measured through calls to its stores as well as a spike in wholesale demand from retailers. The brand has been photographed on everyone from Jenny McCarthy to Molly Sims.

"Editorial press in magazines has always been important, but in the past couple of years, the biggest effect on business has been from celebrities shot in clothing," said Bendet. "It creates a buzz around the brand and it helps to define the image of the brand."

Bendet added that "print is usually way more effective than television in terms of increasing demand and sales for a particular design."

Thanks to both the identifying credits and the tangible nature of print, shoppers can bring ripped-out pages of magazines into retailers, which they can then use to track the potency of a placement.

"We have 15 of our own stores and the customer really is bringing in tear sheets from magazines — even *Us Weekly* and *People*," said Burch. "Print is tangible, and they rip it out and bring it. Or they call the stores saying, 'I saw this in *Us Weekly* on Cameron Diaz.'"

Which type of magazine — high fashion versus mass fashion versus celebrity gossip — is most effective largely depends on the brand's market segment, maturity and target consumer.

As Suzanne Hader, principal at 400twin Luxury Brand Consulting, put it: "Vogue is more important for brand building.

Lucky is more important for launching, particularly if a brand is tightly merchandised with a debut capsule collection. Us Weekly is great at building buzz, but it's just a component.

"But at the top end of the market, consumers take a bit longer to woo," Hader added. "They are more likely to pick up on things in higher-end magazines like Vogue or niche publications that target them individually, such as Town & Country, in which products are positioned as a part of their lives specifically. The higher up the market you go, the more targeted and small the placement has to be."

Even with the growing impact of celebrity magazines, the role of fashion shoots in monthly glossies remains key.

"People really notice on celebrities, but with editorial, people can be really captivated," explained a spokeswoman for Angel Sanchez, a designer ready-to-wear line that has not advertised in several years.

The company benefited from a double whammy (in a good way) last year when one of its dresses got picked up on the cover of Harper's Bazaar's Fashionable Life supplement and was worn by "Grey's Anatomy" star Sara Ramirez to the SAG Awards. The dress sold out.

But Angel Sanchez's biggest coup was for a chocolate organza cocktail dress on the April 2007 cover of More magazine. Dozens of calls and e-mails followed, and the dress sold out at Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus, making it the designer's bestseller of the season.

"We were even thinking of reordering, but it was too late," she said. "Who would have known?"

For the growing number of companies finding themselves in the lucky spot of being worn by a hot celebrity or featured in a magazine, Hader has several recommendations. "First, the customer who is really responding to your press efforts will not want to wait to buy what is featured, so it works best when the brand has its own online commerce site that is fully functioning," she said. "Some new brands are blindsided — you have to have that ready to go when you do the press push.

"Also, sometimes it's not bad to sell out on something," she continued. "The nature of these product placements is you won't know until the last minute. If you sell out of something, don't drop it from your Web site — just put a sign up saying you sold out of it, or even take back orders when possible. It shows there's a demand for your product."

The increasing importance of celebrity placements creates yet another argument of fast fashion on the supply end.

"The secret to our business is ready-to-wear: When something good happens like that, we can be ready with more in two weeks," said Bud Konheim, chief executive officer of Nicole Miller.

A pregnant Angelina Jolie just wore a Nicole Miller dress at the Cannes International Film Festival, and Konheim has ordered the rest of the available fabric to be cut to make more of the dress. This comes a few years after Nicole Miller's biggest celebrity coup ever, also with Jolie, when she wore the designer's Celtic knot dress to a press conference with Brad Pitt when the status of their relationship was still in question. The company sold 10,000 of the dress — about five times more than it would have expected, "had it just been a good dress," Konheim said.

Nicole Miller won't pay celebrities to wear its dresses, but does have a showroom in Hollywood and a store on Sunset Boulevard from which stylists are allowed to select pieces for celebrity clients (Konheim said socialites photographed in the clothes don't make a considerable difference).

"How do we compete with a peanuts budget with Ralph Lauren, who does 140 [ad] pages in The New York Times?" asked Konheim. "The greatest ad you can have is having people wearing the clothes, which starts with Matilda the housewife or Matilda the secretary. We look at the customers at Neiman Marcus who buy our clothes as celebrities. You can take that idea and step it up to celebrities — people who really get noticed. The point of all of this is credibility."

But the Midas of placements continues to be an appearance on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." It helped the Tory Burch

brand, for one.

"Our biggest thing was when we were on 'Oprah' for the next big thing in fashion about eight months after starting the company," Burch said. "The next day we had 8 million hits on our Web site. That changed the company."

A spokeswoman from Lululemon, which was featured on "Oprah" last year, agreed: "Of course, 'Oprah' is the big one."

"Of all of the vehicles that can happen to you, 'Oprah,' hands down, is the best," Hader said. "'Oprah' doesn't take money, so you can't buy that placement, and people take that very seriously, as opposed to items in magazines or on a segment on something like the 'Today' show, when items are chosen by editors who are part of the industry, so there's a little give and take there."

But, Hader added, all TV is not created equal.

"We're on TV all the time, and my guess is it's cumulative," Konheim said. "We either get or don't get mentioned, and if not, some people recognize it and some don't. TV is just not as high-end a venue, and we try to keep our stuff off of junk shows. All publicity is not good publicity."

Ironically, Konheim identified Nicole Miller's biggest coup ever as a "Seinfeld" episode shot in the company's store. "[Jerry Seinfeld] was trying to impress his girlfriend by buying a Nicole Miller dress," Konheim explained. "The first time it showed it was pandemonium, and even today the power of the rerun is something to mention. When those things happen — and it is just flukes — it's great."

Konheim said he hired a publicity firm to try to replicate that success, but found that the best publicity is luck, as opposed to something that can be manipulated and anticipated.

"For the right product in the right place at the right time, it doesn't matter where it will get mentioned — it will take off," Hader said. "And for the rest, there's no magic formula."

As for the role of advertising, observers believe it still has its place even as the cacophony of ads grows. "Advertising is less important now because people are inundated by it all the time," Hader contended. "It's much more effective to have a product associated with an editor or celebrity. Of course, advertising still has its place, as it lets people know a product exists, but there is much more to consider now."

But image maker Trey Laird believes that, in the end, all efforts relate to each other. "To me, the best brands use a combination of advertising, special events, product placement, online and p.r.," said Laird. "Each brand needs to find the right recipe, but advertising still remains an important part of that mix. Brands that only, for example, send celebrities clothes to wear or have the hot bag worn by a celebrity in a magazine only pays off in the short term."

"I think it's only good if a celebrity genuinely likes the clothes, like Jennifer Connelly and her relationship with Balenciaga," he continued. "She and Nicolas [Ghesquière] are friends and she has been wearing Balenciaga to events for years. I know that some people can't tell if a celebrity is paid to wear something, but a lot of people do know the difference."

"Brands like Chanel, Hermès, Bottega Veneta know the importance of building something over the long term," said Laird. "Others that go from one hot shoe to the next are more of a blip. In the end, though, it all really depends on what strategy works for your brand and finding a recipe that works."