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SPOTLIGHT SCANDINAVIA



Star attraction

Japan is obsessed with celebrities, who now dominate TV ads. But do brands benefit from the association, asks **CAMPBELL GRAY**

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 money being paid to international stars to promote products in Japan. The price that cosmetics chain the Tokyo Beauty Center (TBC) reportedly paid to land David Beckham and his wife, Victoria, is a perfect example.

As the winner of a fierce bidding war, TBC reportedly coughed up €2.95 million, the highest sum ever paid for a foreign celebrity – or tarento – in Japan.

Foreign celebrities command huge fees for a 15- or 30-second spot. It's simple: stand by the product and say a few words... and safe – agents make sure there's a 'not-for-export clause' to bar the TV commercials from being shown outside Japan.

Beacon Communications KK – formed in 2001 from the mergers of Leo Burnett and D'Arcy operations in Japan – estimates that an amazing 60% of Japanese ads use a celebrity. "The economic recession is a decisive factor. With the emphasis on fighting for short-term results,

rather than building a brand," says Michelle Kristulla-Green, president of Leo Burnett, Asia Pacific. "It's not uncommon for a client to start the brief for a project by talking about the celebrity they would like to use."

The use of foreign talent in advertising in Japan dates back to the early 1970s. One of the first to feature in them was actor Charles Bronson, in an ad for Mandom cologne. In the 1980s – Japan's 'bubble economy' days – the market was flooded with European and American movie stars appearing in TVCs and print ads.

Even in the 'post-bubble' mid-1990s, Michael J. Fox, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Harrison Ford, Mel Gibson, Brad Pitt, Naomi Campbell, Madonna and Jodie Foster were among the Hollywood stars in Japanese commercials.

Recently, a new trend has appeared. Commercials are moving away from big-name stars to sports personalities, of which Japan can claim its own share of heroes. "Talent or celebrity advertising is used more in Japan than in any other country," says Koh

Sakata, director and chairman emeritus at McCann Erickson.

Alex Lopez, president and representative director, Beacon Communications KK, believes Japan has found a need to find heroes within its own culture. "They've started to look for Japanese heroes that went abroad, who were successful. The most evident are sports heroes in major-league baseball and football."

Using stars to pitch products in Japan, says Jeremy Perrott, Asia-Pacific regional creative director for McCann Erickson, 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.

An additional attraction of using tarentos, says Beacon's Lopez, is in making the most out of the shorter duration of many Japanese TV ads. "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."

TV is the main medium used in tarento advertising, as it maximises

exposure. However, sometimes giant billboards and transit posters are used to beef up the impact, but only where deemed relevant to the target market and depending on the product advertised.

Keiko Oda, creative producer, global creative co-ordination group, Asatsu-DK, explains that point-of-sale is often important in order to bring over the association with the celebrity from the TV spot to point of purchase. POP displays of the celebrity or even stickers are often used to remind consumers that this is the product endorsed by this celebrity. "In Japan, celebrities are probably seen as 'media'. It is not their talent that is being bought, but the image that the product can borrow from them through the association," says Oda.

He says that celebrity-focused campaigns are not usually about brand building, but rather about pushing individual products. "When a celebrity is used, it is mostly to have the audience remember the product through a strong association with the celebrity during a short but concentrated campaign. The function of the celebrity is to push the product, and to be a mnemonic device," Oda explains. "Celebrities are very rarely used to represent a brand, since there is high risk in establishing a brand on the image of a certain celebrity."

He points out that the executions themselves are very often limited in terms of the creative. A downside of using celebrities is that certain executions are simply not possible, due to the limited time available for shoots and the celebrities' own restrictions imposed on media usage.

Paul Anders Schwamm, a Tokyo-based marketing and management consultant, 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. Schwamm argues that the exposure boosts sales of her recordings and concert tickets, while the effect on the advertised brands is open to question.

Despite this, advertisers in Japan believe they have no choice but to hire celebrities. "In Japan, since there are so many media, it is more effective when you use a celebrity compared to when you don't," says McCann Erickson's Sakata.

"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." MM