

Should Road Safety Campaigns use High Profile Spokespersons?

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Abstract

This review examines the evidence relating to the benefits and risks of using high profile presenters such as sports heroes in road safety mass media campaigns. The theories relating to source effects and celebrity presenters are examined along with the empirical evidence from communication and advertising research. The approaches used by advertising practitioners are also examined. The review concludes with the author's proposed set of guidelines in considering using sports heroes or other celebrities and other decision processes to be considered.

1. INTRODUCTION

High profile people are referred to in the literature as 'celebrity' endorsers or spokesperson or presenters. Such people, including sporting heroes, are widely used in product advertising but less so in social advocacy campaigns promoting road safety or healthy behaviours. This review argues that whilst using celebrities has on occasions resulted in very positive results for the advertisers the evidence from communication research cautions their use. Indeed, it can be argued that celebrities such as sporting heroes should only be used in exceptional circumstances.

As used in this review "celebrity" refers to people who have visibility; ie, they are well known (familiar) because of their media exposure and can include people in sport, acting, modelling, politics, science, theatre or the media (eg John Laws).

Presenters are used so as to amplify or boost the communication effects of a campaign. Celebrities are chosen because, supposedly, they are able to better amplify these communication effects than are non-celebrities.

2. THE RISKS IN USING CELEBRITY PRESENTERS

A review of drink driving TV campaigns (DeJong & Atkin 1995) identified three risks in using a celebrity as a presenter in drink drive campaigns:

First, the message may be overshadowed or overwhelmed by the celebrity's presence and ultimately forgotten.

Second, celebrities can lose their lustre and this is especially so with sports stars and entertainers. Thus, in their contractual period they may disappear from the media spotlight.

Third, celebrities from the media can suddenly become newsworthy in ways that directly undermine the campaign by acting in a manner contrary to the campaign. Negative news about a celebrity not only impacts on perceptions of the celebrity, it can also undermine the product or idea being promoted (Till & Shimp 1998).

There are plenty of examples of celebrity endorsers who become newsworthy because of the dissonance between their behaviour and what they are promoting in a television commercial. In Australia, Shane Warne is the stand-out sport star seen as being hypocritical as a result of his promoting the use of "patches" for giving up smoking and continuing to smoke.

There are other risks as well. There is the risk of over-exposure. Since TV audiences tend to be sceptical because they know celebrities are being paid (a lot), then if celebrities advertise a number of products/ideas/causes this leads to over exposure and increased cynicism.

When celebrities endorse a range of diverse issues or products they lose credibility and in particular their trustworthiness. The audience is likely to see their motives as more to do with money than a belief in the advertised cause (Tripp, Jensen & Carlson 1994).

Michael Jordan at one stage endorsed products for 14 companies (including Nike, Coke, Wheaties, McDonald's, Hanes, World Com, Oakley and Gatorade).

Another risk of using a celebrity presenter is that celebrities can be loved or hated. Whilst one celebrity may turn some people on that same celebrity turns others off. The use of football stars for example is potentially likely to have a considerable impact on the chosen footballer's team's supporters but not on fans of other teams who may intensely dislike the chosen football star.

3. THE ECONOMIC COST OF USING A CELEBRITY

In Australia, unlike America road safety mass media campaigns involve paid media time and paid talent fees. Thus using a celebrity presenter in Australia usually involves a cost for the talent. These costs, in most instances, are not insubstantial and depend upon negotiations with the talent or usually the agent. The costs usually increase in subsequent years and the greater the familiarity of the celebrity the higher the cost. The critical factor to bear in mind is that using a celebrity will, in most instances, result in a talent fee equal to or exceeding the production costs of the TV commercial.

Money spent on celebrities is money not available for other activities. The true economic cost in using any celebrity is the activities foregone that would have been undertaken had a non-celebrity presenter been used. Thus not using a celebrity presenter protects the budget and provides more resources overall. Conversely, any decision to use a celebrity presenter should be taken very cautiously for all the reasons suggested thus far and because of the true economic cost (activities that will not be undertaken this year because of a limited budget). Using non-celebrities involves only small costs. Accordingly, any road safety authority must be sure that a celebrity is needed before committing itself to paying for a celebrity presenter.

It is much better to assume a celebrity is not needed and test one or more non-celebrities first. If these non-celebrities are not sufficient to boost the communication effects then the more expensive celebrity approach can be considered and tested.

4. EVIDENCE FROM TV ADVERTISING TESTING

Franzen (1994) summarises the results of thousands of TV commercial tests conducted by McCollum Spielman Worldwide and GfK Marktforschung. In one study 185 German "testimonial" TV commercials were compared with the average scores on 988 TV commercials which did not use a presenter.

"Testimonials proved to score worse than slice-of-life across the board.... They were remembered worse and liked less. They did prove to be more credible. When testimonials were combined with a visual demonstration, persuasibility and credibility increased." (Franzen 1994, p.189).

The same study also found that use of experts or celebrities resulted in even weaker TV commercials, except with respect to awareness. Franzen argues that the ideal presenter is an ordinary person showing the product in use.

“Actors are less convincing than ordinary people. Testimonials with experts are also weak, on average. Credibility scores are mediocre and awareness and persuasion poor. The use of stars from sports, theatre, music or television for testimonials obtain higher awareness scores, but all types of testimonials result in lower scores, on average, for persuasion....”

“Stars often make for extreme scores both in a positive and negative sense. If stars are used their image should match that of the brand, and they should be plausible as users of the product.” (Franzen 1994, p.190).

5. THEORETICAL MODELS OF THE USE OF CELEBRITY PRESENTERS

Underpinning research on presenter effectiveness is the communication research tradition relating to “source” effects. The original foundations were laid in communication research by Carl Hovland and his Yale associates in the early 1950’s (Hovland, Janis & Kelley 1953; Hovland and Weiss 1951). Their initial model is known as the “Source Credibility Model”.

5.1 The Source Credibility Model

This initial model states that the effectiveness of a message depends upon the perceived level of “expertise” and “trustworthiness” of an endorser. The mechanism of influence occurs through a process of “internalisation” which occurs when the audience accepts a source influence in terms of their personal attitudes and value structures.

Trustworthiness refers to the audience’s perception of the honesty, integrity and believability of the presenter.

Expertise refers to the perceived level of knowledge, experience or skills of the celebrity with respect to the endorsement.

There is considerable evidence that the Source Credibility Model does not apply universally. It applies only under certain conditions. An outstanding detailed discussion can be found in O’Keefe (1990, ch.8). In particular, research has demonstrated that in some circumstances a low or medium credible presenter may be more persuasive than a highly credible presenter. Indeed, road safety public- education campaigns may well be one of those circumstances.

5.2 The Source Attractiveness Model

Another model has been articulated by McGuire (1978) and argues that effectiveness of a message depends on “similarity”, “familiarity” and “liking” of the celebrity presenter.

Similarity refers to the supposed resemblance between the celebrity and the audience.

Familiarity refers to knowledge of and about the celebrity.

Likeability refers to the affection for the celebrity as a result of physical appearance and behaviour.

5.3 The Match-up Hypothesis Model

A third model, usually referred to as the “Product Match-up Hypothesis”, argues that messages conveyed by the celebrity’s image and the product (issue/idea) should be congruent if the advertising is to be effective. (Lynch & Schuler 1994; Till & Busler 2000).

5.4 The Meaning Transfer Model

A fourth model developed by McCracken argues that these source models do not allow us to understand the appeal of any celebrity nor to discriminate between celebrities in any useful way. He argued that celebrities are persuasive not only because they are attractive but because they are “made of certain meanings the consumer finds compelling and useful” (McCracken 1989, p.312). Thus the model argues that a celebrity’s effectiveness as an endorser stems from the cultural meanings with which they are endowed. These meanings pass from celebrity to product/idea to consumer.

6. MEASURING THE PERCEIVED “CREDIBILITY” OF A CELEBRITY PRESENTER

Credibility or more correctly “perceived” credibility refers to the judgements made by the target audience concerning the believability of the celebrity.

Numerous studies have identified two factors that underlie the audience’s assessment of a celebrity’s credibility. The two factors – ‘expertness’ and ‘trustworthiness’ - were derived from the initial landmark studies by Hovland and his Yale associates back in the 1950’s (Hovland, Janis & Kelley 1953). Their work, referred to in this review as the “Source Credibility” Model has been replicated numerous times and most factor analytic studies have confirmed these two primary factors. Sometimes the communication research literature substitutes the word ‘competence’ for ‘expertise’.

‘Attractiveness’ was added by McGuire (1985) as the critical ingredient of effectiveness of a presenter. Attractiveness for McGuire encompassed:

- similarity (supposed resemblance)
- familiarity (due to exposure)
- like-ability (affection due to a celebrity physical appearance and behaviour)

A number of researchers have suggested that credibility is influenced by attractiveness as a third dimension in keeping with McGuire’s “Source Attractiveness” Model. There is a considerable body of research in advertising and communication suggesting that physical attractiveness is an important cue in making judgements about someone.

As mentioned elsewhere in this review highly credible presenters (celebrity or non-celebrity) are not always more effective than less credible ones; eg when an audience is already favourably disposed to the message, a less-credible presenter can induce greater persuasion than can a highly credible presenter.

7. ACADEMIC MODELS OF CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING A PRESENTER

One set of academic commentators (Percy & Rossiter 1980) refers to their list of criteria or features as a ‘model’. They call it the ‘VisCAP model’ and have used it in their textbook (Rossiter & Percy 1987, Rossiter & Percy 1995 - 2nd Ed.).

The VisCAP model combines the Source Credibility and Source Attractiveness models. The Percy & Rossiter (1980) VisCAP model adds ‘visibility’ to credibility, attraction and power.

Ohanian (1990, 1991) (see section 18 of original report to Transport SA, Elliott 2001) developed a 15 item ‘Source-Credibility Scale’ involving: Attractiveness, Trustworthiness and

Expertise. Again this work combines the Source Credibility Model and Source Attractiveness Model.

Ohanian and Percy & Rossiter models can be summarised as follows:

Presenter Characteristics	
Percy & Rossiter	Ohanian
• Visibility	
• Credibility	
- expertise	Expertise
- objectivity	Trustworthiness
• Attraction	Attractiveness
- like-ability	
- similarity	
• Power	

8. HOW IMPORTANT IS VISIBILITY?

Visibility, as proposed by Percy and Rossiter (1980), refers essentially to how well known is the presenter. This factor weights heavily in favour of celebrities with great notoriety, especially in the media and this would normally include actors, sports heroes, politicians, business leaders, and leaders in the field of arts, maybe science, medicine, etc.

Non-celebrity presenters will rate very low on visibility, and zero in many instances. Visibility as a factor only applies to choices between alternative celebrities.

If visibility is to be a criterion then the question needs to be asked:

“Which of the alternative celebrities is best-known to the chosen target audience and does it matter?”

The critical question is; will **the celebrity enhance persuasion?** It cannot be assumed that **using a celebrity presenter** because they are highly visible will result in a more persuasive road safety campaign. The decision to use a celebrity or not, and if so which one, needs to be based on other criteria. Even if these criteria suggest that a celebrity should be used it is critical to pre-test the advertising to ensure that the presenter is not a distraction (a video vampire) and will swamp the advertising message.

9. PRACTITIONERS' VIEWS ON SELECTING CELEBRITY PRESENTERS

Three studies are available which attempted to identify how practitioners choose celebrity presenters. The first study involved a small sample of 21 ad agency and 22 company practitioners in the US (Miciak & Shanklin 1994). The aim was to measure the importance of individual celebrity characteristics.

Unprompted the US managers' collective view was that there was 5 critical factors:

- Trustworthy
- Recognisable by the target audience
- Affordable
- At little risk for negative publicity
- Appropriately matched with the intended audience

When asked to rate the importance of 25 factors the critical factors in rank order were:

- | | | |
|---|---|-----------------|
| 1. Credibility | - | trustworthiness |
| | - | expertise |
| 2. Celebrity audience match-up <u>and</u> = | - | ideal model |
| | - | similarity |
| 3. Celebrity product match-up | - | image |
| 4. Celebrity attractiveness | - | like-ability |
| | - | appearance |
| 5. Endorsement fee | | |
| Publicity risk | | |
| Exclusivity | | |

Erdogan, Baker & Tagg (2001) conducted a study involving 131 agency personnel/managers from 80 ad agencies in the UK. The results of this large-scale UK practitioner study appear in Table 1.

SELECTING A CELEBRITY PRESENTER			
Table 1	Mean Scores of Criteria Importance	Mean	Std. Dev.
	Celebrity target audience match	4.65	0.66
	Celebrity product/brand match	4.56	0.69
	Overall image of the celebrity	4.55	0.65
	Cost of acquiring the celebrity	4.34	0.68
	Celebrity trustworthiness	4.28	0.74
	The likelihood of acquiring the celebrity	4.17	0.77
	Celebrity controversy risk	4.13	0.86
	Celebrity familiarity	4.12	0.79
	Celebrity prior endorsements	4.07	0.78
	Celebrity like-ability	4.02	0.89
	Risk of celebrity overshadowing brands	3.91	1.00
	The stage of celebrity life cycle	3.59	0.96
	Celebrity expertise	3.32	0.97
	Celebrity profession	3.10	0.93
	Celebrity physical attractiveness	3.09	0.80
	Celebrity equity membership status	2.98	1.10
	Whether celebrity is a brand user	2.63	0.83
<p>NB 1. Base = 260 agency managers 2. Scale = very important 5, very unimportant 1 3. Standard deviation is a measure of agreement and reveals greater level of agreement (ie lower SD scores) with the higher mean scores. (Adapted from Erdogan et al 2001).</p>			

The authors carried out a factor analysis and obtained five factors: congruence, credibility, profession, popularity, and obtainability.

Erdogan & Baker (2000) conducted an in-depth study of the 30 top agencies in the UK. One of the most significant and relevant findings is that practitioners don't start with a celebrity and then develop the advertising or message. Rather, they start with the creative brief that includes stated campaign objectives. If the campaign script requires a person to deliver the message, the question of which presenter type might be used (eg typical people, experts, celebrities) arises in the minds of creative team members.

The most frequently mentioned criteria, mentioned by all the agency people, was "that the celebrity must be right for the advertising idea".

“Agencies do not start with a celebrity and build a campaign around them. Usually the campaign idea is developed first and then a celebrity search begins.”

The process, in practice, is about what best suits a campaign not who is available and popular.

The second most frequently mentioned criteria refers to the target audience’s feelings toward a celebrity, what a celebrity stands for (in keeping with the “Meaning Transfer Model”) and what they will charge as a fee.

The third most cited factor was whether the celebrity image matched the product/brand/issue characteristics (in keeping with the “Match-Up Model”).

In practice research plays a major role in deciding on whether or not to use a celebrity or to assist in choosing between alternatives. This research is likely to be quite extensive and involving:(a) researching the background of the proposed celebrity, and (b) identifying likely target audience reaction to the alternatives, including their perceptions of contending celebrities and non-celebrities and their perceptions of the match between these people and the advertising idea and the message.

Finally, as part of the process contracts and payments are considered. Agencies can either pay for the length of contracts allowing them to use commercials as many times as they like or they can pay the number of times they are exposed. One advantage of the latter is that they can save money if the campaign is not successful or celebrities get into trouble.

The issue of preparing for celebrity controversy is crucial. Managers argue that ‘**moral clauses**’ are both difficult and essential. On the one hand such clauses make it clear to the celebrity that she/he has a serious responsibility. At the same time it enables agencies to dissolve deals without any penalties when celebrities fall from grace.

The negatives likely to result from celebrity controversy can be partially compensated (but not prevented) by buying ‘**death and disgrace**’ insurance. This insurance covers the cost of re-shooting the commercial with another personality. All agencies, (but two) reported that they urge clients to buy ‘death and disgrace’ insurance.

10. SUMMING UP THE PRACTITIONER’S PERSPECTIVE

The recent UK studies of practitioners can be interpreted as a ‘model’ for selecting celebrity presenters. This reviewer suggests it be called the CCPPO model:

CCPO Model

- Congruence/fit
- Credibility
- Profession
- Popularity
- Obtainability

If however, the model is restricted to the most frequently cited ‘**very important**’ criteria then it becomes:

- Fit
- Cost
- Trustworthiness
- Risk of Controversy
- Popularity
- Expertise

11. SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR USING AND CHOOSING A CELEBRITY PRESENTER

On the basis of academic communication research, advertising testing and practitioner experience the following criteria are suggested as “guidelines” in choosing “who” to use as a celebrity presenter and “when”.

11.1 Avoid if possible

A celebrity presenter should only be used if it can be shown that using one will justify the extra cost and risk by enhancing the communication effects of the campaign.

Non-celebrity presenters should be considered and pre-tested to establish to what degree, if any, using a celebrity will be superior to using a non-celebrity or slice of life.

11.2 Start with the advertising, not the presenter

Advertising and promotional efforts ought to be developed on the basis of the communication objectives. Once an idea has been developed then search for an ideal presenter who may or may not be a celebrity. Avoid starting with a celebrity presenter and developing the advertising idea around them. The RTA 2001 fatigue campaign launched in late October features Dr Karl Kruszelnicki who is very familiar to younger audience (via Triple JJJ). The advertising idea is “micro-sleep”. He is chosen owing to his familiarity, liking, expertise and trustworthiness and his overall image and fit with road safety message.

11.3 Don’t act without research

To avoid any mismatch, and to be aware of likely controversy, it is vital to carefully research the personal and professional backgrounds of any proposed presenters either celebrity or non-celebrity.

In deciding on whether to use any particular presenter (whether celebrity or not) communication testing ought to be conducted to provide a conviction that the celebrity is worth the cost and risks owing to their superior ability to enhance the communication effects.

11.4 Choose selection criteria in advance

Selection criteria should be established at the outset and applied to all presenters under consideration –whether celebrity or non-celebrity.

There is no shortage of criteria as has been demonstrated in the previous section. These criteria may vary from situation to situation.

The current reviewer’s (Elliott’s) selected list would include:

- overall perceived image of presenter for the target audience
- fit with advertising idea
- fit with road safety message
- cost
- controversy/embarrassment risk
- perceived expertise
- perceived trustworthiness
- like-ability
- similarity
- risk of overshadowing the message

In developing these criteria it is important to note that communication research has demonstrated that some of these variables like like-ability, similarity, trustworthiness and expertise do not always apply universally. In some situations (for a review see O'Keefe 1980) communication is enhanced by using presenters who are not liked or not expert or similar to the target audience.

11.5 Choose a presenter most closely identified with the cause

Sports stars are most effective in endorsing sports related products just as racing car drivers are with fast cars.

A presenter, and especially a celebrity presenter, is likely to be powerful if they have a direct relationship with the cause: eg, involved in a car crash or killed someone. Thus Christopher Reeve is a powerful presenter for spinal-cord injury, Michael J. Fox for Parkinsons disease and Fiona Coote for Heart disease research.

Ideally, where a close relationship can be identified the celebrity presenter should be used on a continuing basis and not used only once.

11.6. Try to own the celebrity

Money aside, celebrities are likely to have their greatest impact if "yours" is their sole advertising sponsorship. The evidence is strong that exclusive arrangements are the most effective (Mowen & Brown 1981). Conversely, the more products promoted by the celebrity the less trustworthy they are likely to be perceived. The ideal presenter is someone who does it because they believe in the cause rather than the money.

11.7 Be tough in final negotiations

Every single detail needs to be negotiated up-front with celebrities. Using a celebrity presenter can backfire: when they get into trouble, over-expose themselves because of multiple endorsements, overshadow the message, change their image, lose favour, fall out of the media limelight. The details will need to include such things as:

- limitations regarding other possible endorsements
- time period
- range of activities included in contract
- level of fees and how remuneration will occur (type of payment)
- morality issues
- media coverage
- geographic area coverage

11.8 Finally, protect yourself

A "morality clause" in the contract goes some way but ultimate protection is only available by not using a presenter or using an animated presenter. The advantage of a morality clause is that it makes it clear up-front that the celebrity or non-celebrity has a responsibility to avoid public controversy. As well, the morality clause means that the advertiser can break the contract.

When things go wrong there is a need to make another TV commercial. One way of protecting yourself is to insure against the cost of having to do this by taking out "death and disgrace" insurance which will cover re-shooting with another personality.

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