

CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENT AND ONLINE GAMBLING: TEN GOLDEN RULES

Having secured our interview with **David Coulthard**, we sought the wisdom of **Professor Mark Griffiths** in examining the golden rules of celebrity endorsement in iGaming.

CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENT has long been an integral part of product and service marketing. However, does the presence of actors like Ben Affleck and James Woods, or television celebrities like Sharon Osbourne really make customers more likely to play online poker or bingo? Commercial gambling has only relatively recently got in on the celebrity endorsement bandwagon mainly because gambling advertising has – until very recently – been restricted. In this article I examine some of the golden rules that online gaming operators need to bear in mind when using celebrity endorsement.

(1) Celebrity image and reputation are paramount

If you want to use a celebrity as part of your marketing drive, you have to carefully evaluate a celebrity's image and reputation. Steps need to be taken to make sure the celebrity's image and reputation matches the needs of the company. Sales can take a tumble especially if the celebrity used does something that compromises the company's image. For instance, comedian Vic Reeves' drink-driving conviction wasn't very good for the car insurance company he was promoting!

(2) Remember what celebrities can bring

In most marketing situations, the relationship between the company and the celebrity is mutually beneficial. The latest PartyCasino adverts with ex-cricketer and TV celebrity Phil Tufnell being a good case in point. The company receives all of the perks associated with the celebrity such as publicity, positive connotation, recognition, respect and trust. The celebrity – at the very least – benefits financially.

(3) Intrinsic association and familiarity are important

Celebrity endorsements also tap into the psychology of 'intrinsic association'. This is the degree to which the gambling activity is positively associated with other interests, people and/or attractions. Intrinsic association also taps into the psychology of familiarity and help explain why (for instance) so many slot machines feature themes relating to television shows, films, popular board games, video games and/or

celebrities. It makes punters feel they know something about the product before they have even played it.

(4) Successful marketing leads to increased trust and product longevity

The advertising industry claims that brand recognition, recall and awareness are the most important outcomes of successful marketing campaigns. This, they believe, will result in greater sales and increased revenue. Celebrity endorsement is perhaps even more important in online commercial activities like online gambling where identity, trust and reliability equate to potential punters.

(5) Plan for the long term

Many online commercial enterprises appear to opt for short-term, high impact celebrity endorsement and 'buzz marketing' rather than investing for the long-term. These types of marketing tend to create an instant image and reputation but may not necessarily be good for the company's longevity. To be market leaders amid the competition, online gaming operators need to couple strategic marketing with solid brand management.

(6) Celebrity endorsement is only part of the jig-saw

Interestingly, a survey carried out by Marketing UK asked marketers from a sample of the top 1,000 British companies which techniques they thought were the most successful in increasing sales and at building long-term relationships with customers. It found that celebrity endorsements ranked last, below loyalty schemes, sales promotions, and general display advertising. However, it doesn't make sense to isolate celebrity endorsements because they are just one of many marketing elements that can be used in a successful campaign. What's more, if marketers didn't believe celebrities help in generating long-term sales and profits, they wouldn't keep paying the large fees they command.

(7) Popular celebrities don't always increase sales

When a gaming operator uses a celebrity endorser, they are signing up an image or brand that could itself be argued to be a gamble. At the very least, the gaming

company should get what they pay for but it can all go horribly wrong. When Billy Connolly was used to promote the National Lottery, sales decreased. The adverts had high recall by the public but were loathed by a large proportion of the British public who found the purple bearded Scottish comedian irritating.

(8) Do your market research

While the jury is out on whether celebrity endorsement is a long-term sales winner for online gaming operators, one question that has yet to be answered through empirical research is, what type of gambler does a celebrity endorsement impress and/or influence in their decision play? Is it the novices? Is it the long-standing punters? Is it males only? All of the above? Maybe different types of celebrities appeal to different clientele. No-one knows, so do your market research.

(9) Remember that players can be the celebrities too

For me, the most interesting development of the celebrity endorsement culture is how the big poker tournament winners have now become celebrities in their own right. This type of celebrity endorsement may be more appealing to players. The fact that someone has become a celebrity through skill and talent in an activity that gamblers are already positively predisposed towards suggests they will want to have more of a psychological association with these celebrities than those who just happen to play poker as a hobby. Judging by the front covers of high street gambling magazines, the editors clearly believe that it is the big winners that sell the magazine rather than Hollywood actors or scantily dressed women.

(10) Beware the risks

Just like your punters, you have to ask yourself how much your company is willing to gamble on celebrity endorsement in trying to carve out a niche in the market. As an online gaming company you have got to be clear that you are targeting the right product with the right celebrity with the right message. It can be a long hard slog to shape an image or reputation but it can take just a few seconds of celebrity madness to destroy it.