



Brands get personal

Many of the world's biggest brands are helmed by charismatic and high-profile leaders. But what does a company really gain from this kind of personal association, and why are regional examples so thin on the ground? by Rania Habib and Ibrahim Nehme

What do Virgin, The One furniture store, Apple, EasyJet and Dubai have in common? Well, aside from being major brands, they have, respectively, Richard Branson (pictured, above), Thomas Lundgren, Steve Jobs, Stelios Haji-Ioannou and Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. Those are five very different people but they have one thing in common: They are the personalities behind the brands.

"Every brand needs to be championed by actual people; individuals who can be held accountable for the actions of the brand," says Aubrey Ghose, founder and managing director of AIS Brandlab. "The best CEOs out there understand that their role is actually to be the brand, live its values, and project its personality. It's not an easy task, and a rather daunting one for some."

It might not be easy, but using personalities to back or to drive brands can be an effective business. It could be especially useful in a region like the Middle East, where brands are young and embryonic.

But who are the personalities behind brands in the region? Sheikh Mohammed aside, it's

slim pickings out there according to some. And despite his enthusiasm for brand champions, Ghose actually thinks it's better this way. "The average term of an expat CEO in the Middle East is 18 months," he says. "That's really not enough time to set a long-term strategic goal for a brand that wishes to build a lifetime loyalty in the mind of the consumer."

"People here are very conscious about not becoming prima donnas," says Gaurav Sinha, managing director of Insignia, a Dubai-based branding agency. "They come across as humble, they want to be faceless and build organizations bigger than the person. Are personalities here as mature as they can be in other markets? I challenge that; they've gone out of their way to be behind the scenes here."

LEVANT LACKING. Lebanon also displays a lack of personalities behind brands, but for reasons different than those in the GCC, says Ibrahim Lahoud, director of strategy and brand communication at BrandCentral, a Beirut-based brand-



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ing agency. He attributes the phenomenon to various reasons, including the indifference of Lebanese people to brands' efforts to position themselves in the hearts and minds of consumers, not to mention the high number of brands that revolve around existing international formats.

"The secret of the people behind brands is innovation, and unfortunately, so far, that is one rare ingredient," says Lahoud.

While politics (in the form of Sheikh Mohammed, for example) has been behind some brand personalities in the Gulf, it's a different story in Lebanon. The nature of the divisive Lebanese political system can be a great setback for brands. Salim Wardy, owner of Domaine Wardy – a family business which specializes in the production and sale of wine and spirits – was recently elected as a minister representing the Lebanese Forces within the newly-founded government. Domaine Wardy has suddenly become affiliated with a certain political party, as opposed to being a brand that used to enjoy an independent nature.

Sinha says that the regional market is an "ambiguous" one for brands and their potential representative personalities for the cultural reasons he mentioned. But if he has to name stand-out personalities, he will cite Sheikh Ahmed Bin Saeed Al Maktoum, chairman of Emirates airline, or Mohamed Ali Alabbar, the man behind property developer Emaar.

"That said, the first rule of marketing is to have a great product," says Sinha. "If I buy from Emaar, it's not because of Alabbar, but because it's a good brand."

THE ONE EXAMPLE. Another regional example that fits Ghose's personality requirements is Thomas Lundgren, CEO ("chief emotional officer," according to Lundgren himself) of The One furniture chain. Lundgren has a big personality, and he pours it into the company and brand through wacky ideas such as his 2007 open advertising pitch, involving agencies recording a track for the "Thomas Lundgren Breakfast Show" in just 24 hours (see "The One that got away," page 50, *Communicate*, Jul.-Aug. 2007). He also drives The One's significant CSR efforts.

His story – although not internationally-known like the biggest brand personalities out there – is best-known for a dream he had where an angel told him he was on a mission to save the world from Ikea. After working with the furniture giant for 10 years, he created his own, zany, brand of furniture.

"I do everything from my heart, and I think my business is about feelings and brains," says Lundgren. "You can't just base something on feelings. If you only base it on brains, though, it can become something that has no passion at all. But if you have passion it is very easy to get involved with your brand." Lundgren says that becoming the per-

sonality behind his brand was not a conscious decision; upon retrospection, however, it was an obvious one. "Because of my passion," he says. "Our company is driven by that."

Sinha says that having a human element makes brands more appealing, because it makes them more believable. "The person who is the face of the brand should be an authentic pillar to the brand proposition, and someone who is there to enrich it," he says. But he warns that the old adage "To be known is to be loved" does not apply from a branding point of view. Even if a brand has a larger-than-life personality behind it, if the product is not great, the branding strategy won't lead very far. Lundgren couldn't agree more. "We have core values that we use in everything we do – love, live, dare, believe – just like you have rules within your family, otherwise it's a schizophrenic operation," he says.

NOBODY'S PERFECT. Having a personality behind a brand can have various pitfalls, says Ghose, the biggest of which is the old cliché that everyone is human. "When the individual disappoints through his or her behavior, the brand suffers," he explains. "Also, our press culture is designed to elevate a person to celebrity status, then find their flaws and expose them. As a result, personalities are generally less trusted, as the consumer has become subliminally aware that it may only be a matter of time before they find fault with the individual. Good marketers understand this principle and are increasingly reluctant to develop a brand around an individual personality."

That worry may be a way off for Lebanese brands; Lahoud says they still have a way to go, as the concept of branding is still immature compared to in the West. In the meantime, leaders behind brands should consider his warning: "CEOs get busy managing the organization, whereas they should be managing the brand."

Companies looking to avoid becoming a large faceless giant know that the personality behind the brand plays an integral role, says Sinha. And in spite of his cautious attitude to associating a brand too closely with one person, Ghose also says that if consumers are attracted to a person and trust their behavior, their choices, and their values, then they will trust the brand that person represents.

"We treat brands in very much the same way as we relate to people as individuals," explains Ghose. "That's why brands with celebrity personalities behind them work so well, but only for as long as the celebrity is relevant in the mind of the target consumers."

So what's the trick to staying relevant?

"Authenticity is so important," says Lundgren. "It's just like you would deal with your kids: you can't tell them not to smoke but smoke in front of them. The trick is to be yourself. Walk the talk." ■



HE'S THE ONE

"Chief emotional officer" Thomas Lundgren is weird, wacky and well-known