CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENTS: AIRLINES WAGE WAR ON EXPENSIVE NEW FRONT

News / Airlines

Competition between the world's major airlines has moved beyond who has the best product, to who has the hottest celebrity endorsement.

Hot on the heels of Qantas's new partnership with the "Boy from Oz" Hugh Jackman, Emirates has unveiled an advertisement starring American darling Jennifer Aniston.

The commercial, which focuses on Emirates' First Class offering, appears designed to counter the Nicole Kidman campaign by rival Etihad.

Celebrity "ambassadors" are highly sought after by airlines, who appear willing to pay seven-figure sums to use the names and images of movie stars.

But marketing experts are divided on the benefit of such high priced partnerships, with some suggesting airlines would be better off ploughing their money into loyalty programs.

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Australian National University celebrity endorsement expert Andrew Hughes, said using a star had a very "short term benefit" for airlines.

"To keep people loyal to the airline you have to use other marketing methods, to build and maintain that relationship," said Dr Hughes.

"You can't rely on the fact that people can relate to Nicole Kidman because only a small percentage of the market is going to have that connection."

British Airways has countered that to an extent, by using a string of celebrities in campaigns, including actors Naomi Watts and Orlando Bloom, F1 driver Jenson Button and model Georgia May Jagger.

Director of Blinc International celebrity procurement agency, Brian Levine said star associations gave brands "personality".

"You can show the plane and you can show the features of the plane. but having a personality involved, creates that emotional connection with an inanimate object," said Mr Levine.

University of Adelaide marketing expert Dr Cullen Habel agreed celebrities gave airlines "breakthrough".

"The main reason companies use celebrity branding is to cut through the customer's filters, it pushes their probabilities in one direction," said Dr Habel.

"Whether it's airlines or service stations, it's a game of nudging people in your direction, and improving probability."

Celebrity partnerships are not without risk for companies - particularly when scandals erupt.

When Tour de France "legend" Lance Armstrong was exposed as a drug cheat, Nike, Trek and Giro could not distance themselves from the cyclist quickly enough.

Similarly Tiger Woods was dumped by Pepsi and Gillette when his personal life become front page news in 2010.

Malaysia Airlines CEO Christoph Mueller recently made light of their partnership with Australian tennis brat Nick Kyrgios, likening his notoriety to constant media reporting about MH370.

But the airline is sticking with Kyrgios who recently filmed a promotional video of his top five things to do in Malaysia.

In Dr Habel's mind, it's a case of almost any publicity is good publicity.

"It's an awareness tool, and it builds a brand personality," he said.

"I think they almost all do it quite well for the tool that it is."

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