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How to give your brand real star quality

by Debra Blundell.

The World Cup isn't the only thing dominating our television screens this summer. Those of us not into the Beautiful Game who have done a spot of channel surfing in an attempt to find some diverting entertainment have found what? Hours and hours of Big Brother.

Unlike the World Cup which, whether you like it or not, is a world-class event worth a four-year wait, Big Brother comes around inevitably every year and lasts an interminable 13 weeks. And when it's not Big Brother, it's some other reality TV show that we're subjected to. Even when the shows end, every magazine, tabloid and digital channel promises us a scintillating exposé into the private life of someone we've never even heard of...

Thankfully, the celebrity of most reality 'stars' isn't long-lived. If the bookies are right, we'll be hearing a lot more of Tourette's-sufferer and current BB front-runner, Pete, but Chantelle Houghton – even with her celebrity fiancée, has now pretty much faded into obscurity.

It's a sign of our times. The start of the 21st century will be remembered as the zenith of the Cult of Celebrity. Gossip magazines proliferate. The Beckhams and Hiltons are everywhere you look. Celebrities aren't just people any more – they're global brands. A-listers, B-listers and Z-listers have realised that clever branding can catapult them to the big time, and keep them there. But equally, if

they don't get the branding right, they can plummet from tabloid front page to chip wrapping in the blink of a false eyelash.

So where does it all go wrong? Their mistake – as anyone who knows anything about managing a global brand will tell you – is that they offer nothing different. Identikit looks. Identikit talent (or lack of it). Identikit personality. But it goes deeper than that – and this is where the parallels with branding come in. Most minor celebs fail to make it to the heady heights of super-stardom because they are fakes. They are pretending to be something they are not. When you strip away the hair extensions and spray-on tan, they are just as ordinary as the rest of us and we are left deflated and disappointed. Real, authentic celebrities, with talent, heritage and genuine star quality, however, will never go out of fashion.

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The comparison between the fame game and branding may seem trivial, but there are some genuine lessons we can learn from the rise and fall of these fake celebs. To succeed in today's increasingly competitive market, your brand needs to be not just compelling, but authentic. If you're pretending to be something you're not, you may tempt consumers to give you a whirl but they'll soon feel dissatisfied and go in search of the real deal. Here are the new rules in a nutshell:

Be compelling. Consumer choice and competition are greater than they've ever been. Many products and services are becoming commodities. You have to offer something people genuinely want in order to stand out.

Don't pretend to be something you're not. Adding a few salads to the menu doesn't make a burger bar a health food café and releasing a single doesn't make a model a popstar. You're fooling no-one but yourself.

Don't over-claim. Very few brands are actually the biggest, the best or the first. Consumers today are clued up. They read reviews, they do research on the Internet. If you overstate your case you will just undermine your credibility.

Get the balance right. This is the tricky bit. If you overdo the truth you can come across as too worthy and therefore unexciting – the Cliff Richard of branding. Always bear in mind what the market wants and not just what you believe in. But if your brand is all bells and whistles but you don't deliver on your brand promise, you will lose consumer loyalty as they scratch beneath the surface and find there is nothing there. The trick is to get the right balance between what you promise and what you deliver.

Be genuine, not fake. We know where stars like Michael Douglas and Elizabeth Taylor have come from and we know what made them great. The same goes for products and services. If we know where a cheese comes from or the heritage of a business, we trust it more.

Have integrity. Consumers like brands that are ethical, honest, straightforward and have clear provenance. Just look at Alan Titchmarsh's career!

Don't be boring – there's still room for fun. Brands can fulfil all these criteria with warmth and wit. Love her or loathe her, Jade Goody is one of the very few 'fake' celebrities to have carved a real career for herself. She's always been true to herself, honest about who she is and where she is from, and clever enough to turn her lack of brains into a positive asset by laughing at herself. It's a formula that has charmed many doubters over time. Perhaps we can all take a leaf out of the Goody brand book...

To see how your vital stats measure up, please contact Gilles Guilbert for an informal chat on 020 8858 5100 or email gg@indigocreative.co.uk