

# Celebrity endorsements: a Kenyan guide

By [Esther Karuku](#)

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“David Beckham signs a £20 million deal with Giorgio Armani.” “Beyonce is the new face of Samsung electronics.” Headlines such as these appear regularly on European and American dailies. Celebrities promote products through endorsements all the time in developed economies and it is now slowly picking up in Kenya.



What is a celebrity, you may ask. According to Uche Okonkwo of brandchannel.com, celebrities are people that exert significant influence in several facets of society, ranging from arts, music, movies and television, sports, culture, politics and even religion. They range from film and television stars to musicians, sports personalities, royals and politicians.

The concept of a celebrity endorsement is relatively new in Kenya. A celebrity endorsement is a channel of communication in which a celebrity acts as the brand's spokesperson and certifies the brand's claim and position by extending his/her personality, popularity, stature in the society or expertise in a field to a brand. Marketers can currently explore this avenue since the Kenyan market is not flooded with endorsements.

## Kenya's celebrities

Don't get me wrong, Kenyan celebrities have been involved in several local marketing efforts. Joseph Kinuthia who acts as Omosh in the overly popular local school drama, Tahidi High, has featured in several Tuskys Supermarket adverts. Equity Bank's current advertising campaign Karibu Member has several familiar faces including beauty queen Cecilia Mwangi, Afro-fusion musician Susan Owiyo and sports legend Paul Tergat. Not forgetting the big one (no pun intended) Charles Bukeko, the star of another popular Kenyan drama, Papa Shirandula. Bukeko was chosen as the face of the Coca Cola “Brrr” campaign that ran internationally. It was reportedly worth millions of shillings.

East African Breweries Ltd (EABL) came close to an endorsement when they picked gospel singer, Esther Wahome, local DJ Adrian and Tanzanian singer AY to promote Malta Guinness. EABL has also recently signed on local musician Nameless (David Mathenge) to publicise the Jitolee campaign against drunk-driving.

## Radio presenter endorsements

Another form that is increasingly becoming popular is radio presenter endorsements; the most notable being the comedic pair of Maina Kageni and Mwalimu King'ang'i (Dan Ndambuki). Their morning show has managed to gain quite a loyal audience and marketers have noticed. In my view, telephone service provider Telkom Kenya, through its Orange brand, is the only Kenyan company that has raised the bar when it comes to celebrity endorsements. Orange signed on one of the most admired local music artists, Jua Cali (Paul Nunda) to be its brand ambassador in a deal worth Kshs10 million.

All these marketing efforts prove that celebrity endorsement is largely unexplored in the Kenyan market. One reason for this may be the underdeveloped local film and TV production industry. In the US, where the celebrity endorsement culture is so ingrained that there are agencies that only specialise in crafting endorsement deals, most brand ambassadors are Hollywood actors. In India, brands are endorsed by Bollywood and cricket stars. In a bid to promote growth in the film industry, the Kenyan government removed the current import duty on film equipment in last year's budget. It's a little too early to tell, but marketers should keep an eye out for any new faces that may appeal to their target market.

## Sports celeb endorsements

The sports fraternity, on the other hand, is a different story altogether. Kenyan athletes have been on the cover of local dailies for their brilliant performance for decades now. They command both international and regional recognition and respect. It is quite surprising that no corporate has exploited such great publicity through an endorsement deal. Another great team is the Kenya Rugby Sevens team. Humphrey Kanyage and his boys have done Kenya proud and there is currently a lot of goodwill towards them. They have and continue to receive quite a lot of positive press coverage. Being young and successful, these rugby players have a large following. Kenyan companies need to move from simply sponsoring sports teams to building brand equity through these sports heroes and heroines. Celebrity endorsements, if done properly, are more profitable for the brand than mere sponsorships.

## Getting it right

Now that we have identified a couple of potential celebrity endorsements, how do you make sure you do it right? According to experts, the following should provide you with a simple checklist to gauge the suitability of a celebrity:

- **Celebrity appeal:** The celebrity must interest, or better still, draw in your target audience for an endorsement to be effective. Your target customer must want to be identified with the celebrity. Think along the lines of, “When I grow up, I wanna be...”
- **Celebrity sincerity:** Your target audience needs to believe that the celebrity would still use your product even if they were not being paid to do so. It is crucial to get a personality whose word is trustworthy. This is particularly important when introducing a new product into the market. A familiar face will decrease the anxiety involved in trying out a new brand, but only if the celebrity is believable.
- **A right fit:** Do the celebrity values tie in with the brand values? Here's a hint: A marketer whose target market is made up of young, urban, trendy professionals should consider making the Kenya Rugby Sevens leading scorer, Collins Injera, his/her brand ambassador.

## It is a risky affair

Endorsement deals are incredibly viable but there are some risks involved. The biggest threat in celebrity endorsements is the celebrity him/herself. The kind of personality to look for while shopping for an endorsement ideally is appealing, relatively scandal-free and credible. However, despite the best planning, crises do occur. Case in point is Michael Phelps in the US. The Olympic gold medalist was photographed smoking marijuana at a party and was dropped by Kellogg Co. as an endorser of Frosted Flakes after the photos surfaced. Another instance is when Wm. Wrigley pulled adverts for its Double mint gum featuring singer Chris Brown after he was arrested for assault. A marketer needs to bear in mind that celebrities are human and they will make mistakes that may impact the brand. This means that contingency plans are a necessity.

The rule of thumb here, is to always remember that an endorsement is not a magic wand. All other brand building processes must continually be adhered to even as the celebrity campaign is carried out. Nevertheless, celebrity endorsements are a great way to revive a dying brand, give it some energy and new appeal. Are there any daring Kenyan

brand managers ready to take this on?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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