

Rap and Brand Names an Odd Mix

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NEW YORK (AP) - A few weeks ago, Jay-Z announced he was boycotting Cristal at his clubs after the champagne company's president indicated that he wasn't thrilled about the brand's association with hip-hop culture _ comments the rapper called "racist."

But what about the many other high-end brands whose names constantly appear in rap lyrics? Do they embrace the free publicity or cringe at it? It depends on which company you ask.

Mercedes-Benz _ the most-mentioned brand in last year's top songs _ says the car's popularity in hip-hop circles certainly didn't hurt sales growth over the last dozen years.

Cadillac, which lost some luster in the 1980s and '90s, credits its turnaround, in part, to the popularity of the Escalade among rappers and other celebrities. Moet Hennessy USA said the wine and liquor company was "thrilled" about its affiliation with hip-hop.

Bentley Motors and Louis Vuitton _ also among the most name-checked brands in music _ were more reticent on the subject.

While some companies may shy away from being associated with a culture often marked by misogyny and violence, it is undeniable that hip-hop wields immeasurable power and influence in business.

Aspirational in some respects and now synonymous with youth culture in many corners of the world, hip-hop has long been credited with _ or criticized for _ having an impact on everything from clothing to cars.

But periodically, hip-hop's chief arbiters _ like Jay-Z _ turn on brands because of slights, real or perceived, to the culture.

Pepsi agreed in 2003 to give \$3 million to charity after Def Jam co-founder Russell Simmons threatened a boycott because the soda company dropped an endorsement deal with rapper Ludacris following complaints from conservative commentator Bill O'Reilly.

Designer Tommy Hilfiger was dogged for years by rumors that he didn't want minorities buying his clothes. His company, which denied the entire episode ever happened, never quite regained the same popularity in hip-hop.

Lucian James, an executive with a branding agency that tracks mentions of products in Billboard's Top 20, warned that in a fast-changing marketplace luxury brands in particular must capture relatively "new" customers while maintaining "traditional or old" customers.

James said Cristal put itself at serious risk of losing the new clientele because of the comments made by Frederic Rouzaud, the president and chief executive of Champagne Louis Roederer _ a 230-year-old French company that makes the bubbly.

In a recent issue of The Economist magazine, Rouzaud said the company viewed the affection for its champagne from rappers and their fans with "curiosity and serenity."

Asked by the magazine if the association between Cristal and the "bling lifestyle" could be

detrimental, Rouzaud replied:

"That's a good question, but what can we do? We can't forbid people from buying it. I'm sure Dom Perignon or Krug would be delighted to have their business."

Jay-Z, who has made numerous references to Cristal throughout his career, pulled the champagne from his sports lounges, where bottles sold for \$450 and \$600. And, at a concert this week at Radio City Music Hall, the Def Jam Recordings president omitted "Cristal" from some of his lyrics.

"What they don't seem to have been interested in is seeing the popularity of Cristal in hip-hop culture," James said of executives at Cristal, which ranked No. 8 in mentions in songs last year. James' company, Agenda Inc., compiles the list.

"I can't imagine Cristal recovering very quickly. It (hip-hop loyalists) was a huge part of their market," James said.

Noel Hankin, vice president of multicultural initiatives at Moet Hennessy USA, said his company, which markets Hennessy, Dom Perignon and Belvedere, among other drinks, said his company welcomes the association.

"We appreciate that business. We want it. It's critical to our business success," Hankin said. "We've never had any hesitation or reservation about embracing the hip-hop community."

Moet Hennessy has sponsored the televised Vibe Awards, where bottles of Moet were conspicuously visible on tables. Hennessy ranked No. 6 on Agenda's report.

Louis Vuitton, which tied with Cristal at No. 8 on the list, declined to comment on the association. So did No. 2 Nike.

John Crawford, a spokesman for Bentley Motors (No. 4) released a short statement that said in part that the company "believes that increased interest in the marque, from any quarter, is good for the brand as a whole."

An executive at Mercedes-Benz, part of DaimlerChrysler AG, viewed the attention from a business standpoint.

"Hip-hop is really a language of the younger generation and it's always great for a brand to be relevant with the younger or next generation of buyers," said Kass Dawson, who heads emerged markets at Mercedes-Benz.

"We consider it a compliment of the highest order," Dawson said, adding that Mercedes has sponsored events related to awards shows and hip-hop magazine parties. "It really speaks to what our brand stands for _ the success, status, aspirations."

Cadillac spokesman Kevin Smith gave props to celebrities, including rappers, and their fondness for the Escalade for the company's resurgence. Cadillac has loaned vehicles for placement in videos and movies, he said. For the prototype of the 2007 Escalade, the company invited about 35 celebrities to an exclusive viewing.

Even Rouzaud, the executive atop the Cristal brand, seemed to realize the potential impact a boycott by hip-hop devotees would have on his bottom line.

After Jay-Z announced the boycott of Cristal, Rouzaud issued a statement to "set the record straight and express our gratitude that people from a diversity of cultures and countries have been enjoying our wine."

Rouzaud characterized Jay-Z's accusations as "unjust." Moreover, Rouzaud said, the company has been "a little bit dismayed at seeing our wine sprayed around in celebration instead of being savored in a glass," in reference to scenes in rap videos.