



Celebrity Slipstreaming: Pop Stars & Pop Expressions

By Max Sutherland

-Dr. Max Sutherland's column is published monthly and posted on the web at www.sutherlandsurvey.com. Receive an advance copy by email - [free subscription](#). Max Sutherland is author of the book '[Advertising & the Mind of the Consumer](#)' (published in 8 languages) and is a registered psychologist. He works as an independent marketing consultant in Australia and USA and is also Adjunct Professor at Bond University. Contact msutherland@adandmind.com.

Toyota advertisements have featured Steve Irwin, the Crocodile Hunter. Gillette used David Beckham. L'Oreal ads starred Claudia Schiffer. Why?



Well, it's pretty obvious. Such celebrities:

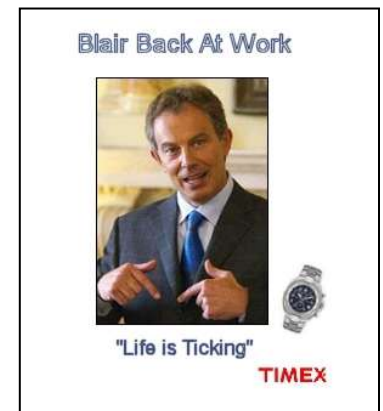
- a) Are attention magnets and
- b) By association, they lend credibility/trustworthiness to the brand. ("It must be good if Claudia Schiffer uses it." "It must be good if Beckham uses it.")



Cashed-up brands can afford to pay megabucks to these stars for the right to hitch a ride on their celebrity status. However, what about brands that can't afford it, or don't want to pay the celebrity's asking price? In a previous column ([SlipStream Marketing - want free sponsorships with that?](#)) I showed how it is possible, *without* paying sponsorship fees, to appropriate some of those benefits - by slipstreaming. Here's a Jaguar ad in 2003 for example, slipstreaming Beckham to announce the new XJ model is coming.

There are various ways to slipstream celebrities. Federer wins Wimbledon.

What stops any brand from taking out an ad congratulating him? "Congratulations Roger Federer. From one top seed to another. Yates Seeds." Or a politician like Tony Blair goes back to work after very publicly being hospitalized for a heart problem. Timex could slipstream this with something like "Life is ticking – Timex".



Celebrity Expressions

Now, here's yet *another* idea. Celebrities don't have to be flesh and blood. Pop expressions can also have star-like quality. So why not hitch to a pop expression and slipstream it? Like Budweiser did with 'wassup'. Can you hear the expression 'wassup' nowadays without thinking of Budweiser? At least in the USA?

Leslie Savan likens pop expressions (Wassup, Gimme a Break, *Hel-Lo?!)* to flesh and blood celebrities in her insightful book "[Slam Dunks and No-Brainers](#)". They temporarily stop us in much the same way that seeing a famous person does. "Amid the fractured, fuzzy notions and mumbled grunts of everyday verbal intercourse" Savan says "a snappy catchphrase practically steps out of the limo and onto the red carpet, a confident grin gracing its flash-lit face."¹

Celebrity words, just like human celebrities, are attention magnets that can draw attention to your brand. Think about the many pop expressions out there with this celebrity-like quality that are practically begging to be slipstreamed. Like Budweiser did with wassup, you could slipstream one of these:

- To die for.
- Get over it.
- Don't go there!
- In your face.
- That's gotta hurt.
- Yeah, right.
- Don't ask.

What these type of pop phrases have in common, according to Savan's book, is the roar of a phantom crowd. "They always speak of other people having spoken them. It's as if the words came with built-in applause signs and laugh tracks".

So, to take a phrase out of the Nike book, 'just do it'. Nobody owns the phrases and they don't demand sponsorship fees, therefore it costs nothing to adopt one as an attention magnet for your brand. Raise it as your own and over time its impact will escalate beyond attention and you may perhaps come to own that expression in peoples' minds – like Budweiser and 'wassup'.

I could cite many examples of brands that have slipstreamed pop expressions (or what I call syntactical celebrities), although few are as well known as the Budweiser or Nike ones. That's because all too often they are not continued for any extended length of time. Short term slipstreams that are exercised purely to draw attention can nevertheless work well just for that limited purpose.



T-Mobile for example, slipstreamed *"If you don't want to know the score, look away, now"* – an expression that is often heard when TV programs report the scores of games to be replayed later. The expression demands attention and people are attuned to it. T-Mobile slipped this expression, backhandedly, with *"If you want to know the score, look this way now"*. In the ad, the score appears in a text message on the mobile phone and the ad is all the more effective for appearing under a report of an Agassi match in the sports pages.

So why not try syntactical slipstreaming? There are many other prime candidates that are waiting out there now. Consider:

- Go figure
- *Enough* already
- Get outta here.
- So over it.
- Like, whatever
- Duh.
- I *don't* think so.
- *Yesss!*



In any age, at any time, there are pop expressions waiting to be adopted by brands looking for attention. In 1975, in a short term campaign, Toyota pitched its new Land

Cruiser against the more established Jeep by slipstreaming the expression ‘read it and weep’. The ad was headlined: *“Read it and weep, Jeep.”*

Mum, a brand of deodorant, very successfully adopted the expression “I can’t get by without my mum” in the 1960’s. It had a long running season that spanned more than a decade.

The best known and longest running star of this syntactical stage is of course Nike’s slipstream of ‘Just do it’ – an expression whose star quality has been boosted by Nike’s promotional expenditure

When Nike, or whoever, has already used an expression, does it mean that you can’t use the same one? *Get outta here!* Of course you can, especially if you are in an unrelated product category.

Think about how unrelated categories exploited Toys R Us by slipstreaming the fame in its name and tweaking the original to produce such gems as [Wigs R Us](#), [Dried Flowers R Us](#), [Quotes 'R' Us](#) and even [Texas Cooking - Beans 'R Us](#). In a similar way, the fame of ‘Just do it’, can be tweaked and slipstreamed by other categories (see illustrations).

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Novotel hotels slipstreamed ‘just do it’, albeit with a small tweak that left off the first word (to produce ‘Do it!’)

“just buy it!”

Morphy Richards toasters slipstreamed ‘just do it’ with a different tweak - by turning the expression into ‘just buy it’.

JUST DO IT

JUST BUY IT
 AT OLYMPUS SPORT

A similar tweak (‘Just Buy It’) was adopted by the Nike retailer, Olympus Sport, as a supplement to the original expression.

just done it

Here’s how [LSM](#), (a UK financial administration outsourcing company) executed a whole campaign offering to free-up time for their clients to do what they really want to do. It shows the fun things their clients have just done - because of the time that they now have - thanks to LSM. Each ad is built around the celebrity expression “Just done it!

Tweak It and They Will Come!

Tweaking a celebrity expression (as in these illustrations) not only allows you to capture the attention accorded the original expression but chances are it also has another effect. It thinly masquerades one expression as another, creating a kind of momentary impersonation and this triggers a further attention device that I call [the mind's intruder alarm](#). The mind does a mild, momentary double-take and the extra mental processing that this generates, makes for even more memorable impact. See [Intruder Alarm column](#).

So get your free attention magnet, here! Hitch a ride on one of these celebrity expressions. One or two snobby advertising agencies may look down their noses and decry it on the grounds that it lacks originality. But where's the evidence that artistic originality outsells clever strategy? If it works, *go for it*. Yesss!

¹ Savan, L. (2005). [Slam Dunks and No-Brainers](#). New York, Alfred A. Knopf. P15