

# Renault banks on Ranbir to weave the magic

Bollywood continues to have a strong association with auto brands

MURALI GOPALAN

When Renault recently roped in Ranbir Kapoor as brand ambassador, it marked yet another instance of a celebrity's ongoing honeymoon with the auto industry.

However, Sumit Sawhney insists the association with the young actor goes beyond this. "A celebrity like Ranbir becomes a perfect fit for Renault as he, like the brand, is vibrant, forward looking and connected to people. He is the best bet to take our message across to potential customers," says the CEO & MD of Renault India.

## Perfect fit

Sawhney drives home the point that Ranbir will go beyond merely endorsing products but will be face for the French carmaker in the subcontinent. As he puts it, the idea is to move from being "a house of brands to a branded house".

The timing is especially critical with Renault all set to launch its Kwid hatchback in the coming months. Its targeted custom-

er base extends across India and this is where Ranbir's presence is expected to make a huge difference. Some years ago, Renault had another face from Hindi cinema, Anil Kapoor, endorse its Pulse but that was limited to a single model.

Sawhney concedes that eventually it is the product that will make all the difference but brand ambassadors still play an important role in recall as people listen to them.

"India is so huge and diversified that it is not the easiest of tasks reaching out to customers with one voice," he says.

In Sawhney's view, the young actor also has a lot in common with the automobile brand which makes him the perfect choice as ambassador. "Not only is he a versatile actor but brings to the table the same levels of passion, versatility and innovation as Renault does," he says.

Apart from this, adds Sawhney, Ranbir is part of a rich legacy in the Indian film industry which goes all the way back to his great grandfather, Prithviraj Kapoor



**Right choice** The Kapoor legacy behind Ranbir ties in nicely with Renault's 117 years in the auto industry

and thereon to the next three generations. Renault, likewise, has a legacy which dates back 117 years though it is one of the youngest brands in India. Its new slogan, "Passion for Life", will be better relayed through someone like Ranbir, says Sawhney.

According to him, the actor while being the face of the young generation still embodies traditional values like humility and respect. "He is someone who would comfortably fit in as the

ideal son or brother in a family," he adds.

## Face of the brand

Interestingly, Renault's global ally, Nissan Motor, had opted for Ranbir to endorse its Micra compact in the initial period of its launch. It is still a moot point if his presence made a difference as sales of the car are little to write home about even while it is the leading export model from India.

Ranbir, likewise, has endorsed Hero MotoCorp's Maestro scooter which does not make him an unfamiliar face in the auto arena. Sawhney is spot on when he terms him a youth icon which is perhaps what Virat Kohli, India's cricket skipper, is in the sports arena. In a country where two-thirds of the population is under 35 years, it only makes sense to have a face which can make the right connect with today's generation.

Bollywood, of course, has had more than its share of celebrities in the auto space over the years. In the '80s, Dharmendra was the face for the Rajdoot motorcycle while post-reforms India had Shah Rukh Khan spreading the message of new entrant, Hyundai Motor which has gone on to become a strong rival in this competitive market.

Over the years, actors and sportsmen (primarily cricketers) have endorsed auto brands. Amitabh Bachchan and his son, Abhishek, were roped in by Maruti for the Versa while Sachin Tendulkar, now the face of BMW, was brand ambassador for Fiat during the launch of the Palio.

Bajaj Auto, which steers clear of celebrities, briefly had Tamil

actor, R Madhavan, for its scooter many years ago.

The list is endless and includes Hrithik Roshan and Priyanka Chopra for Hero MotoCorp while TVS Motor has had MS Dhoni and Tamil actor, Suriya for its Star City bike range. Akshay Kumar is the voice for Honda Motorcycle & Scooter India while Deepika Padukone and Anushka Sharma have endorsed scooters from the stables of Yamaha and TVS respectively.

More recently, Ranveer Singh has showcased Maruti Suzuki's Ciaz while Virat Kohli articulates Toyota's values. The Japanese automaker also had Aamir Khan for the Innova some years ago.

Not all these big faces helped the cause of selling the products of the companies they endorsed. By the end of the day, the customer needs to be convinced that he is getting a good deal in the overall cost of ownership.

A commercial vehicle maker like Ashok Leyland had a strong brand ambassador in MS Dhoni but turned the corner thanks to its own efforts eventually. Renault's leadership will only be too aware of this reality as it embarks on its new honeymoon with Ranbir Kapoor.