

IN SEARCH OF THE RIGHT DEAD CELEBRITY

How Do You Find the Best One for Your Ad Campaign?

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By [Anna Heinemann](#)

NEW YORK (AdAge.com) — OK, so you're thinking that maybe a certain dead celebrity is just the thing to help your upcoming advertising campaign really cut through the clutter. But how can you be sure that sufficient numbers of your target audience actually recognize or even like the deceased entertainer you plan to bring back to life via digital magic?



Selling dead celebrity image rights to advertisers is a major business, and new digital manipulation techniques promise to expand it further.

Also see the **DEAD CELEBRITY LIKEABILITY CHART** at the bottom of this article.

Is there actually a marketing research firm somewhere that tracks consumer opinions about dead people?

Likeability data

Well, surprisingly, there is, and it's headquartered in Manhasset, N.Y. From there, Marketing Evaluations has been providing advertising clients with data on the general familiarity and appeal of living celebrities since 1964. In recent years, it has branched out to include likeability data on dead celebrities as well.

Dead celebrities have caught on big in advertising since a 1991 Diet Coke commercial featuring Elton John performing with James Cagney, Louis Armstrong and Humphrey Bogart was such a success that Coca-Cola created a sequel featuring footage of other famous celebrities. Since then, technological advancements have allowed advertisers to seamlessly incorporate footage of dead celebrities into ads, such as John Wayne in a Coors campaign or, perhaps most memorably, to turn a dance by Fred Astaire into a Dirt Devil spot.

But while many of the ads have drawn criticism -- Roger Ebert called using portions of actors' performances in commercials "grave robbery," and Fred Astaire's daughter wrote Dirt Devil a letter proclaiming that her father had been "sold to the devil" -- dead celebrities do seem to be a profitable option for advertisers.

Forbes' annual ranking of the Top-Earning Dead Celebrities proves that these familiar faces are still money-makers long after they've gone. The magazine's fourth-annual list released in late 2004 listed 22 celebrities who earned at least \$5 million in the past year.

Elvis Presley licensing

Elvis Presley's estate topped the list with \$40 million in earnings that *Forbes* attributes not to his

music sales, but to Elvis Presley Enterprises' extensive use of licensing and marketing to sell Elvis-sponsored products and admissions to Graceland. According to *Forbes*, the singer's estate has more than 100 licensees who use Elvis' image to sell products ranging from Zippo lighters to cards by American Greetings.

The rights management firm CMG Worldwide knows better than most just how much of a profit center images of the dead can be. The firm represents the estates of hundreds of deceased celebrities, including Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, Buddy Holly, Rock Hudson and Marilyn Monroe, whose likeness alone is used to promote hundreds of products worldwide.

"Marilyn Monroe died in 1962," said Jonathan Faber, president of CMG Worldwide. "It's 43 years after her death, and the sort of earning potential and market opportunity that she still has is really remarkable. If Marilyn stands for elegance and glamour and timeless beauty, and you are an ad executive working on a product you'd like to have all those adjectives attached to, why not put Marilyn on there? It's shorthand -- she personifies all of these."

New controversies possible

Mr. Faber said that the initial shock of ads incorporating old film images into modern product promotions seems to have died down but that digital technology has evolved to the point where it could trigger controversy again.

"You look at a John Wayne Coors ad or a Fred Astaire Dirt Devil ad ... those are generations ago in terms of what the technology was. The technology is evolving to the point where you could theoretically create an entirely new James Dean movie," Mr. Faber said.

To assess the potential "fit" and marketability of these deceased celebrities as contemporary product icons, Marketing Evaluations now calculates every two years what it calls its "Dead Q" scores, measuring the current consumer appeal of 150 deceased performers.

Top ranking dead celebrities

In its latest 2005 Dead Q tallies, Lucille Ball, Bob Hope and John Wayne top the list of the public's favorite dead celebrities. Although Elvis was *Forbes'* top-earning dead celebrity, he ranks at No. 12 on the Dead Q list. Also among the top 15 are Jimmy Stewart, Katherine Hepburn and the Three Stooges.

Two recent deaths made this year's Dead Q list: Johnny Carson, who is ranked No. 7, died Jan. 23, and John Ritter, who is ranked No. 8, died Sept. 11, 2003.

Marketing Evaluations extracts its data from the responses of 1,453 adults who replied to a mailed questionnaire asking whether they recognized a celebrity's name, and then whether they'd rank that particular celebrity as being among their "favorites." The respondents were taken from a national sample of approximately 2,500 people who agreed to participate in the company's national consumer panel.

Steve Levitt, president of the research firm, said the scores are given on a scale of one to 100. The scores are based on the percentage of those familiar with the dead celebrity who also rank him or her among their favorites, rather than being based on the perceptions of everyone surveyed, regardless of whether they knew the celebrity.

Calculating the Dead Q score

In a survey group of 100, for example, Bob Hope's score of 52 would represent that 83% of those surveyed said they were familiar with Mr. Hope, and 60% of those familiar with him said they'd list him as their favorites.

"What if 23% of everyone said Jerry Orbach is of my favorites, yet only 71% are familiar with him?" Mr. Levitt asked in explaining the premise behind the scoring system. "What percent of people would we say think Jerry Orbach is terrific, 23? That's not fair because 29% don't know him."

Many of Marketing Evaluations' customers are involved in advertising, licensing and promotion, but Mr. Levitt pointed out that the data is also useful to estates trying to fight licensing infringements. The data can be used to establish that the personality in issue currently has worth.

He also suggested that Dead Q scores could be useful to media outlets such as American Movie Classics (AMC) or Turner Classic Movies in determining which classic movies to air based on which older actors have recognition and appeal. Mr. Levitt said the data could also be used by collectibles companies or even the U.S. Postal Service in determining which celebrities to include on commemorative stamps.

2005 DEAD CELEBRITY LIKEABILTY CHART			
Rank	Celebrity	2003 Q Score	2005 Q Score
1	Lucille Ball	51	52
2	Bob Hope	56	51
3	John Wayne	47	48
4	Jimmy Stewart	46	44
5	Charles Schulz	46	43
6	Red Skelton	45	43
7	Johnny Carson	--	41
8	John Ritter	--	40
9	Jackie Gleason	38	40
10	Michael Landon	37	39
11	Katherine Hepburn	40	38
12	Elvis Presley	40	38
13	Carroll O'Connor	39	38
14	George Burns	38	37
15	Three Stooges	36	35
16	Walter Matthau	37	33
17	Cary Grant	36	33

Data compiled by Marketing Evaluations, Manhasset, N.Y.