

Rap, brand names make for odd mix

For years, hip-hop artists have given products free promotion in their songs; that could change

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. Moët Hennessy USA said the wine and liquor company was "thrilled" about its affiliation



Hip-hop icon Jay-Z performs with Beyoncé during the BET awards show last month. The music executive 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.'

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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" cus-

tomers 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 Moët 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."

Moët Hennessy has sponsored the televised Vibe Awards, where bottles of Moët were conspicuously visible on tables. Hennessy (See Brand, Page 9)

Black youth receive by giving help

By Tiesha Henderson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

DALLAS (NNPA) - It has been said the greatest joy you can receive is in doing something for someone else. And this sentiment has been firmly planted in the hearts of the students working with the National Association for the Prevention of Starvation or NAPS, who have traveled almost 700 bumpy miles in a passenger van all because they saw a CNN story about the plight of Dallas' urban youth. What would motivate young college students to give up their summer in exchange for an opportunity to help strangers?

Nicole Brown, a sophomore at Oakwood College in Huntsville, Ala., said her heart was touched when she saw a video of the work NAPS does on its mission trips.

"Then I found out that NAPS even goes out into the schools and into the streets, and that really caught my attention because my heart is in the streets," she said. "I used to be out there doing stuff that most young people do."

Thessicar Antoine, also a sophomore at Oakwood College, said her first encounter with NAPS was when she

was in elementary school. This experience led her to become a member when she reached college.

"When I was in the third grade, NAPS came to Florida and gave a presentation," the Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., native said. "I always remembered it and said if I was ever to come to Oakwood College I would want to do what NAPS did because it had such an impact on me."

NAPS is a non-profit organization that was founded by Anthony Ball on the campus of Oakwood College in Huntsville, Ala. in 1978. The organization became officially recognized by the state in 1993.

Oakwood is a historically Black school affiliated with the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Although NAPS is headquartered on Oakwood's campus, it has no affiliation with the college or any other religious organization. Officials said they made this choice so that they would not be limited in terms of their ability to travel to different cultures throughout the world to render aid.

Through its feeding, educational, medical and building programs, the organization has completed missions all over the world. With

chapters in several foreign countries including India, Zambia, Madagascar and Jamaica, NAPS has established an international influence in humanitarian and relief efforts.

Some NAPS students have taken "a year of dedication" off from school so that they may go into schools and juvenile detention centers to speak to the young people there full time. Brown, one such student, said she took the year off because she wanted to reach as many people as possible.

"You look into the world and you see that the majority of the young people aren't living a very good life... The biggest impact on young people is [other] young people. So working with NAPS has been a blessing in my life," she said. "Summer breaks and Christmas breaks are not enough for me. I just see so many people that need to be encouraged. So many people's lives need to be changed, and I can do so much within one year."

Children's program director Julie-Anne "Jewel" Satterfield said the group was supposed to return to India to continue their work helping with the first school for African-Indian people this sum-

mer. However, the plans fell through and NAPS remained stateside.

However, this did not deter NAPS in their mission. "We said 'Hey, the Lord closed these doors but there's a work that needs to be done right here in our backyard,'" Satterfield, a 2005 graduate of Oakwood College who now works fulltime with NAPS, said.

Francisco Cross, the missions director for the project said, "We were looking at the news and we saw the Dallas Independent School District and the violence going on in the school system."

"One of our mottos is 'Children helping children.' So what better place and time to help these young people, who, in most cases, come from broken families with no father figure or no mother figure?" he said.

The group has spent the summer dividing its efforts between Hurricane Katrina relief in Lake Charles, La., and working with Dallas Youth. In Dallas, NAPS is working with a day camp at the Salvation Army's Cedar Crest Corps and is coordinating service efforts with several area high schools.

"It's been a blessing. They're great kids," said

Rodney Hinkle, the corps administrator of the Salvation Army center where NAPS is helping out. "You always hear negative things about our youth, but these 15 to 18 students have been nothing but positive and a good influence to not only our kids, but the seniors that we have in our senior program."

During their neighborhood visits, the NAPS students adopted a group of young ladies from south Oakcliff interested in following in their footsteps. Affectionately dubbed the "junior NAPS" by the organization's members, these girls have also begun to help at the Salvation Army day camp. One of the girls, Keonis Spencer, a junior at Roosevelt High, said she's learned a lot from working with NAPS.

"It's helped me learn about the world and the people in it," she said. "I've learned about college and community service and about the Bible and about God," Spencer said.

"We want to train these children to be able to carry on the work, because when we leave we want it to continue," Cross said.

Tiesha Henderson writes for the Dallas Examiner.