

Does the Pope Wear Prada?

Marketers Pray for Day Pontiff Is Seen Using Their Brand; Even Better Than a Movie Star

By STACY MEICHTRY

POPE BENEDICT XVI is appealing to a new group of admirers: marketers seeking not blessings but pontifical product placements.

Since his election last year, the pope has been spotted wearing Serengeti-branded sunglasses and brown walking shoes donated by Geox. He owns a specially engraved white Apple iPod, and he recently stirred much publicity with a pair of stylish red loafers that may or may not be from Prada.

The raft of designer labels floating around the new pontiff is one of the odder consequences of last year's long-awaited papal transition. For the marketing world, the change at the helm of the Holy See is presenting an unprecedented opportunity, but also an ethical dilemma over how far to exploit religion for hyping a product.

Benedict XVI's media-savvy predecessor, John Paul II, was one of the world's most photographed public figures, but he also was a conspicuous ascetic. His preferred footwear was a pair of worn brown shoes. Prior to a 1981 assassination attempt, the Polish pontiff cruised around Rome in a 1960s Mercedes he inherited from his predecessor. Product placement was also a relatively nascent marketing technique throughout the first decade of John Paul II's tenure, and his last decade was marred by a steady decline in health.

Benedict XVI is striking a snazzier profile, presenting international brands with a welcome change of pace. Being associated with the pope is worth at least 100 times more than an A-list celebrity because the pontiff has a more devoted following, says John Allert, chief executive of the British unit of Interbrand, a global branding consultancy that is part of the **Omnicom Group Inc.**

But unlike movie stars, who can command huge sums for product endorsements, or the queen of England, who discreetly allows companies to mention royal patronage, the pope, as the moral and spiritual leader of more than one billion Catholics, endorses holiness and chastity but not products.

That means companies have to hope the pontiff uses a product they have donated to him and then tastefully note the event, or delicately capitalize on a photograph showing the 79-year-old theologian using or wearing a particular brand. Astute marketers say the key



Pope Benedict XVI wearing the famous **red shoes** at his installment mass; above, and glare-protected by Serengeti glasses, left.



advertise the photos or send out news releases, but a spokesman says the spotting helped Serengeti's business with retailers. "Our salesperson comes in and the retailer says, 'My Gosh! Did I just see the pope wearing Serengetis? Show me that style!'" says Phil Gyori, Bushnell's vice president of marketing.

Apple Computer Inc. declined to comment on the pencil-thin iPod nano that Benedict received as a gift from employees of Vatican Radio on the station's 75th anniversary. Radio technicians specially ordered the nano from Apple with the engraving "To His Holiness, Benedict XVI" and packed it with Vatican Radio programming. But Apple trade maga-