

## DIVINE PRODUCT PLACEMENT

# Pope draws new flock: marketers

*Benedict sports Geox shoes, Apple iPod in departure from ascetic predecessor*

By Stacy Meichtry

**P**OPE BENEDICT XVI is attracting a new group of followers: 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-expected papal transition. For the marketing world, the change at the Holy See is presenting an unprecedented opportunity, but also an ethical problem 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. Before a 1981 assassination attempt, the Polish pontiff cruised around Rome in a 1960s Mercedes he inherited from his predecessor. Product placement also was 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 firm that is part of Omnicom Group Inc.

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 bil-

lion 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.

The key words are "tastefully" and "delicately." Pursuing pope-and-product juxtaposition poses risks. Brands have to be careful not to appear opportunistic or they could risk a backlash with the pope's admirers. "The question of endorsing products, especially from a figure such as the pope, raises an enormous number of questions in terms of the ethics of each company," says Ben Cronin, general manager and research director of S.Comm, an advertising-research firm.

A senior Vatican official says it when it comes to worldly goods, Benedict XVI's choice of personal accessories is "completely arbitrary."

The official adds: "He's aware of the buzz, but mostly he laughs about it, because it's so absurd. What does he really have to

*Please turn to page 14*

*Continued from first page*

choose? He doesn't wear a tie or coat. The glasses he wears are the same glasses he wore as a cardinal, as is the pen he writes with."

Because the pope is so lightly accessorized, brands like to be associated with him all the more. Following Benedict XVI's election in April 2005, officials of Italian shoe company Geox SpA worked to leverage their relationship with papal spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls, a close friend of Geox founder Mario Moretti Polegato and a member of the company's ethics committee. Geox gave Mr. Navarro-Valls several pairs of Geox Uomo Light loafers—featuring the brand's trademark anti-foot-sweat system—as a present for Benedict XVI.

When the pope wore the shoes, Geox chose not to promote the event through advertisements or press materials. Still, the com-

pany was delighted when word got out. "If the pope uses our product that means it works. He's out in public under the sun for hours in a heavy tunic, so he risks becoming sweaty," says Geox spokesman Eros Scattolin. "What better testimony could you ask for?"

**Bushnell Performance Optics** got a lucky break when, during one of his first outings last year, Benedict XVI was photographed wearing a pair of its Serengeti sunglasses. Bushnell didn't advertise the photos or send out press 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 Benedict XVI received as a gift from employees of the 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. Apple trade magazines, such as Macworld, quickly trumpeted the event, peppering their Web sites with newspaper reports of the gift.

Italian upscale leather maker **Natuzzi** was a little bolder with its marketing efforts. The company created the internal upholstery for a golf cart that General Electric Motorcars, a subsidiary of Germany's DaimlerChrysler AG, gave the pope last year. The pontiff only uses the cart inside the Vatican gardens and, therefore, out of the public eye. Natuzzi and General Electric Motorcars issued a joint press release to let people know about the vehicle.

Car makers are the most active campaigners for papal patronage. With Benedict XVI's planned trips to Spain, Poland and Turkey, **Volkswagen AG** and **BMW AG** are both jockeying to replace DaimlerChrysler's Mercedes-Benz as the next maker of the popemobile—the car with a bulletproof bubble

that is arguably the world's most visible sport-utility vehicle. Mercedes has supplied popes with cars since the 1930s, providing three bubble-backed popemobiles over the years. The German company donated the current popemobile—a heavily armored ML 430—to the Vatican in 2002, and company spokesman Joerg Zwilling said Benedict XVI has no immediate plans to abandon it.

That is unfortunate for Volkswagen, which supplied a fleet of 100 vehicles to organizers of World Youth Day during the pope's high-profile visit to Cologne, Germany, in August. At the time, Volkswagen also offered to redesign the popemobile based on its Touareg SUV model. The Vatican declined.

This past October, BMW donated a bulletproof X5 SUV model to the Vatican, and the car maker says it hopes Benedict XVI will soon make public use of it since the vehicle, like the pope, is "Bavarian-made." "The appeal is that he is one of, if not the, world's best-known persons," says BMW spokesman Michael Rebstock. "If he is on his way somewhere, he's attracting everyone's attention."

The most widely publicized papal branding event appears to have been the result of mistaken identity.

Over the past few months, scores of media reports have dubbed Benedict XVI the "Prada Pope," crediting the Italian fashion house with having made the pope's eye-catching red loafers.

The senior Vatican official says the loafers actually were made by the pope's personal cobbler. Prada has refused to confirm or deny the reports, allowing the press speculation to continue. A spokesman for Prada said the fashion house lacked "the necessary elements" to make an accurate determination.



*Pope Benedict XVI (left) at his installment Mass in St. Peter's Square on April 24, 2005.*



Cortis

*Pope Benedict XVI on his way to meet Italy's president.*