

In bed with Kylie Minogue

It's a hit ... Kylie Minogue's bedding line has proved popular with UK shoppers. She first charmed her way into our lounge rooms on the small screen, and in the two decades since her Neighbours days, Kylie Minogue's adventures in branding have taken her through music, fashion, fragrance, lingerie and right back to where she began - our homes. Her new Kylie at Home range of bed linen, cushions and throws makes her the latest newly fledged soft-goods designer and part of a far larger phenomenon: the increasing migration of celebrity names from the catwalk, movies and television into our homes.

Kylie at Home, co-designed with UK home furnishing company Ashley Wilde, is a girlic, slightly camp cornucopia of satin, taffeta, sequins and sparkles inspired by the Showgirl tour's feathered headdresses and Minogue's grandmother Nain. When it launched in the UK last year, Minogue told Woman & Home magazine that the domestic side of her creativity was in her blood: "My grandmother taught me how to pattern-cut and sew from the age of about 13. To this day, I adore fabrics, trims, the look and feel of them, the way they catch the light and work together."

"Kylie oversees the product," says Graham Dean, Myer's director of sales (home). "That's why you see her coming through in the range. It's very girlic; there are lots of bows and silk and lacework."

Earlier this year, a survey of marketers and advertisers conducted by Mark Richardson's talent agency, Talent Inc!, named Minogue as Australia's most powerful celebrity and personal brand, beating Shane Warne, Dame Edna and Elle Macpherson. "I would say at this stage in her career there isn't much she wouldn't get away with putting her name on," says Richardson. "Even through all the personal turmoil she's kept it together and held herself with grace. She's become an icon - somebody who has gone beyond what they do to become a brand because of who they are."

Until recently, the only carpets synonymous with Alex Perry were the red ones down which celebrities were sashaying in his showstopping dresses. But when Australia's most famous gown designer debuted his new collection last month, it hung on walls instead of women, and was unveiled to architects and artists rather than prima donnas and princesses.

Perry's first rug collection - eight bold, Greek-inspired designs for Designer Rugs, which retail from \$4500 - is also his first foray into a design medium beyond clothing. "I'm enjoying it a lot," he says. "The rugs were a far more serene experience than fashion often is. Rugs don't tell me they feel uncomfortable while I shoehorn them into a gown to make them look fabulous."

Perry joins Designer Rugs' growing stable of high-profile, first-time crossover names, including fashion designers Akira Isogawa and Easton Pearson, jewellery line Dinosaur Designs and Oscar-winning production designer Catherine Martin. According to Myer's Graham Dean, brands with star power are a fast-growing segment of the homewares market. "Celebrity endorsement on home products is very important now, particularly in the cookware area," he says. "It's being driven by the surge in popularity of cooking, all the shows on TV such as MasterChef."

And although Kylie at Home (which sells exclusively throughout Australia at Myer, with bed linen starting at \$210 and cushions at \$50) has only been in stores since July, initial sales are looking as healthy as they have been overseas, where the range sold so well at UK department stores that within months of its 2008 launch, it was swiftly expanded into 12 other countries. "The range appeals to our core customer - the mid-market female," says Dean.

And Alex Perry isn't stopping at rugs; he's just signed up with Waterford crystal to co-produce high-end glassware.

Meanwhile, one of Australia's most established celebrity homewares lines is about to head off the shelves and into cyberspace. After nearly five years selling exclusively at Kmart, Deborah Hutton's Living with Deborah Hutton range parted company with its retailer earlier this year, and will be available online through new partner eZiBuy from early next year.

All this activity reflects what many perceive as a renewed focus on the home. Says Designer Rugs director Yosi Tal, "Because of globalisation, things have become overwhelming, and so people are looking for a sense of intimacy; the home has emerged as our oasis, our fortress. It's increasingly important that it looks and feels exactly right."

Home may be where the heart is, but celebrities - and their retailing, manufacturing

and marketing partners - know it's where the dollars are, too.

These days, consumers are a tougher crowd. In a world of cynical audiences, instant information sharing and endless competition, we're less inclined to trust a famous face on a box. Endorsement success, say branding experts, comes down to one overworked but crucial word: authenticity.

Mark Richardson, head of Melbourne-based talent agency Talent Inc!, which represents Sunday Life's Karen Martini and MasterChef runner-up Poh Ling Yeow, says the old-style basic endorsements are making way for closer associations between celebrity and product. Minogue, Durie, Hutton and Jamie Oliver, who invented his bestselling Flavour Shaker and uses his own products on stage and TV, all make much of their involvement in the design and production of their ranges.

"Success comes right down to the fit and integrity of the association," Richardson says. "With the flow of free information in the world, there are no cover-ups any more. The talent or endorser must be able to honestly stand up and say, 'I've had a hand in designing this or I use it, or I've helped modify it.'"

He adds, "There have been several notorious examples of artists endorsing things and not using them or, worse, being seen to use other products." Think Pepsi endorser Britney Spears drinking Coca-Cola on camera, or Shane Warne getting caught smoking after his deal with Nicorette nicotine gum.

"What's really important for us is design cred," says Designer Rugs' Yosi Tal. "If a person's just a celebrity in their own lunchtime, interior designers and architects are not going to use

their product just because they're famous. It has to be well designed."

Alex Perry adds, "I'm a good sales person and I could flog you anything, but there's got to be integrity or people won't like you or trust you and then won't love your brand."

But surely it takes more than well-intentioned sincerity to persuade us to keep letting celebrities into our homes? It seems hard to reconcile today's savvy consumer with a person prepared to trust their personal style decisions to celebrities they'll never meet.

Mark Richardson believes endorsements function just like old-fashioned word-of-mouth. "Nowadays, the majority of things we buy are endorsed somehow," he says. "It might be by a friend we trust because in our minds that person has always been stylish or quality-conscious."

But thanks to popular culture's obsession with fame, he says, they've come to feel as if that circle of friends now includes celebrities. "When we get that involved with people's lives, it's like they almost enter our social network and therefore, like friends and family, we listen to them."

Con Stavros, senior lecturer in marketing at Melbourne's RMIT, says celebrity endorsements make choices in a cluttered marketplace easier. "Often when you're buying products you're trying to reduce risks, particularly when it's homewares, which are very visible," he says. "You've hoped that the Kylie or the Gordon Ramsay has done

the hard yards for you, they've worked out what's good or in fashion; you can buy those items and know you're in the game ..."

This is why, says Myer's Graham Dean, a

celebrity's popularity doesn't always equate with sales. "Gordon Ramsay has been interesting," he says. "When he came out to Australia and we had those issues with a few inappropriate comments, sales in his cookware and dinnerware rocketed. It's bizarre, but it shows you that even when the celebrity may not be that popular, the endorsement is still a very powerful thing."

Affection for the celebrity doesn't matter, says Stavros, as long as you trust their opinion. "You might say, 'Ramsay's on TV, he's a Michelin-starred chef, so he wouldn't put his name on something that wasn't of quality. Would Kylie risk sullying her brand with something that was poor quality? That's unlikely, so I'll trust those brands.'"

Celebrities and their business managers pay close attention to the quality of the products they're pushing, says Stavros. "If something goes wrong, they can put themselves out of business. It's hard for them to throw up their hands and say, 'It's not my fault - it's the company I was dealing with in China.' These days, news spreads quickly and the attitude to your name can change overnight."

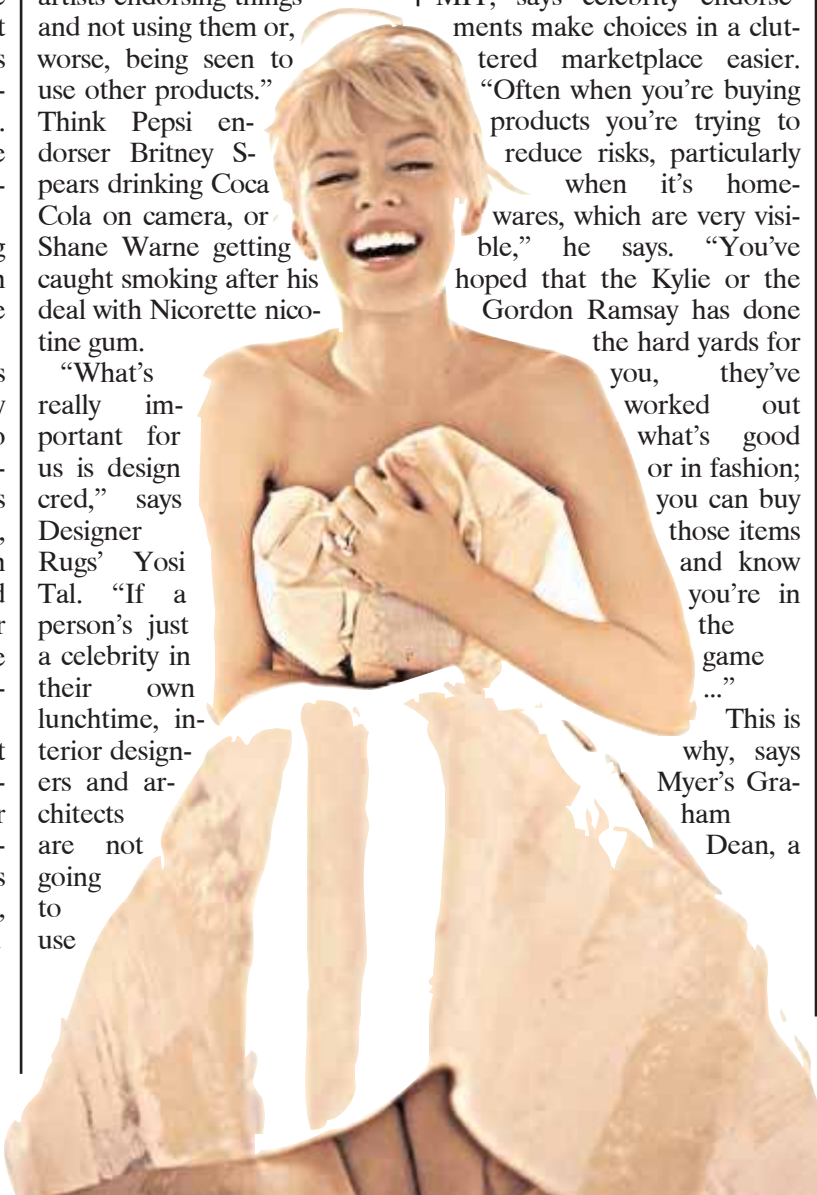
But the greatest obstacle to success is neither controversy nor shoddy goods. It's every celebrity's nemesis: over-exposure. Both Stavros and Alex Perry regard men's fashion house Pierre Cardin as the ultimate what-not-to-do. Says Perry, "In the '60s, it was a groundbreaking fashion house and at some point it was licensed out to absolutely everything. There were Pierre Cardin carpet squares. It was the most random conglomeration of licensing and the name became a joke."

Says Stavros: "The label was even on wine bottles. That's where you run the risk of consumers' attitudes changing - your brand becomes too common, too normal."

With celebrity associations becoming weirder and wilder - Jamie Oliver makes home fragrances and even Prince Charles has a homewares line - it's a cautionary tale every celebrity planning a lucrative home invasion should remember.

"Stick to what you know, and what your audience knows of you," says Mark Richardson. "As I tell my clients, celebrity is the graveyard of the artist."

A beautifully decorated one, of course, with matching scatter cushions, lamps and throws.



Courtesy of Sunday Life Source: