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How Doug Ellin Turned Entourage Into the New Paragon of Product Placement

A seamless collaboration of brands and bros

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Entourage creator Doug Ellin "would be an incredible lead creative of an agency," says collaborator Rob Stone. Photo: Rainer Hosch

For filmmaker Doug Ellin, who is as passionate about cars as he is movies, it was love at first sight.

A few years ago, Ellin—creator of HBO's brilliant Hollywood send-up Entourage and director and writer of the big-screen version of the adventures of Vince and his band of bros, which hits theaters this week—toured General Motors' design bunker in Los Angeles, a place, it has been said, that's harder to get into than the headquarters of the CIA. That's where he came face-to-grill with the Cadillac Ciel, a sleek, black convertible with suicide doors.

It set Ellin's creative wheels in motion, inspiring him to write the concept car into the script of the Entourage movie back when the project was still in its nascent stages. (In fact, the film hadn't even been green-lit.) Meanwhile, GM had produced a single prototype of the Ciel and had only tentative plans for its launch.

None of that dissuaded Ellin, who saw the Ciel as the perfect carrot for brash agent Ari Gold (played by Jeremy Piven) to dangle before



"Making an integration look natural to the storyline" is a key challenge with any movie, says Cadillac brand strategist Melody Lee.

his actor client Vincent Chase (Adrian Grenier). The car would become both a plot point and a brass ring, a way to reunite the two characters for a new, high-stakes, big-money adventure. "I was obsessed with it," Ellin says of the Ciel. "It reminded me of a futuristic version of the Lincoln that's in the opening credits of the Entourage TV show. It sparked a script idea for me because it was a perfect match for the Entourage vibe."

Then, in a most dramatic twist, GM decided not to launch the Ciel after all, informing Ellin it would remain merely a glamorous, one-of-a-kind object to be trotted out at auto shows.

But for Ellin, the dream ride just wouldn't die.

The filmmaker and GM would develop a close relationship thanks to the marketing unit of powerhouse talent shop Creative Artists Agency, which represents both Ellin and the automaker. The result? The Ciel, as well as Cadillac's redesigned Escalade SUV and its ELR plug-in hybrid, all landed roles in the \$30 million Warner Bros. feature. Beyond that, the Ciel stars alongside Piven in an original short film, *Ari Gold Is Back*, that bridges the gap between the end of the Emmy-winning HBO series and the film.

It points to an evolution for Ellin and the Entourage franchise, which, much like its characters, is maturing. Ellin populated the series about rags-to-riches movie star Vince and his crew with the characters' favored brands—among them, Apple, Ferrari, Johnnie Walker and Tequila Avión—while turning away others. (The parade of marketers hoping to get a shot in the storyline swelled as the show grew in popularity over its eight seasons.) HBO does not allow for paid promotions, but the show did famously feature product placements for everything from Gulfstream to Gatorade. Now, with the much-anticipated release of the Entourage movie, Ellin has been involved not only in forging brand alliances but also instrumental in bringing them to life via the big screen and other original content.

"We didn't want anything that felt gratuitous," says Melody Lee, Cadillac's director of brand and reputation strategy. "And that's always the tricky part, making an integration look natural to the storyline. This evolved into a really collaborative process."

The timing of the Entourage tie-in was no accident. Cadillac was, as it happened, readying a major rebranding, including an Escalade relaunch with the tagline "Dare greatly." GM execs sought ways to ignite buzz among trendsetters, and embedding the Cadillac brand in a name-dropping, art-imitates-life-imitates-art flick about four boys from Queens living large in Tinseltown seemed like just the ticket. (The L.A. setting of Entourage stands in contrast with Cadillac's decidedly New York identity. The company recently moved its HQ from Detroit to Manhattan's SoHo, where Publicis' TV spots, featuring the cobblestone streets and Italian restaurants so identified with the neighborhood, were shot.)

On the HBO series, the Escalade was the ride of choice for character Turtle (Jerry Ferrara), Ellin seeing it as just the right set of wheels for the baller. (Ellin himself grew up in a Caddy household. To prove to the neighbors he'd arrived, his dad insisted on parking the car in the driveway rather than the garage of the family's Long Island home.)

CAA put Ellin and GM together "to try to create real human relationships and see what those might lead to," says Jae Goodman, chief creative officer and co-head of CAA Marketing. "What we were looking for was something meaningful."

Across the industry, there's a growing appetite for such alliances, as marketers move beyond traditional product placement. As Cadillac's Lee says, "Anyone can take movie footage, add cars and call it a day." That's no longer good enough for making an impression on consumers submerged in content. From native ads to products written into scripts, marketers want messaging that looks less like advertising and more like an element of the content.

And from film and TV producers to YouTube and Vine stars, the creative community is becoming more open to these relationships—even courting them. Forerunners to Ellin's Cadillac partnership include Michael Bay's Chevrolet tie-in with DreamWorks/Paramount's Transformers and Dodge's role in Universal's Fast and Furious franchise.

Jeff Greenfield, COO and co-founder of ad-measurement firm C3 Metrics, sees Entourage as "a unique piece of content" in that it is "tailor-made for brand integrations."

Might it inspire still more movie-brand mashups? "It wouldn't surprise me if this is seen as a model moving forward," Greenfield says. "Studios will want to green-light more projects like this and get brands involved, but you have to have a hot property. Entourage had its pick of brands, and in that way, it'll be a tough act to follow."

The Entourage TV series achieved massive cultural influence, with fans repeating its characters' catchphrases ("Hug it out") and aspiring to the ostentatious, rock-star lifestyle it displayed, trend forecaster Maude Standish points out. "It was a defining show for a generation of millennial males—and there was always this explicit emphasis on stuff. It was like consumer-product porn: go big, bottle service, cars and supermodels. But it put the stuff into an emotional context," she says.

Cadillac isn't the first brand to hitch a ride to Entourage. Johnnie Walker also made repeated appearances in the series. But it wasn't until Ellin's childhood friend Rob Stone started working with the liquor brand's parent company Diageo North America that a formal relationship came about. Ellin consulted with Diageo and Stone's Cornerstone Agency—which has brought together artists like Kanye West and The Strokes with brands including Converse and Crown Royal—on various marketing concepts over the years, and, as the Entourage movie edged closer to reality, discussions evolved into a strategy for blending the two.



Doug Ellin. Photo: Rainer Hosch

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Johnnie Walker parent company Diageo praised Ellin for Entourage's creative product integration.

The result was a three-minute original film, Johnny for Johnnie, written by Ellin and directed by Entourage co-star Kevin Connolly, who plays Eric "E" Murphy. The video offers a cheeky look at character Johnny "Drama" Chase (Kevin Dillon) imagining himself as the new Johnnie Walker spokesman. He unveils the deal on Jimmy Kimmel, mirroring the franchise's abundant meta-moments, and even envisions a special batch—dubbed Johnny Drama—with his face plastered on the label.

"We look for partners with unique and authentic creative voices," says Dan Sanborn, Diageo's vp, public relations and entertainment marketing. "And with Doug, there's no faking it. He sweats every detail."

The short film, part of a larger marketing campaign around the movie, had its risks, Sanborn admits. "It was no small consideration for us to put Johnny Drama's face on the striding man," he says. The stunt proved worth it, though, as the video quickly racked up half a million views on YouTube and a million more on Facebook.

The allure of Hollywood is powerful for even the most risk-averse marketers. Meanwhile, those who make content for a living have become familiar with the creative brief and the brand bottom line. "It takes a certain level of vision" for marketers to commit to such projects, says Ari Avishay of CAA Marketing. "But there are changing dynamics on both sides—and what rules is good content."

Ellin says he's ready to dive deeper into the burgeoning world of branded entertainment, independent of his movie and TV projects. He says he plans to pitch concepts, including commercials and other marketing ideas, to companies on Cornerstone's roster, and possibly beyond.

For his part, Ellin's friend, Cornerstone's co-founder and co-CEO Stone, says of the filmmaker: "I truly believe Doug would be an incredible lead creative of an agency. Making films is rewarding, but it's a long, drawn-out process. Working with brands, you can quickly have something in the marketplace, and Doug likes putting out work."

It's a long way from Ellin's earliest days in Los Angeles, when he dreamt of becoming a stand-up comic. Day jobs at studios led him to writing scripts, and he eventually became a staff writer on ABC's short-lived Bonnie Hunt sitcom, Life With Bonnie. He penned the indie

comedies *Kissing a Fool*, starring David Schwimmer, and *Phat Beach*, which he has described as "probably the worst movie ever made." But it is *Entourage*, which premiered in 2004, that would be his calling card. Ellin has an ongoing deal with HBO for projects and is working on a Harriet Tubman biopic for the channel starring Oscar winner Viola Davis. The winner of an Emmy Award for producing a segment of ESPN's documentary series *30 for 30*, Ellin is also slated to direct the sequel to 2003's *Bad Santa*.

He recently told *Vanity Fair* he'd do "20 sequels" of *Entourage* if there were an appetite for them, though he's only signed on for one. Whether the franchise has legs will hinge on its box-office performance in a season packed with superheroes, action stars and long-awaited sequels.

And if the movie does turn out to be a big, fat hit? Opening weekend numbers are all well and good, but Ellin also holds out hope the film will inspire Cadillac execs to reconsider rolling out the Ciel. "I've told everyone there that my goal is to get them to release this car," he says. "Maybe people will demand it. That would be amazing."

