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Lady Di's popularity and profitability live on

By Stuart Elliott

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NEW YORK: A decade ago, Diana, Princess of Wales, became a powerful princess of sales as her death created a cottage industry of marketers cashing in with books, magazines, television shows and merchandise like figurines and coins.

Ten years later, the coming milestone anniversary is bringing a reprise as dozens of companies seek to capitalize on a renewed interest among consumers in Diana's life and legacy. And so far at least, the commemorative products have proved popular among consumers and advertisers alike.

Among those taking part in the return of what the British call "Dianabilia" are blue-chip names that include Bertelsmann, Cablevision, Comcast, Discovery, Disney, General Electric, Hearst and Time Warner.

Back, too, are the purveyors of trinkets like the Danbury Mint, with "an exquisite porcelain collector plate"; the Mystic Coin Company, with a "Princess Diana colorized British penny"; and the Hamilton Collection unit of the Bradford Group, with a "limited-edition" figurine devoted to "Diana, princess of our hearts."

It no longer raises eyebrows when celebrities are commercialized after their deaths.

But just how quickly Diana became a potent global marketing phenomenon after she died on Aug. 31, 1997, took experts in building and licensing brands by surprise. The strength of her appeal then is a major reason, they say, that the merchandising of her memory has resumed now.

"If you think of her as a product, she was able to accomplish a lot," said Burt Alper, principal at Catchword Branding, a consulting company in Oakland, California.

"She was brilliant in reaching out and connecting to her audience in a way every brand would want to do," he added. And Diana is "remembered as this young, captivating person, a beautiful princess who passed before her time," Alper said. "She did not go through a waning of her popularity and she did not go through the aging process."

Alper likened Diana to celebrities including Marilyn Monroe, who have become marketing stalwarts in death because their images are "frozen in time" at what is perceived in retrospect as high points in life.

That aspect of Diana's persona was cited as a reason for the lasting strength of her brand by Cyndi McClellan, senior vice president for research and programming strategies at the Comcast Entertainment Group, part of Comcast. The group's E! cable network in the United States presented Sunday night an hour-long special, "Diana's Last Day," that will be repeated several times in the coming week.

"Marilyn Monroe became more iconic 20 years after her death than 10 years after," McClellan said, "and similarly Diana's memory may grow to become even more iconic, especially to a younger generation that just knows the memories."

The E! special is among many to be scheduled by cable and broadcast networks in the United States in a spate of Diana-mania that began on June 18 with an episode of "Dateline NBC" devoted to an interview with Diana's sons, William and Harry. The show drew high ratings for NBC, part of the NBC Universal unit of General Electric, and sponsors like Apple, Honda, Procter & Gamble, Target and Toyota.

"All the ingredients are present for a very long-lasting fascination with the woman and what happened to her," said Tim Brooks, executive vice president for research at the Lifetime cable network, citing the results of a survey the company conducted last month. For instance, almost twice as many respondents said that Diana would be remembered for her charity work than for her death or her marriage to Prince Charles.

"She's considered on some very favorable terms, not like the Hollywood flameout of the moment," Brooks said. "We're not talking Anna Nicole Smith here."

Among deceased celebrities with high profiles, he added, "Diana is knocking on the door of the club" that includes Monroe, Elvis Presley and John F. Kennedy, he added.

Indeed, Diana's presence on the cover of the August issue of Reader's Digest magazine adds her to a short list of famous faces that includes President Kennedy, said Jacqueline Leo, editor in chief.

"We test every cover as a concept before we go ahead with it, and we had very, very high scores on this across the board," said Leo, whose magazine is owned by investors led by Ripplewood Holdings.

"And I'm happy to report the early indications for sales on the newsstand are really good," she added.

The appearance of Diana on the August cover promotes an excerpt inside the issue from the book "The Diana Chronicles," which has 300,000 copies in print after nine printings, according to the publisher, the Doubleday division of Bertelsmann.

The book, which has landed on several best-seller lists, is among about a dozen new titles devoted to Diana, which also include "The People's Princess: Cherished Memories of Diana, Princess of Wales, From Those Who Knew Her Best," from the Crown unit of Bertelsmann; "After Diana: William, Harry, Charles and the Royal House of Windsor," from Hyperion, part of Disney; and "Diana - An Amazing Life, The People Cover Stories 1981-1997," from the editors of People magazine, part of the Time Inc. division of Time Warner.

"Ten years on, the world is a different place," said Larry Hackett, managing editor at People. "Can you imagine what Diana would have been in this Internet, blogging, Paris Hilton kind of world?"

Still, he added, the soft-cover version of the Diana book, priced at \$10.99, "is selling above expectations." (There is also a hard-cover version, costing \$19.95.)

Another reason that Diana may continue to intrigue consumers is the unfolding lives of her sons. As Hackett put it: "You can't help but look at the boys and think about her."

William and Harry may even be living versions of line extensions, as brand offshoots are known in marketing circles.

"They keep her alive in people's minds, which perpetuates her brand," said Alper of Catchword Branding. "It allows the 'legend' to continue and provides a sequel."

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