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Unreachable youth? Busta sure can sell Courvoisier

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When rapper Busta Rhymes pleads "pass the Courvoisier" does that mean Virginians actually do?

If sales of Courvoisier cognac in Virginia are any indication, the answer is yes.

This spring, Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control saw a major increase in sales of Courvoisier in retail stores after the debut of the Brooklyn rapper's hit song "Pass the Courvoisier" and its accompanying music video.

"It's increased because of the video," said a clerk at the Venable Street ABC store in Church Hill, who declined to give her name. She said that before the song and video, other cognac sales were strong at the store. After the video, Courvoisier sales jumped. Before the single, Courvoisier, known as the cognac of Napoleon, was an also-ran.

"It didn't sell as well as the Hennessy," the clerk said.

According to state ABC spokesman Greg Bilyeau, sales of typical 750-milliliter bottles of Courvoisier VSOP remained steady at \$16,839 in January 2002 versus \$16,840 in January 2001, a \$1 decrease.

But in February 2002, the month when the first version of the song was released, sales leaped to \$30,563, a 21 percent increase over the \$24,042 in sales in February 2001. Courvoisier is distributed by the British liquor conglomerate Allied Domecq PLC; it comes in three varieties, XO, VS and VSOP.

According to state statistics, Courvoisier is the 33rd top-selling liquor in Virginia, just ahead of Johnnie Walker Red scotch and just behind Skyy vodka. The top selling cognac is Hennessy, which last year was the No. 7 liquor sold in Virginia, just behind Seagram's Crown Royal.

Courvoisier is actually the subject of two Busta Rhyme songs, the first released in the middle of February, explained a spokesman at J Records, the New York record label of German media conglomerate Bertelsmann. J Records is a new label run by Clive Davis, the legendary producer who created Arista Records. "Pass the Courvoisier" appears on the album Genesis, which features rapper Busta Rhymes with co-stars P. Diddy and Pharrel. The video version features the once-famous "A-Team" star Mr. T as a bartender.

The second song in heavy rotation now is "Pass the Courvoisier Part II," a remix, which commonly is a more danceable version of a song that features the most catchy and oft-repeated refrains. In "Pass the Courvoisier Part II," the lyrics that are often repeated can't be printed here, though in a tamer version repeats "don't this hit make my people wanna" over and over.

This is not the first time that a product featured by a rapper has increased sales.

The rapper Ludacris helped the sales of the Cadillac Escalade sport utility by mentioning it in a song. The nationally syndicated Russ Parr Morning show, which is heard locally on WCDX-FM 92.1, recently gave away two of the giant vehicles to listeners.

"There is a lot of this going on," said Donald Roberts, a professor at Stanford University and expert in the field of youth culture and media. He said that young people mimic what their favorite musicians do in the videos. A spike in sales of products mentioned in songs just adds more evidence to that end.

But Roberts said this example of Courvoisier is one of many, and is not unique to rap, citing Steve McQueen's driving of a Ford Mustang in the movie "Bullitt."

The rap videos definitely target teens, who are the biggest consumers of music.

"Videos are of youth, by youth and for youth," he said. "It [the music video] is some of the most influential stuff going."

For that group of impressionable teens, beverages such as Courvoisier are seen as "symbols of being in the high life," Roberts said.

"These guys are not going to do a rap video in a Ford pickup drinking beer," he said.

The use of brands in the hip-hop culture has a long history, said Murray Forman, assistant professor of communications at Boston's Northeastern University. One of the first was Run DMC's promotion of Adidas in the hit song "My Adidas." Snoop Dog's drinking of Tanqueray gin established the precedent for "juice and gin."

Forman, who recently finished writing a new book, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap and Hip Hop*, said that this sort of thing is fairly inevitable in a media-saturated society. And for marketers searching for ways to reach increasingly media-savvy young people, "Pass the Courvoisier" offers hope.

The use of expensive luxury products has become a part of the rap culture, what the professor calls a "mutual transference of prestige" between the rapper and the brand name.

"It is a way of transferring the prestige of the product to the rapper," Forman said.

The ultimate, he said, is for the rapper to return the prestige to the product, which is what has happened with Courvoisier.

It's all about brands and sales. Indeed, P. Diddy and Busta Rhymes are brands too, selling their records alongside Courvoisier.

Asked if this is good, bad or neutral, Forman said it is simply the way our society is constructed today. "I think it's kind of sad and unfortunate," he said. "But that's the game as it is now."

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