Lights, Camera, Calculator! The New Celebrity Math   By CARL BIALIK

Film and television producers might want to bring a spreadsheet to their next casting meeting.

To help decide which celebrity is the best choice for a film role or product endorsement, entertainment and marketing executives can tap into a host of numbers to gauge public figures' star power. So many, in fact, that the numbers leave a dizzying portrait of who's hot and who's not.

At least four companies regularly track opinion on public figures in entertainment and sports. The venerable Q Score, in its fifth decade, surveys consumers once or twice a year by mail. Three newer competitors rely on the Web, enlisting panel participants to weigh in more regularly. The numbers are marketed to advertisers and casting directors to help them identify celebrities for product pitches or starring roles.

But the various ratings sometimes show sharply different results. That poses a problem for companies that rely on numbers to make casting decisions: If indexes point in different directions, which one should they trust? Moreover, the tracking companies for the most part don't provide their data for free, leaving marketers to decide which ratings service to pay for.

"It's a little bit of snake oil, I think," to suggest that these scores can predict the success of an ad campaign, says **Kevin McKiernan, CEO of Creative License** (www.creativelicense.com), who counts Wal-Mart, Cotton, Ford, Hertz, and their agencies (among others) as clients. "A lot of times a gut check on an artist or celebrity will be as strong an indicator as any of these dozen or so awareness ratings measurement companies. We use them when clients insist but we counsel them that there are no guarantees. One altercation, DUI, questionable act of judgment, or innocuous comment in the press can send those measurement graphs plummeting. It's kind of like using an online dating service to find the perfect wife. The solution? Make sure you are working with someone who understands your brand, is an expert in the entertainment world and can manage your expectations successfully."

To see how these numbers can shake out, consider the advertising industry's favorite cautionary tale these days, Tiger Woods. Once a ubiquitous product endorser, the world's top golfer got dropped by several companies after news emerged last fall of his repeated infidelity, which he admitted in a televised statement last week. By and large, the various celebrity ratings show drops in his key numbers. But they differ in subtle ways on just how much of a hit his marketing potency has taken.

Last July, 65% of respondents to an E-Poll Market Research poll who were aware of Mr. Woods said they liked him, or liked him a lot. That proportion dropped to 26% in their latest rating, earlier this month. Some 31% found the golfer insincere, while only 2% found him trustworthy (compared with 1% and 28%, respectively, for Tom Hanks in the most recent poll, last April).

E-Poll Chief Executive Gerry Philpott says respondents to the company's polls rate celebrities on 46 different criteria, a system he developed because he found Q Scores to be too narrow. "It seemed to be very limited in that it just discussed the awareness of a celebrity and whether a celebrity was liked or not," Mr. Philpott says. "Issues go much more beyond, do people like Jennifer Aniston or not, to, what attributes does she have?"

Steven Levitt, president of Marketing Evaluations Inc., which produces Q Scores, responds that expecting people to fill out 46 attributes on 25 celebrities in one sitting, as E-Poll does, is unreasonable. His company's relatively simple rating—respondents can either indicate that they don't know a celebrity, or rate him or her on a scale of 1 to 5—allows him to ask respondents to rate 450 celebrities in one sitting, he says.

But Q Scores are collected by mail, a time-consuming process that happens at most twice a year, unless a client makes a special request. As a result, the company's latest Woods numbers date from last summer, before he became gossip-page fodder. At the time the golfer had a positive Q score of 28—meaning he was named as a favorite by 28% of the 86% of respondents who recognized his name. His negative Q score—the percentage of those who knew him and rated him only fair or poor—was 19. These figures were little changed from six years earlier.

Assigning so much weight to name recognition can yield perplexing results. Mr. Woods's index dropped only modestly, to 80.9 just before his apology from 89.2 a year earlier, in part because slightly more people were aware of him. This helped overcome a plummet in trust, to 43.7 from 68.8.

Mr. Woods's Cebra score dropped only slightly, to 67 this month from 70 last September. A crash in likability, to 46 from 69, was mitigated by a surge in buzz, to 85 from 74; and a small bump in familiarity, to 70.

Mr. Woods "suffered in terms of being a role model," says Graham Kerr, an executive vice president at Millward Brown, a unit of the advertising conglomerate WPP Group. "But there is still a sense he is the best at what he does"—meaning golf.

But these numbers can't be truly validated, as most of those who produce them say. There is no way to know if casting someone with a higher ranking in a movie or ad guarantees a bigger box-office take or more sales. "No one can sit there and say, because George Clooney has high scores, that's a guarantee that a movie will be successful," says Mr. Philpott of E-Poll. "You can name one bomb for every hit that a celebrity has."

Then there are the public-relation bombs that no index can anticipate. Scott Morgan, president of the advertising agency Brunner, has used Q Scores, but he says, "There is no rating that will tell you the risk someone will be involved in guns, bars and cars. A Q rating could be very high, and two days later the guy could be backing over a fire hydrant or shooting himself in a bar."