



Richard Varga
Chivas Regal Brand Ambassador



THERE ARE BRAND ambassadors and there are Marquee Brand Ambassadors—those top-tier representatives that are highly trained and deeply trusted to be the face and voice of the brand in even the highest stakes marketing environments. Rich Varga is the latter, a front-line brand evangelist charged with representing the style and chic of the Chivas Regal brand at events all over the country. He was trained in Scotland by Chivas Master Blender Colin Scott and has perfected his skills as a Scotch expert for years since. He has a personal passion for the finest of Scotch whiskies, and for Chivas Regal in particular, and he has personally trained more than 500 trade personnel and represented the brand at many high profile events, including the Cannes Film Festival, LA's elite Black Card Circle, the Luxury Brand Summit's World Conference and the Clint Eastwood Retrospective at LACMA. And when he's at the local pub, he's always happy to buy you a round. Here, he talks about what it takes to create and become the ultimate brand ambassador.

EM: What is the difference between you (a brand ambassador extraordinaire) and other, more standard street soldiers, in terms of activity, training and, especially, responsibilities?

RV: [Marquee Ambassadors] straddle the line between supplier and distributor because we are the embodiment of the brand at a given moment in time for consumers. We want to forge relationships with media, owners and celebrities to encourage them to align with the brand. We do a lot of training and work on larger marketing issues. We're about living and embodying the brand to all the different audiences and stakeholders.

EM: What qualities do you need to become a Marquee Brand Ambassador?

RV: First and foremost, you have to have an extroverted personality. You have to want to connect with people one-on-one. For me, it's about listening to people talk about whisky and hearing their personal whisky drinking stories. There has to be a mutual sharing of ideas to make those connections. Also, good knowledge is key. With whisky, Scotch in particular and

other liquid potables, you have to know your stuff. Finally, personal passion for the product counts. The subject matter has to be ingrained in you as an ambassador. If you don't have that, everyone can see it and knows you're a fake.

EM: What training is required?

RV: This is not a job you can get a university degree to learn to do. It's one of those things where you have to seek out experiences to learn. For me specifically, going to Scotland was crucial. You have to walk the floor of the distillery, and smell, taste and live Scotland to really know the product and the experience you're trying to create for consumers. You need the sensory experience of the distilleries to get a feel for the culture and the language of the brand. Of course, working with and learning from Colin Scott was the only way to train my palette and nose. You're constantly evolving and learning. It's like an extended apprenticeship.

EM: And how do you use that education to inform your interactions with consumers?

RV: When I'm out talking to people, they probably only remember like 25 percent of the actual knowledge I give them. It's really about sharing a dram and sharing that experience with them. It's not about just having knowledge, it's about building relationships and conversations about whisky. People know there's no

hidden agenda with me. Are there talking points? Sure. But I embraced those long ago so I can take the time to just talk to them and hopefully something out of that conversation is what they remember and take with them.

EM: How do you maintain the relationship between being a friend and counselor to consumers while communicating the image and messaging the brand needs?

RV: My job is about making real relationships. I'm there to leave a favorable impression of the brand with consumers. I can express the information and let it sit with them without really having to step away from the "counselor" and into "sales" mode. I strongly identify with the non-sales approach. Consumers are really savvy about marketing. They've all grown up with it. I think when you take the sales out of the brand ambassador's job the message can be stronger. Because once the consumer senses a pitch, they reevaluate everything you'd said and begin to see it all as campaigning. The message has to be pure. No bait. It's very honest, very straightforward. You just have to be truthful. **EM** —K.B.