

Champagne Tastes

Moët Hennessy Diageo Hong Kong Ltd. toasts its Chinese customers with a lavish, theatrical experience as exclusive as its Dom Pérignon champagne — and reaps more than \$500,000 in publicity.

By Charles Pappas



Moët Hennessy Diageo Hong Kong Ltd. (MHD HK) was having trouble uncorking its Dom Pérignon brand in China. The company planned to showcase some of its latest vintage champagnes in Hong Kong as part of a customer appreciation event. But for all Dom Pérignon's powerhouse pedigree — the champagne was ranked as the ninth-strongest brand in the world by valuation consultancy Intangible Business — just

INTERNATIONAL EVENT

Company: Moët Hennessy Diageo Hong Kong Ltd. (MHD HK)

Event: The Plenitudes, an Exploration

Objectives: Increase sales, social-media impressions, and publicity for the Dom Pérignon brand.

Strategy: Create a theatrical experience that conveys the status and history of Dom Pérignon vintage champagne.

Tactics: Target roughly 400 influencers with a multiday event in an ornate location. Build a theatrical experience highlighting vintage champagne's aging process. Offer samples of all three vintage champagnes, along with sumptuous food and a surprise industry celebrity.

Results: Secured roughly \$130,000 in post-event sales. Produced 84,000 social-media impressions and approximately \$500,000 in publicity.

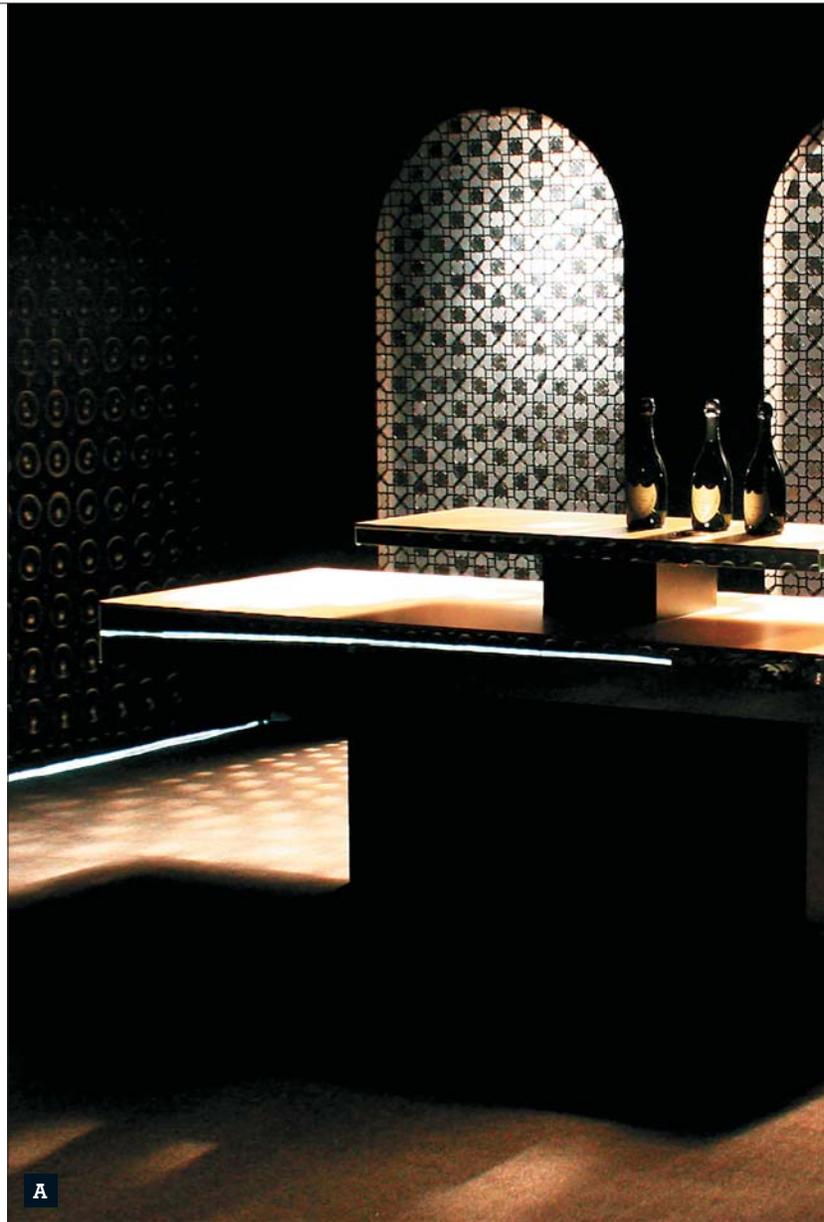
Creative/Production Agency: Uniplan Hong Kong Ltd., www.uniplan.com.hk

Budget: \$500,000 – \$749,000

a subatomic-particle-small 0.5 percent of all wine downed in China is of the sparkling variety.

The reasons for the Chinese aversion to bubbly, according to Javier Calvar, the chief operating officer of market-research company Albatross Global Solutions Inc., are almost as numerous as the Chinese themselves. In short, many Chinese consumers prefer the crimson hue of red wine, as the color connotes good luck; loathe the

tart flavor of champagne; dislike its barely above 7UP level of alcohol; believe champagne is a drink for women; and favor wines that can be opened and stored indefinitely, thus precluding champagne, which once opened can



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A Moët Hennessy Diageo Hong Kong Ltd. (MHD HK) created a setting that evoked Dom Pérignon's origins in the Abbey of St. Peter's cellars.

B Performers expressed through interpretive dance the journey of champagne from chardonnay and pinot noir grapes into an intoxicating, frothy delicacy.

C MHD HK highlighted three vintage champagnes from 2005, 1998, and 1990.

quickly lose its signature effervescence. Even that trademark fizziness, synonymous with celebration and festivity, is seen as a liability in China. "Champagne's bubbles, along with its being served chilled, are key characteristics of the drink," Calvar says, "and, unfortunately, both of them run counter to popular Chinese beliefs that sparkling and cold drinks are unhealthy."

Binge Thinking

MHD HK knew it needed to recognize consumer dynamics and buying patterns, including those cited by Calvar. Instead of seeing champagne's liabilities, however, the company and Uniplan Hong Kong Ltd., its creative agency partner, saw possibilities. They understood that research showed the beverage's keenest selling point in China wasn't necessarily what it does for the drinkers' tongues but what it can do for their image. One estimate found 80 percent of champagne sales in China stemmed from crowded locales like nightclubs, restaurants, and hotels, because those public spaces offer drinkers an audience who can watch them conspicuously consuming champagnes that might run \$300 to \$400 a bottle. But there was another more subtle element that went hand in hand with the craving for status.

"Nowadays, buyers want luxury products like champagne to offer singular quality and project their social standing," says Davy-Brice Froment, Uniplan's director of luxury. "But consumers also look for remarkable experiences with luxury products that motivate them to buy those items even more." That desire for experience and hunger for status suggested to MHD HK that its best approach was an event with a duration sufficient to weave an engaging brand story as captivating as any tale Scheherazade had ever spun. "Chinese consumers are genuinely interested in the history of a brand and seek out cues to its heritage: castles, chateaus, landmarks," Calvar says. "This also plays to Chinese consumers' need for knowledge, which is a kind of social currency, because being able to retell a story helps consumers gain 'face' whilst promoting the brand."

Indeed, Dom Pérignon had more history than a Ken Burns documentary. Legend has it that the fizzy elixir was invented by a 17th century French Benedictine monk, Dom Pierre Pérignon, who, when testing the wine he made that had accidentally been carbonated, exclaimed, "Come quickly, I am drinking stars." The story is more fable than fact — Pérignon pioneered several advances in champagne production but didn't invent it.

Grape Expectations

Uniplan and MHD HK brainstormed the idea of a live event that could be divided into theatrical acts reflecting

the creation of the champagne itself. The company titled the event The Plenitudes, an Exploration, a reference to the three stages, or plenitudes, in champagne's aging process, where the drink takes progressively greater leaps in quality after a given number of years. To demonstrate the rapturous effects of this maturing process, the company would offer attendees 2005, 1998, and 1990 vintages of Dom Pérignon champagnes representing the three plenitude stages, as well as entertainment that reinforced the

THE PLENITUDES

Certain vintage Dom Pérignon champagnes are released when they reach one of three milestones in the aging process, which are known as plenitudes. The brand walked attendees through conceptual vignettes meant to invoke the signature characteristics of each stage.



P3: 20 – 30 years

- ▶ Complexity
- ▶ Integration
- ▶ Maturation

P2: 12 – 15 years

- ▶ Energy
- ▶ Intensity
- ▶ Precision

P1: 7 – 8 years

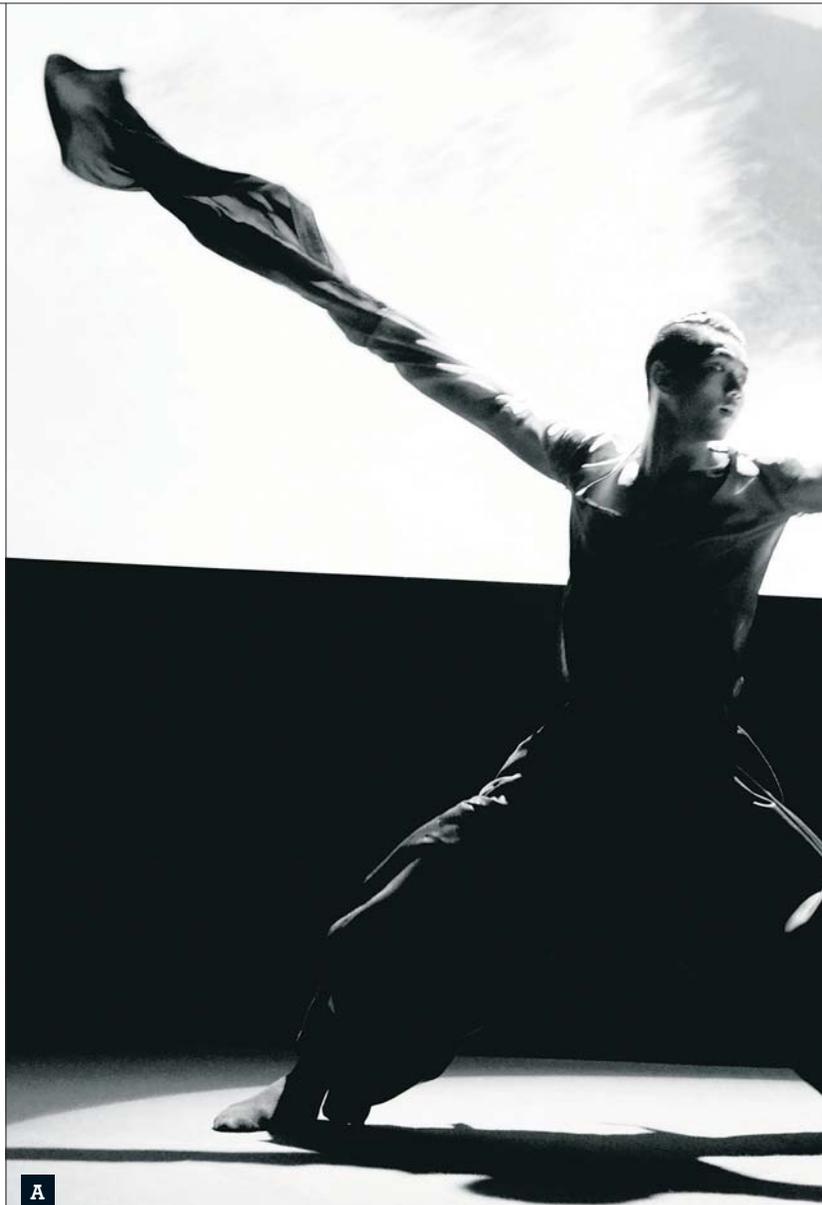
- ▶ Harmony
- ▶ Promise
- ▶ Completeness

theme of the drink's distinctiveness. The champagnes were often referred to as P1, P2, and P3, respectively, signifying, again, each vintage's respective plenitude.

But luxury-related events are rarely effective if they're as crowded as a mall on Black Friday, since luxury itself is often associated with things that are scarce or experiences that only the few can have. So to maximize a sense of intimacy and status, MHD HK eschewed a one-shot event where it might have to pack in hundreds at once. Instead, it chose to

spread The Plenitudes over two lunches and two dinners, covering three days (the third day would offer an abbreviated version, with guests going through the exhibition without a sit-down meal). Each lunch and dinner would last approximately three hours. Just as the elegant shield-like label of Dom Pérignon signifies the luxe beverage inside, the location the company chose denoted upscale style: Hong Kong's Central Pier 4, where influential brands and institutions like Prada S.p.A. and the Hong Kong Contemporary Art Foundation have staged events for their most affluent and avant-garde clients and benefactors.

Much as Dom Pérignon's vintners use only an exceptional assortment of chardonnay and pinot noir grapes to produce the champagne they desire, MHD HK cultivated



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PHOTOS: UNIPLAN HONG KONG LTD.



A The whip-like movements of the male dancer in the second of *The Plenitudes* expressed the chemical energy of champagne's aging process.

B The dancer's movements echoed the eclipse playing out on the 26-foot-long rear-projection screen behind him.

C Minimalist decor conjured the austerity of the abbey where Dom Pérignon was first produced centuries ago.

about 400 heavyweight clients, VIPs, and media reps for the event it wanted. For customers, it invited, for example, representatives from the Ritz-Carlton Hong Kong and Watson's Wine (the latter being Hong Kong's largest online wine store), while for VIPs it brought in Xuan Mu and John Rana, founders and owners of some of Hong Kong's pre-eminent lounges, nightclubs, and "gastropubs." Lastly, for media coverage, it reached out to journalists such as those hailing from *Prestige Hong Kong*, *Hong Kong Tatler*, and *Le Pan* magazines, lifestyle periodicals as synonymous with luxury as Hermes is scarves.

The company's goals had the optimism of New Year's Eve toasts. MHD HK wanted to see a notable increase in sales within a few weeks of the event. Plus, it hoped to generate 60,000 social-media impressions and reap at least \$100,000 worth of publicity.

Flutes of Fancy

In May of last year, after several weeks of planning, MHD HK was ready to pour its targeted audience a carafe of history, sensuality, and status. When the nearly 90-strong contingent of guests (365 would attend overall) arrived at Central Pier 4 for the first event of *The Plenitudes*, an Exploration, they were ushered into a realm of composed sophistication, a natural extension of a world where the cars are Bugatti, the watches Patek Philippe, and the clothes Versace. Positioned on top of the pier were tents housing rooms for the event — and a massive projected 3-D rendition of the revered Dom Pérignon shield logo that thousands in Hong Kong could view from afar.

Starting off in a minimalistic lounge, guests were served champagne in glasses that glowed with a platinum finish. They then moved into a 480-square-foot space converted into a screening room. Here, they watched a three-minute film introduction to the plenitudes concept narrated by Dom Pérignon's chef de cave (i.e., cellar master), Richard Geoffroy, the head of the company's winemaking team. Once the movie faded to black, Geoffroy himself stepped into the room to greet guests.

Now that the aperitif of the movie was over, the first part of the experiential event, dubbed *The Harmony*, commenced. Two marble doors swung open in the screening room, revealing an adjoining area with walls and carpet as black as deep space. Down one wall ran a row of arch-like windows, an homage to those in the Abbey of St. Peter in Hautvillers, France, where the celebrated champagne was first made. While guests filled the shadowy room quietly as if called to chapel during vespers, a dancer from the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts moved in a mashup of tai chi and Martha Graham to express the harmony of

the 2005 champagne's formation. While she danced, a recorded voiceover explained how the congruence of grapes and time can form a transportive drink. Attention was then brought to the Levitating Water, a trompe-l'oeil (trick of the eye) art installation that looked as if the water in it were reaching for the sky, courtesy of a special effect created by synchronizing the frequency of the cascading water with a stroboscope positioned nearby. As part of the illusion, the number "9" appeared in the water, symbolizing the number of years it took for the vintage to achieve its lofty P1 status. Once the "9" was exposed, ceiling-mounted lights switched on to reveal a display of the champagne at the

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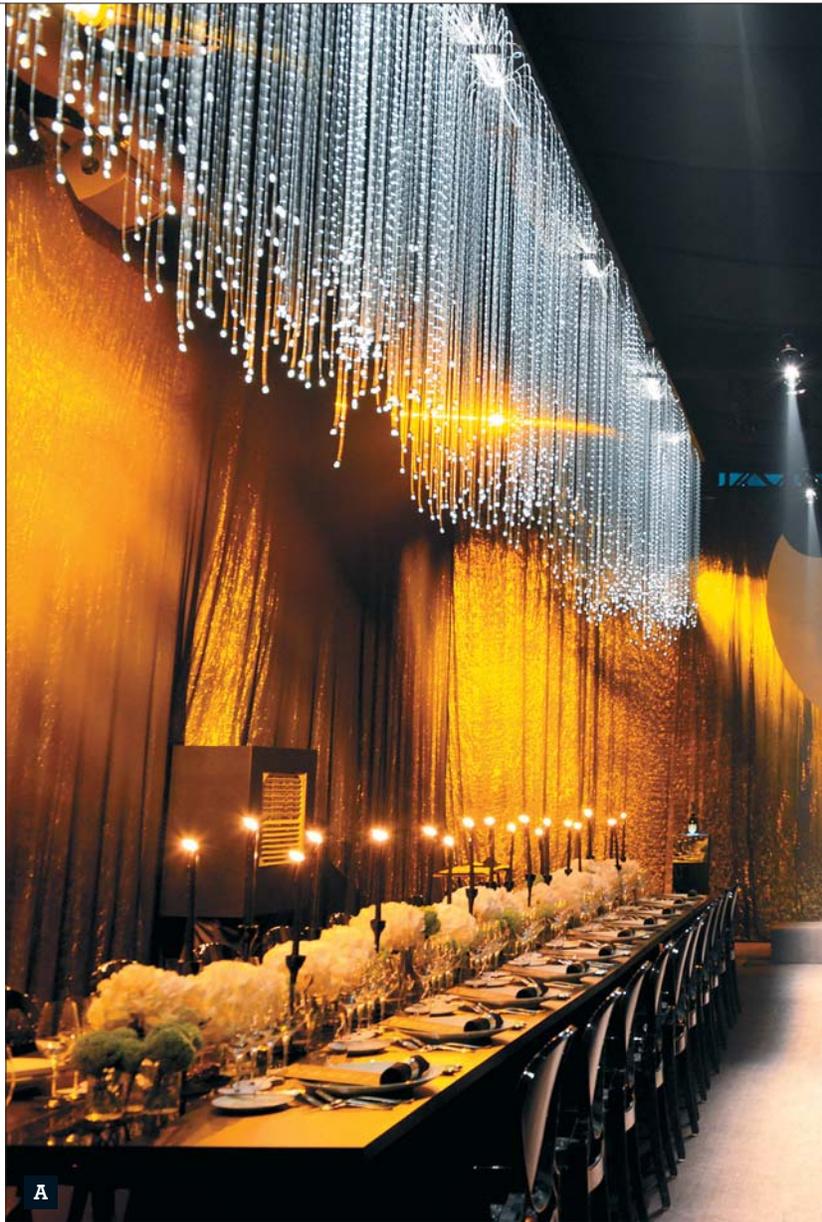


end of the room.

Next, guests transitioned into a partially lit room to experience the second of The Plenitudes, called Energy. Posed inside a circle of light on the floor, a male dancer in long-sleeved garb waited, frozen in place. Behind him was a 26-foot-long rear-projection screen that played a video serving as the background rhythm

for the performance. When the three-minute video began with an eclipse, the dancer mimicked the slow transit of the astronomical phenomenon. Then, as the film built to an ocean sequence of leviathan waves slamming rocks on an Icelandic bay, the dancer exploded in a series of whipping, lashing moves that suggested the raw power of the organic catalyst in champagne's aging. Once the film and dancer reached their apex, a gobo-projected P2 logo, indicating the 1998 champagne, appeared on the wall in a connected room.

Finally, in yet another adjoining room with walls covered in gold fabric, the third and concluding part of The Plenitudes, titled Complexity, offered a rich spectacle appropriate for the most elaborate of champagnes, the Dom Pérignon 1990, aka P3. In the center of the 540-square-foot space stood a section bracketed by floor-to-ceiling mirrors with a golden pole in the center. Once all the guests had gathered around the section, a dancer



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emerged from behind a one-way mirror as if materializing out of the air. Under lighting effects that suggested a galaxy of stars overhead, the performer coiled and spun around the pole, while a chiffon-soft breeze from a nearby fan lifted her gossamer skirt, giving it the appearance of a cloud floating lazily across the sky.

Champagne Supernova

After the three-part experience wrapped up, staffers ushered guests into a 1,600-square-foot dining room. Long and narrow like a banquet hall in Valhalla, the room offered two tables for the guests to dine at. While the group sat down to feast on dishes — e.g., langoustine, sea bass, veal, etc. — selected to enhance the minerality of the 1990, 1998, and 2005 vintage Dom Pérignons they would be served, the theme of the meal, Dom Pierre Pérignon's apocryphal "I am Drinking Stars," came into focus. Gobo lights created a pattern of stars flickering over the rich gold fabric lining the walls, then fashioned a second pattern at the far end of the room highlighting a Dom Pérignon logo. Moments later, two chandeliers made of dozens of spaghetti-thin fiber-optic strands lit up, creating an effect of light spilling from the ceiling as if into the champagne glasses on the tables below. During the banquet, cellar master Geoffroy navigated guests through the sensual voyage of tasting the three vintage champagnes.

"It's one thing to take a French product and introduce it in Germany," said one Corporate Event Awards judge in bestowing the company with the Judges' Choice Award, "but to take a product halfway around the world and present it in such a captivating manner to the Asian market is nothing short of remarkable." Another judge offered this 100-proof reaction to The Plenitudes: "I only wish I could have been there."

The results for the event were as sparkling as the champagne itself. Hoping to boost sales directly following the event, the company realized about \$130,000 in increased revenue immediately after the three-day run. Along with the rise in sales, it also sought to produce 60,000 social-media impressions, a goal it surpassed by more than 40 percent, generating upwards of 84,000 of them. Finally, the company had wanted to obtain \$100,000 worth of publicity. But within weeks, the event produced what MHD HK gauged as \$180,000 in media coverage, on its way to ultimately reaping about \$500,000 worth.

"I am easily satisfied with the best," Winston Churchill famously said about champagne. The best, by sundry measures of sparkling wine, is Dom Pérignon. And the best event, by many measures of such experiences, was The Plenitudes, an Exploration. **E**

A At the event's banquet, guests dined under two fiber-optic chandeliers that seemed to drizzle light into the attendees' glasses.

B The stars glittering over and around the whirling performer in the third of The Plenitudes implied the galactic majesty of the champagne.

C After dinner, guests were treated to a performance that combined all three of The Plenitudes dancers.