

Cîroc, Ace of Spades and the Power of Hip-Hop

BY [TAYLOR CRUMPTON](#)



Illustration by Rebecca Bradley

In October 2007, Sean “Diddy” Combs married Cîroc and hip-hop.

One of the most recognizable figures in U.S. pop culture, Combs contributed to the rise of “hip-hop luxury” in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As CEO of Bad Boy World Entertainment, Combs oversaw designer namedrops in artists’ lyrics, and launched his own clothing and perfume lines.

Hip-hop is instrumental in his “rags to riches” story, from the launch of preeminent record label Bad Boy Entertainment, to his foray into high fashion with Sean John, where he won the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) award as Menswear Designer of the Year in 2004. His journey embodied a

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Combs wasn't the first celebrity to try to turn Cîroc into a household name, but he was the most successful.

**"I'll be damned if I drink some Belvedere while Puff got Cîroc." —
Jay-Z, "Family Feud," 4:44**

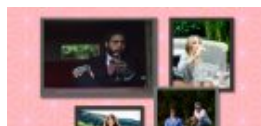
In 2003, British beverage conglomerate Diageo created Cîroc with French oenologist and distiller Jean-Sébastien Robicquet. A vodka-adjacent spirit made with French wine grapes, Cîroc initially struggled to attract consumers already loyal to established vodka brands like **Grey Goose**.

Marketing is essential to garner and retain consumers in a competitive landscape, so the brand hired NFL players as celebrity ambassadors in the early 2000s. The partnership failed to produce needed sales. In the early 2000s, Cîroc was **the fiftieth ranked vodka in the world**, according to *Business Insider*.

Four years after Cîroc's debut, Diageo approached Combs with a celebrity endorsement deal. Combs countered with an equal-share partnership, where he would serve as the brand manager and chief marketing officer. His marketing agency, Blue Flame, would be in charge of advertising.

Under Combs' leadership, the vodka brand identified a new consumer base, younger drinkers who were eager to expand their options. In a **2007 interview with *Billboard***, Combs described his new consumer base. "They're looking for something that tastes like their lifestyle," he said. "It's that trendsetter, that hipster, someone who's looking for luxury and looking for something better."

Combs noted that it wasn't an endorsement deal, either. His work with Cîroc was much more multifaceted.



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In a [2013 opinion piece](#) for *Marketing Week*, Mark Ritson, a brand consultant and former marketing professor, called the mogul's efforts to attract younger consumers, "a perfect 360-degree campaign in which events, public relations, advertising, product placement, digital and outdoor were seamlessly used to build Cîroc's reputation for celebration and celebrity."

Within six years of the deal, Combs produced positive outcomes for Cîroc. Sales increased 600% from 2008-2013, according to *Marketing Week*. In 2013, competitors like Grey Goose saw 2% to 3% year-over-year sales, compared to Cîroc's growth of 65% in the same time period.

"The brand sold more than two million cases [during 2012] in the U.S.," wrote Ritson. "That's still only half that of Grey Goose, but the trajectory of the two brands has now been reversed. Goose is flat, and Cîroc is catching up, fast."

Combs utilized his status as a pop culture icon and hip-hop mogul to incorporate the genre's biggest stars into Cîroc's campaigns, like 2016's "[Let's Get It](#)" with DJ Khaled and French Montana.

In 2011, Combs was featured in the "[Luck Be a Lady](#)" campaign alongside actors Aaron Paul and Michael K. Williams, supermodel Chrissy Teigen and legendary record producer Jermaine Dupri. Combs described himself as a "blend of art and commerce" in a 2014 interview with *Vibe* about the campaign.

Combs is not the only hip-hop icon to enter the liquor and spirits industry. In 2011, Jay-Z worked with Bacardí and Château de Cognac to launch [D'Ussé](#). In 2013, Nas entered [a years-long partnership](#) with Hennessy, the world's best-selling Cognac, [famously known](#) as an early spirits brand to market toward African Americans.

While many spirits companies have utilized hip-hop in their advertising and marketing efforts, most have failed to invest in hip-hop culture and communities.

Jay-Z is a partner in D'Ussé, but he's also the sole owner of [Armand de Brignac](#), (Ace of Spades), a Champagne company that first appeared in the U.S. through a product placement in his "Show Me What You Got" music video.

"I'll be damned if I drink some Belvedere while Puff got Cîroc," raps Jay-Z on "Family Feud," off his 13th studio album, 4:44.

The verse emphasizes the importance of Black-owned brands in music. For decades, spirits companies received free promotion in songs by hip-hop and other artists.

Between 2009-2011, the most prevalent brands in popular music were Patrón, Hennessy, Grey Goose and Jack Daniels, [according to Slate](#).

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As a cultural and commercial force, hip-hop also embraced brands like **Alizé**, **Möet & Chandon** and Louis Roederer's **Cristal**—until Jay-Z **called for a boycott** of the latter after he accused Frédéric Rouzaud, managing director of the brand, of making racially insensitive comments about Cristal's prominence in rap music.

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Thirteen years after Combs took a leadership role at Cîroc, it's one of the world's most recognizable spirits brands. His success laid the foundation for hip-hop artists to be taken seriously in the liquor and spirits industry.

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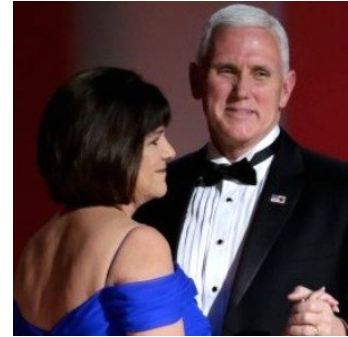
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