

Fame Game

Think twice before using a celebrity to push for your cause

These days, supporting a personal cause is almost as trendy among entertainment celebrities as is branding one's own fragrance, filming a reality TV show, or (if you're female) toting a lap dog around town in your brand-name purse. From Los Angeles to New York City, from Angelina to Beyoncé, and from Gawker.com to *The New York Times*, stars make headlines not just for their red-carpet style, box office hits, or fiancés of the moment. They also still make headlines for the causes they support: a recent Reuters consumer poll ranked Angelina Jolie and U2 front-man Bono ahead of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former President Jimmy Carter, and Bill Gates as their favorite cause celebrities. According to another survey—this one by DoSomething.org, a Web site where do-gooder kids and teens can connect—youths know more about U2's charity work than its music.

But how much can celeb support trigger those highly sought-after donations from today's cause- and wallet-conscious consumers?

Results vary widely. Consider those celebrity-driven causes, publicity stunts, and one-off endorsements that have backfired.

Remember the photos of model Naomi Campbell caught wearing fur some weeks after posing for a PETA animal rights campaign poster? Or, remember Jessica Simpson's jaunt to Kenya with her charity of choice, Operation Smile? Simpson reportedly spent most of her 10-day, \$12,500 "charity trip" holed up in a luxury resort rather than giving time to Operation Smile, canceling scheduled visits with sick children after claiming that she, herself, had fallen ill. Simpson was later slammed by humanitarians when a hotel staff member confirmed that she took in a \$1,500 safari during the time she was supposed to have been recovering.

Nonprofits, beware

But the fallout on the causes these celebrities support can be far worse. Bad press can dim the credibility of a cause, decrease citizen interest in donating time or

money, and/or diminish the likelihood that consumers will buy a product that benefits a star's favorite charity.

According to research by Cone Inc., Americans cite celebrity involvement as one of the least effective attention-getters for nonprofits—ninth on a list of 10 marketing methods to gain consumer support. That's well behind such preferred methods as word-of-mouth and media coverage. Further, only 15 percent of Americans said that celebrities are likely to influence their philanthropy. The takeaway here? As the economy continues to demand tighter purse strings, charities should think twice about using one-off celebrity endorsements to drum up support. With the transparency of the Internet, conversations run-

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ning wild in the blogosphere, and the proliferation of shallow celebrity cause involvement versus authentic support, consumers aren't easily fooled anymore by just another famous face.

Of course, not all celebrity tie-ins go bust. Consider the (RED) campaign, co-founder Bono of U2 fame's marketing effort to raise money for the Global Fund to

Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. The group has raised more than \$110 million so far. Also, consider Lance Armstrong's LIVESTRONG campaign to fight cancer. Since he started the effort in 1997, the yellow wristband campaign has raised more than \$250 million to inspire and empower people affected by cancer. The difference? Bono and Armstrong show a strong personal interest in the cause, work hard to sustain them, and tap into their own networks and star power to drive real, broad-based support. Jessica Simpson? A pretty face for hire, but perhaps little else for the cause in this case.)

The lesson? Make it real. Celebrity power works but only if the tie-in is authentic (personal connection and commitment to the cause), long-term (beyond one event or one media tour), and underscored by the star's personal donations of time, money, or access granted for the cause.

“Friend-raising”

One successful example of the power of a well-intentioned group is celebrity “friend-raising.” Marlo Thomas, supporting the St. Jude’s Children’s Research Hospital founded by her father, has for several years used its *Thanks and Giving* campaign to gather such famous friends as Jennifer Aniston, Robin Williams, and others to help raise funds and awareness for the hospital’s life-saving research and experimental treatment programs. In 2007 alone, St. Jude hit a 50-partner milestone for the campaign, which, combined with the tremendous media coverage, resulted in record contributions for the hospital that year.

In all, the program has raised more than \$100 million since it began in 2004. You don’t need one mega-star, either. Consider New York City’s Safe Horizon, the nation’s largest victim assistance organization, which has harnessed the power of a group of celebrities and influentials to shine a light on the hidden, often unspoken issue of child abuse. The 68 members of the group’s Champions for Children committee include celebrities: it’s chaired by Malaak Compton Rock and actress Mariska Hargitay (*Law and Order: SVU*) is a member. These members have made long-term commitments, receive no compensation for their time, and work frequently to raise money and share their access to others who can

join the group and help. The group was honored last spring by *Redbook* magazine.

President Clinton’s annual Global Initiative conference of world thought leaders and social entrepreneurs making a difference with their philanthropy is another example of celebrity that matters. The Clinton Foundation is also tackling such issues as childhood obesity through his foundation’s alignment with the American Heart Association and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation. And even with all of this, he is not too busy to appear on Nickelodeon talking to overweight kids about his own struggles as a chubby child in Arkansas, a story that resonates among supporters and would-be backers, alike.

The upshot? Next time a celebrity comes your way, don’t forget to ask these questions: Why are you interested in our cause? Are you seeking publicity or a reputation-makeover? What are you willing to personally contribute? How will you involve others? What do you hope to accomplish? And, most importantly...what do you stand for?

Believe us, you will reap the rewards...while removing the risks. ▲

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