

CHOOSING CELEBRITY ENDORSERS: TIPS AND TRAPS

A CELEBRITY CAN BOOST YOUR FUNDRAISING AS NOTHING ELSE CAN.
THESE 10 DOS AND DON'TS WILL PAVE THE WAY.

BY ROBERT WHEELER

Celebrity endorsers—people who use their public recognition on behalf of a consumer good—are an underused tool by nonprofits. That's not to say that celebrities are absent from nonprofit advertising. Examples include Colin Powell for America's Promise, Robert Redford for the Sierra Club, Ted Danson for American Oceans Campaign, Doug Flute for Autism, and Elton John for the MAC AIDS Fund (see "What Can Spokespeople Do for an Organization?" on page 20) as well as many NFL players for the United Way. Still, celebrity endorsement is mostly a for-profit advertising technique.

To understand why so few nonprofits use celebrity endorsements, and to help nonprofits take advantage of this tactic, we conducted several studies.¹ Based on our research, here are some tips to follow and traps to avoid when choosing the best celebrity to represent your organization:

1

Use celebrities for the right purpose.

The best use of celebrities is to gain high awareness in a short time. They're especially useful for newer, smaller organizations that aren't well known and need a lift to get fundraising started. They're also appropriate whenever attention-getting is your most important communication objective, as when you're launching a new service or making a big change. Nonprofit executives in our survey emphasize that celebrities bring a certain power to the organization that boosts fundraising. As one executive notes, the buzz that a celebrity generates is priceless.

Celebrities can create awareness in many ways. Here are some of the things a celebrity spokesperson can do for you:

- **Perform in a video** about your organization.
- **Pose** for magazine ads, posters, or your organization's brochure.

- **Speak** at gatherings.
- **Be part of** public service announcements (PSAs) about your organization.
- **Promote** your organization's products and services.
- **Chair** your fund drive.
- **Write** an article about your issue.
- **Appear** at a fundraising event sponsored by your organization.
- **Make** public appearances.
- **Educate** people about your cause.
- **Act** as your spokesperson with the media.
- **Sign** your fundraising letters.
- **Present a check** to your organization to encourage others to give.
- **Attend** public-relations functions.
- **Talk about your cause** on radio and TV shows.

Most likely you'll want a celebrity to do only a few of these things, or you may have other ideas.² Before you choose a celebrity, it's important to identify your requirements. Pinpointing tasks will clarify what skills your celebrity needs and will make selection easier.

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You also need to decide on time requirements. Do you plan to use the celebrity for many years or for a short, concentrated period—as part of a fund drive, for example? Meshing your time requirements with a celebrity's schedule is an important part of the evaluation and selection process.

2

Look for the right qualities.

Before picking an endorser, consider which traits are most important to you. Be sure the celebrity has qualities that fit the image you want for your organization. Such a fit is more valuable than the celebrity's fame.

Find someone with a logical connection to your organization, someone who is familiar to your target group or constituency. When the celebrity has a meaningful relationship with the organization, people place more faith in the source of the information. For example, Michael J. Fox has high credibility as a spokesperson for Parkinson's disease because he has the illness. Thus, he can probably generate more contributions for a PD foundation than can comparable celebrities.

Choose someone who has a story and can tell it well. Not all celebrities can communicate a meaningful and compelling story. Good communicators make the most powerful spokespersons.

Consider the long-term value of the celebrity. Weigh the desire to pick someone who's "hot" against the celebrity's staying power.

Look for a spokesperson with a genuine sense of caring, who wants to help others. Consider the moral values the person represents. The last thing you want is to choose someone who will hurt your organization's reputation. Being likeable, wholesome, and respected is more important than being famous. (But if your cause isn't mainstream, consider looking outside the margins for celebrity endorsers, as the MAC AIDS Fund did when it chose Elton John, Shirley Manson, and Mary J. Blige as spokespeople; see page 20.)

3

Base your decision on long-term objectives.

Thinking only of short-term needs when selecting a celebrity can spell disaster. Your organization's long-range plan should be your main consideration in choosing a celebrity. Bring up the

idea of celebrity endorsement during strategy development, not as an afterthought in the program development stage.

4

Think small.

If your organization is local or regional, then a celebrity with local or regional appeal may prove more valuable than a national celebrity. Perhaps the best choice of all is a local son or daughter who is well-liked by the populace and who has made good.

Working with a local spokesperson offers other advantages, too. The celebrity is usually in town and available for photo shoots, PSAs, and personal appearances. Scheduling a national personality can be a nightmare of coordination. In addition, national celebrities usually require greater support and many "perks." Native sons and daughters come with fewer demands.

5

Decide on a fee.

Local and regional celebrities are less expensive than national ones. Most of the executive directors interviewed indicate that these celebrity endorsers are fair, understanding, and care genuinely about the mission; otherwise they wouldn't be involved. Fees usually include all travel and lodging and a small stipend. In one case, a huge Hollywood star asked for a very large fee in addition to a hairdresser, personal assistant, and the rest, but turned right around and donated much more than the sum of the expenses associated with her appearance.

One executive provided this advice: Offer the celebrity first-class travel, lodging, and pay for all reasonable incidentals; on top of that, pay a fee equal to the minimum scale based on the union or trade affiliation to which that personality belongs. In the American Federation of Television and Radio Artist (AFTRA), minimum fees for an actor in an entertainment program would run about \$175 to \$1,000 a day, depending on the length of the program. That's a good place to start.

NATIVE SONS AND DAUGHTERS COME WITH FEWER DAMANDS.

6

Create a partnering agreement.

Your relationship will work best if your organization and the celebrity view each other as partners. Together, create and sign a contract spelling out each partner's responsibilities. During this process, you'll discover if either partner has unrealistic expectations. Be sure the celebrity understands and commits to your organization's mission and long-term plan, as well as the amount of time needed to carry out your goals. Nothing is worse than to choose a celebrity, invest in promotion, and then have the celebrity leave. It's also important that the celebrity be available when needed for production work or personal appearances. The more clearly you spell out such arrangements beforehand, the smoother the relationship will be.

7

Ask for the best.

You may think that an "average person" with a connection to your organization is better than a "large" celebrity with no connection. Not true. The celebrity's familiarity and likeability will more than make up for the lack of connection. When you have an opportunity to use celebrities that don't have a connection but who measure up in other ways (reputation, wholesomeness, star power, etc.), use them. On the other hand, when choosing between two similar celebrities, one with no connection and one with a connection, always choose the celebrity with the link. Finally, in the process of evaluating and soliciting celebrities, always ask for the biggest, best, and most logical celebrity you can. You never can tell, you may get lucky. But also have other alternatives and back-ups available.

8

Keep focused on your mission.

Some celebrities may start demanding accommodations far beyond your contract agreement—penthouse suites, 24-hour-a-day food, wine, hairdressers, and masseuses. These things aren't cheap and require a great amount of coordination. More important, such demands indicate that the celebrities are more focused on themselves than on the organization's goals. If the

mission is getting lost and you can't get back on track, it may be necessary to terminate the contract.

9

Be different.

Don't do the same things other organizations are doing. Celebrities will embrace the chance to do something unique. And having a celebrity spokesperson gives you a chance to break out of the routine. Think of new ways to work with the celebrity—ways that will maximize the value of the relationship for both you and the celebrity. For example, consider using the celebrity *within* the organization to motivate and lift employee morale, drawing volunteers and staff into your fundraising campaign.

10

Think about it.

It takes time and care to find someone to represent your organization, and working with a celebrity can be difficult. You need to think deeply about whether a celebrity spokesperson is worth the time, effort, and resources involved. But don't dismiss the idea without thought and discussion. A celebrity can achieve more visibility for your organization than any other promotional technique. If you choose carefully—focusing on character, caring, and connection more than fame when making your choice—you will find that the benefits of using a celebrity far outweigh the challenges. ■

Footnotes

¹ In the first study, 398 participants reviewed a series of nonprofit celebrity ads, filled out a questionnaire, and detailed their thoughts while reading the ads. The purpose was to test the advertising effectiveness of a celebrity endorser with a link to a nonprofit organization compared to a celebrity endorser without a link. In the second study, 12 nonprofit executives and consultants were interviewed to identify the characteristics they seek when choosing celebrity endorsers for their organizations.

² See “Advertising Your Organization,” “How Nonprofits Can Use Television Talk Shows,” “PSAs-Free But Not Easy,” “Creating Your Brochure,” and “Picture Your Organization on Videotape” in *Public Relations and Communications, Leadership Series, Volume I*, and “Should a Famous Person Chair Your Fund Drive?” in *Fundraising & Resource Development, Leadership Series, Volume III*, available from the Society’s Resource Center, www.snpo.org, 734-451-3582.

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What Can Spokespeople Do for an Organization?



When nonprofit leaders seek a celebrity spokesperson, they usually look for someone “safe”—someone whose wholesomeness guarantees that no scandal will taint the nonprofit’s reputation. But the MAC AIDS Fund (360 Adelaide Street West, Suite 302, Toronto, Ontario M5V 1R7, www.macaidsfund.org) sought out celebrities known for breaking the rules. Why?

First of all, Elton John, Mary J. Blige, and Shirley Manson are ideal spokespeople for MAC because they have a deep commitment to AIDS education and outreach. They appeal to young people, who are more likely to listen to controversial musical icons than to mainstream authorities. It is those people, especially young gay men, who most need to hear the AIDS-prevention message.

They are excellent spokespeople not only for AIDS education and prevention but also for MAC’s primary fundraising tool—Viva Glam Lipsticks. The MAC AIDS Fund was created in 1994 by MAC Cosmetics, and its spokespeople represent what MAC is all about: artists expressing themselves and their creativity with fashion and makeup.

Every cent made from selling the lipsticks goes directly to the MAC AIDS Fund. In turn, the money is donated to AIDS organizations in the communities where the lipsticks are sold. As Shirley Manson explains, the ethos behind the MAC products is “that surface and beauty and glamour are wonderful, amazing things, but we need to remember what’s important and that things beneath the surface have to be attended to and that we shouldn’t shut our ears and eyes just because we find them ugly.”

Manson sees her work as a MAC spokesperson as a “perfect opportunity to put my own public profile to good use for a cause I feel strongly about.” She notes, “The great thing about the success of my band, Garbage, is that we’ve enjoyed international popularity. Since the MAC AIDS Fund stretches around the world, we set up events around the world to tie in with my touring schedule.”

Mary J. Blige agrees that “this is the perfect way to say I care for my community and what happens to it. I went to a few AIDS projects during my tour, and I’d speak and present a check. I’d mention Viva Glam and thank MAC and say something to the youth out there about AIDS and protecting yourself and doing something positive.” In her first two years promoting MAC’s Viva Glam around the world, Blige broke all past fundraising records by raising more than \$7 million.

“I think the campaign always stands out,” Elton John says. “You always notice it in the magazines, and for MAC to actually instigate this kind of campaign with people like Mary J., Shirley Manson, and me, or whomever, they will get noticed.”

The Fund has raised over \$23 million to promote services for those around the world affected by HIV and AIDS. This success is directly related to the wise choice of spokespeople. Such controversial, rule-breaking icons wouldn’t be appropriate for every nonprofit organization, of course. But the lesson is clear: Find spokespeople who care passionately about your cause and who appeal to your target audience.