

Recruiting Celebrities: Getting a star to say yes to your event

Craig McGuire - 6 Dec 2004 00:00

It takes more than just money to secure the right celebrity for your product. Craig McGuire discovers what truly resonates with the high-maintenance crowd

How difficult do you think it would be to get George Lucas, Cameron Diaz, John Elway, and Queen Latifah to sign on for the same event?

Now consider the event is the Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach Pro/Celebrity Race, requiring your celebs to commit eight exhausting days to training, track practice, and public appearances, including the three days of Race Weekend. Oh, and they won't be paid.

Rita Tateel, president of LA-based The Celebrity Source, is a PR pro specializing in celebrity recruitment for promotional events, and she pulled it off.

For the Toyota event, Tateel was contracted by lead agency Euro RSCG Magnet. For such an event, requiring such a commitment, Tateel actually invited 20 times the 18 participants needed. (For a standard event requiring less intense participation, she'd invite only 10 times the number of stars needed.)

The celebrities were invited seven months in advance to provide ample time to sort out scheduling conflicts. (For most non-paid projects, celebrities will rarely commit more than two months in advance.)

Tateel had each invitation hand delivered, drawing heavily on pre-existing interest.

"Each year we keep track of those celebrities who express extreme interest, but may not be able to participate because of the lengthy time commitment," Tateel says. "Ben Stiller, for example, has confirmed three years in a row, but each time had to drop out due to unexpected work commitments. Eventually we know we'll get him."

Needless to say, recruiting a celebrity for an event or campaign is quite an undertaking.

And even if you're not a specialist like Tateel, there are proven strategies that can increase the odds you'll land your fish.

"First, you have to understand what motivates a celebrity to say yes," Tateel says. "Always ask this as if you are the celebrity. Why should I do this? What's in it for me?" On top of professional and personal commitments, a star has just so much time to devote to public appearances. Not to mention, bona fide celebrities are more than likely inundated with requests.

As always, money talks. But, when there's little or no cash in the budget, there are many

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other motivators you can use.

"Media exposure is always a prime motivator, mostly for the up-and-coming or down-and-going," Tateel says. "Or if the celebrity has something specific to promote, such as a new book, film, or CD."

On the other hand, there are always celebrities interested in helping worthy causes, especially if the celebrity has been personally touched, such as Michael J. Fox (Parkinson's research), Denzel Washington (Boys & Girls Clubs of America, which he attended as a child), and David Hyde Pierce (Alzheimer's research, as his grandfather died of the disease).

"You need to find something about that particular event that will interest the celebrity to leave the comforts of home to even travel to do something they basically would rather not do," says Stephen Jaffe, chairman, Jaffe & Co., whose firm has represented such stars as Leonardo DiCaprio and Donald Sutherland. "In many cases, they'd rather contribute money or an item they can autograph that will be auctioned off. Other times, it's a matter of selecting the right celebrity."

Bridget Brennan, MD of Zeno Group Chicago, says it's important to pursue a star who identifies with the nature of your event. For example, Zeno enlisted supermodel and mom Cindy Crawford as a spokeswoman for the launch of a fashion-forward new stroller from Evenflo.

"The key to getting Cindy to agree was that she believes in the product herself," Brennan says. "Promoting a new high-end stroller is in keeping with the niche that Cindy has carved out for herself as a high-profile mom with style."

In fact, when Crawford was subsequently invited by Oprah Winfrey to participate in the "World's Largest Baby Shower," she offered to help promote the stroller on the show.

"We made it as easy as possible for Cindy to appear on the show, arranging travel for her on a private jet, first-class hotel accommodations, hair and makeup," Brennan says. "When working with a celebrity, it is essential to remember the perks. A celebrity simply can't be spotted flying coach by Page Six."

This brings us to the subject of "swag," as many celebrities commonly refer to the "stuff we all get" from personal appearances. But how can swag be such a motivator when celebrities can easily afford to buy this stuff?

"We all love presents," Tateel says. "Celebrities are no different. When it comes to luxury items, celebrities may not want to spend their own hard-earned money on frivolous things."

For Tateel's event, the celebrity participants received four days of professional race-car driving instruction, first-class travel and treatment, custom-fitted race-car driving uniforms and gear, and, of course, a fabulous goodie bag of gifts.

So, if you are going to go through all this effort and hinge your event on a celebrity guest, do the legwork.

Celebrities are more likely to participate in events that are similar to charitable work they have performed in the past, as was the case with Sharp Communications' recruitment of New York Mets pitcher Al Leiter and CNN News anchor Soledad O'Brien for The Randall's Island Sports Foundation (RISF) Holiday Tree Lighting 2003.

The RISF is a public-private partnership with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, formed to manage and operate the 480-acre Randall's Island Park and develop sports and recreational facilities. It sponsors community-linked programs for New York City children.

"Before soliciting celebrities and their publicists, Sharp extensively researched the celebrities' previous charitable work to ensure that their profiles were in line with the foundation's philosophy," says James Brodsky, president of Sharp. "Sharp then created an award program to encourage and secure celebrity participation - a Kids Island Club Champion Award was to be given out to honor the attending celebrities for their community work and charitable efforts."

One last thing to keep in mind: Just because you can get a Michael Jackson or an Anna Nicole Smith doesn't mean you should, no matter how much publicity they'll generate.

Technique tips

Do ask yourself, as if you are the star, "Why should I do this?"

Do make sure it's a credible match and relevant to the star

Do provide great swag

Don't set your sights higher than your budget will allow

Don't fail to personally oversee all accommodations, especially travel to and from the event

Don't neglect to have a backup plan in place in case the celeb cancels due to an "emergency"

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