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Celebrity participation and endorsements aid brand-building

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A winner of the Nobel Peace Prize once angrily shook his fist at me. As PR consultant for an independent school, one of my duties during a fundraising dinner was to make sure the big donors got their photos taken with guest speaker, Dr. Henry Kissinger, former secretary of state and advisor to U.S. Presidents. During the reception, I collared key couples, placed them next to Kissinger, and directed the photographer to shoot. By the 10th couple, the honored guest stared at me and roared in his thick German accent, "Tell him to stop flashing in my face." That episode didn't affect the success of the event: Publicity about the guest speaker attracted 600 guests, raised over \$225,000, drew media attention, and helped raise the school's image to build enrollment and attract faculty.

Celebrity endorsement can be used on many levels. Major brands use this marketing technique and pay big bucks: Diet Coke's sales rose when Taylor Swift promoted their brand. Gilbert Gottfried was the voice of the Aflac duck until he joked about a tsunami.

On the local level, if you know the right people or for the right cause, personal appearances might not cost anything at all. Or you might need to include an appearance fee in the marketing budget. Getting a big local name to endorse a local product can be costly. For national names, Hillary C. gets \$200,000 per event.

One might promote opening of a mall with Miss Massachusetts cutting a ribbon. For a telethon, I once had the meteorologists from all three major Boston stations come at the same time (unbeknownst to them!). It was cute the way each took credit for the nice weather that day. It made a cool photo for post-event PR. At another fundraiser, I was asked to shepherd (a pun?) cardinal Sean O'Malley, introducing him, orchestrating photos, answering his questions. Known personalities don't guarantee media coverage. Only one reporter came to that event, I told the cardinal's assistant I was disappointed. He joked, "Trip him and you'll get a headline."

I was impressed to learn that one of the biggest NBA basketball stars, 7'6" Yao Ming, now retired, is the spokesman for the group 86 Elephants. In March, 2013, poachers killed 86 elephants in Chad using machine guns. They hacked off the tusks to make into jewelry and religious objects. Due to limited budgets and tribal warfare there aren't enough rangers. 30,000 elephants are killed annually, threatened with extinction. Yao Ming, is using his celebrity status to end the ivory trade. He's also campaigned against the killing of rhinos for their single horn (not ivory) prized for medicinal and jewelry uses. He campaigned against the killing of sharks for shark fin soup. His work resulted in a 60% drop in shark sales in China. Maybe he can help save the elephants.

A good marketing programs includes news stories, ads, mailings, social media, etc. - but employing a famous face can build buzz and your brand in ways you hadn't imagined. And the right marketing pro can make it happen.

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