

*“I’m sure there are celebrities who have real passion about particular issues and they really do want to make a difference. But most of it is a collusion between the way they wish the public would see them and the way the public relations people use them in order to get attention for their causes.”*

*Kim Hume, Washington Bureau Chief, Fox News (2000)*

## **Celebrity Advocacy In Charitable and Social Justice Causes**

By

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Should it be considered empowerment or entitlement? Self-sacrificing or self-serving? Vocational calling or avocational distraction? Is the advent of celebrity advocacy humanitarian altruism or the potential exploitation of people suffering? Are the stars of the Hollywood entertainment industry compassionate good-deed-doers or merely photo opp opportunists?

In the growing field of celebrity advocacy, it’s sometimes difficult to separate the sincere from the disingenuous in the sphere of espousing charitable and social justice causes. Celebrities who lend their fame by devoting themselves to helping others versus those who attach themselves to worthy causes for the media buzz it attracts. It’s relatively easy to see who the players are – our burgeoning culture of celebrity obsession creates a cult of visibility.

And for the social cause or issue, is there an upside for seeking celebrity attachment? Is it an expanded audience, higher level of awareness, or increased fundraising potential? Should attachment to a celebrity be considered a necessary evil or a strategic maneuver?

In the cluttered and often chaotic world of message overload, can a social cause even hope to break through the communication sound barrier to be heard *without* the voice of celebrity behind it?

Often, the results speak for themselves. Charities and causes might muddle through for years garnering little public attention and then suddenly find themselves thrust into the national spotlight with celebrity intervention. Significant dollars can be raised with the persuasive presence of celebrity.

But can celebrity advocacy actually move the masses to action? Does the glow of fame overshadow the merits of a cause or the role of politicians in setting the political and social agenda? Does celebrity involvement in a social cause transcend tabloid chatter and give rise to the pressure of world opinion?

Similar to the mathematical theorem of transitivity whereby if  $A = B$  and  $B = C$ , then  $A = C$ , as long as celebrities garner media and media informs the world, then there's opportunity for social causes to have their message heard through celebrity.

## ***EVOLUTION OF CELEBRITY ADVOCACY***

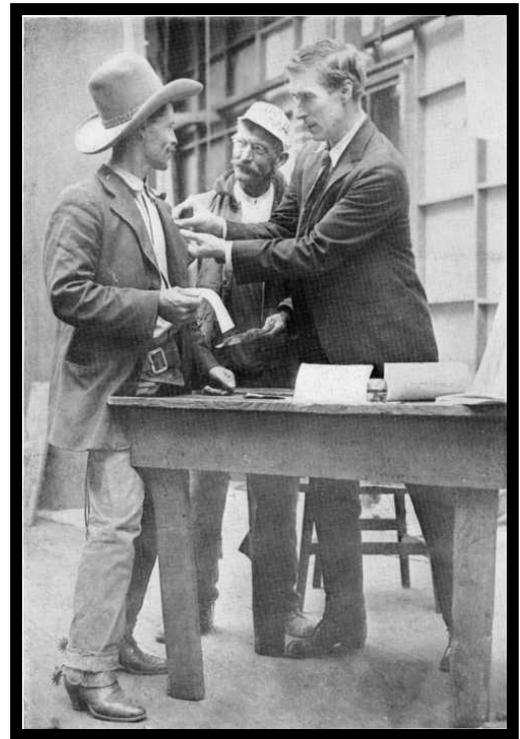
Advertisers do it. Corporations shell out big dollars to those who *can* do it. Governments seek out those who *will* do it. So why shouldn't a social justice or charitable cause harness the power of celebrity to further their agenda?

"The idea of getting prominent public figures to endorse a cause is not new," said author Adam Hochschild in a recent interview. Hochschild points out that what is changing, however, is the definition of what and who 'celebrity' really is. "Rarely do we

think of someone other than an actor or athlete.” Historically, that was not always the case. In Hochschild’s “King Leopold’s Ghost,” the endorsement of nobility and spiritual leaders was widely used to publicize the Belgium atrocities occurring in the Congo in the early part of the twentieth century. From 1900 to 1910, publications by the Congo Reform Association depicted prominent lords, ladies and bishops endorsing the reform platform. The organization’s protests were celebrity dependent. “Where one might have expected to see illustrations of human atrocities, instead, noblemen – always with a bishop’s robe somewhere in the picture – were the visual images shown,” Hochschild adds.

Silent film stars lent their celebrity selling U.S. War Bonds during World War I. Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford stumped for war bonds in 1918,<sup>1</sup> along with William S. Hart who campaigned for the sale of Liberty Bonds to help finance the war effort. Hart also wrote, directed and co-starred with Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks in one-half reel Liberty Bond sales promotional films.<sup>2</sup>

Criticizing the socio-economic conditions of the 1930s through his music, depression era folk singer Woody Guthrie used his celebrity to protest class inequality in America.<sup>3</sup> Musicians continued to get into the mix in 1971 with George Harrison’s Concert for Bangladesh. That marked the first time the music industry collaborated for a common humanitarian cause.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1. Published photo of actor William S. Hart selling Liberty War Bonds during World War I, ca. 1918.**

On a chance airplane encounter in 1953, the partnership between celebrities and global causes was forever forged. Turning idle travel chatter into a dialogue for collaboration, the then-executive director of UNICEF persuaded entertainer Danny Kaye to use his celebrity to travel the world promoting the needs and rights of children.<sup>5</sup> Kaye became UNICEF's first Goodwill Ambassador, traveling the globe for 33 years to further the cause. Almost everyone who is anyone has followed in Kaye's ambassadorship role.



**Figure 2. UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie with displaced Chechen refugees in Bella camp, Ingushetia, 2003.**

Angelina Jolie represents the UNICEF ambassador of today – the jet setting celebrity flying in and out of ravished, often war-torn, impoverished nations learning first-hand the plight of the world's underserved. Jolie's passion brings awareness to the plight of

more than 35 million world refugees forced out of their homes and living in the dire conditions of refugee camps. "Refugees are not like immigrants who have made a choice to leave their homes in hopes of starting a new life somewhere," said UNHCR<sup>6</sup> spokesperson Joung-Ah Ghedini.<sup>7</sup> "For refugees, the decision was imposed on them; they were forced to leave because of a genuine fear of persecution or worse." Conditions in the camps are deplorable; Jolie dedicates herself to raising awareness of the situation.

Rising to new heights in celebrity advocacy, Ireland's rock star Bono from the musical group U2 made headline news recently when he was endorsed by the Los Angeles Times to head the World Bank.<sup>8</sup> "If the idea resonated, it's because people

recognize that the cause of global development – the fight to curb disease and hunger in Africa and elsewhere – needs a forceful, charismatic spokesman who can marshal private resources and shame governments into living up to their commitments,” the editorial staff opined.<sup>9</sup> Veering far afield from the world of celebrity, President Bush subsequently nominated U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz for the World Bank’s top job.

Whether or not the Bush Administration actually considered Bono for the World Bank position is not relevant to the scope of this paper. What is relevant is the way in which celebrities attach themselves to social causes and elevate public discussion. Short of becoming political figures themselves, celebrities advocating social causes can “move the needle” in the world court of public opinion under the right circumstances.

## ***EFFECTIVENESS MODELS***

Whether peddling wares or offering hope, celebrities sell. “The play that celebrities get in our culture from various media sources is huge,” says Kierstin De West, founder of Conscientious Innovation, a marketing and branding center.<sup>10</sup> “There’s definitely a market out there that will listen. As the awareness [about a particular cause] goes up, the involvement will go up, too.”

The evidence is inconclusive, though. Craig Strong, vice-president and managing director of J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, disagrees with De West’s position.<sup>11</sup> He perceives fundamental differences between product marketing and social marketing arguing that there is a more intense level of involvement for an individual when presented with an issue than when asked to choose between two brand products. “In the social sector, you’re asking someone to make a fundamental behavioral change. Most people

have a defined sense of values and behavior, and it requires a fair bit more than a celebrity endorsement to shift someone from [their] position,” reported Strong. “It takes consistency, time, and education.”

Turning to the field of advertising, insight into considerations for attaching celebrities with brands parallels the practice of attaching high profile talent to social causes. Empirical evidence demonstrates the benefits of endorsements, particularly those of a celebrity. Freiden (1984) tested four types of endorsers – celebrity, CEO, expert and consumer. In comparison with the other endorser types, celebrity endorsers scored higher on the dimensions of trustworthiness, believability, persuasiveness, and likeability.<sup>12</sup>

Q scores by Marketing Evaluations, Inc. measures the familiarity and appeal of celebrities. This “likeability” measurement ranks more than 1,700 personalities across specific target audiences. From super A-list actors to reality show participants, Q scores can help a charity gauge the expected receptiveness and appeal of a particular celebrity to defined demographic profile audiences. It can also work the other way – help a celebrity narrow their search for a cause to engage based on matching target audience demographics.

Another study (Kamins 1990) tested a hypothesis on match-up, or proper fit. The findings revealed that the positive impact of a celebrity endorser depends, at least to some degree, on a proper fit between the celebrity and product, or in the case of this analysis, cause.<sup>13</sup> “Success hinges on a ‘good fit’ between spokesperson and product or cause,” says Dominique Hanssens, professor of marketing at the UCLA Anderson Graduate School of Management.”<sup>14</sup>

Empirical research has also tested correlations between positive and negative perceptions of a celebrity and its reflective association on the attached brand/cause.<sup>15</sup> It was found that repeated exposure of the celebrity/cause pairing establishes a pattern of connectivity by strengthening the associative link between them.<sup>16</sup>

There are also outcome-related measurements that indicate the potential financial range of effectiveness in the celebrity-cause relationship model. Pierce Brosnan in his work for the National Women's Cancer Research Alliance raised \$12 million from 1992 - 1997.<sup>17</sup> As chairwoman of the American Foundation for AIDS Research campaign, Sharon Stone reportedly raised hundreds of millions of dollars for the organization.<sup>18</sup> In a single night, the Elton John AIDS Foundation grossed \$1,000,000 at the celebrity's post-Oscar fundraising event, according to Christina Lee, senior account executive at Rogers & Cowan and publicist for the event.

Success metrics for social justice causes are often determined by achieving increased levels of awareness for an issue. Richard Gere calls attention to the plight of Tibet; Michael Douglas works to stimulate discussion for disarmament; Warren Beatty pushes universal health care.

## ***THE CREDIBILITY FACTOR***

Simply attaching a celebrity to a cause does not guarantee success. It may succeed in generating media buzz and exposing the subject to a broader audience, but will the relationship actually legitimize the issue and bring about a call to action, albeit fundraising, awareness, behavior change, public policy, or other effects? Will the celebrity be perceived to endorse a cause because they are receiving some tangible

benefit, or because it's good for their image, or because they actually understand the issues and have a genuine interest in the cause?

“The celebrity has to know and understand the mission of the association,” says Peter Braun, executive director of the Los Angeles Alzheimer’s Association.<sup>19</sup> Alzheimer’s disease research received 65 percent more research funding in 1991 after Shelley Fabares testified before a joint subcommittee on aging.<sup>20</sup> Fabares recounted the “pure isolation and terror” she and her sister experienced while caring for their mother who suffered from the disease until her death in 1992.

“Credibility comes with biography, both personal and professional,” offers Republican consultant Dan Schnur. “Either something in their past or the amount of time and commitment they put into their cause in the current day.” Schnur points to the nomination chatter surrounding U2’s front man Bono as an example of an effective biographical connection. “Bono brings attention to third world debt in a very visual way; he puts in the time and effort.”

Christina Lee echoes that sentiment, “Bono is sincere about focusing his time and energy on his particular cause.” She points to the fact that Bono often turns down requests from other charities so as not to dilute his focus and involvement in the issues he champions.

Michael A. Levine, entertainment attorney in Toronto, confirms Schnur’s belief that credibility lies in the celebrity’s personal life. “They must walk the talk and live a lifestyle that would suggest they truly believe in what they are talking about, and it’s not just some PR group handing them a script.”<sup>21</sup> This could pose to be an understandably

difficult challenge for some celebrities who might be well known for their lavish lifestyles.

“Celebrity endorsements only become believable when either the celebrity has a very long track record of having communicated or supported something, or has been personally affected by a particular cause and therefore knows something about it and cares,” offers Craig Stone (J. Walter Thompson.)<sup>22</sup>

## ***CELEBRITY BROKERS***

Matching celebrities with causes is a growing business in the field of public relations. Barry Greenberg, owner of Celebrity Connection, states that for the celebrity, picking the right cause “is as important as picking the right agent... it helps them get booked on talk shows and to get them into magazine articles.”<sup>23</sup>

“Celebrities give an organization more power – more power in the media. That’s very important for getting in front of a national audience,” suggests Christina Lee (Rogers & Cowan). Consider Padres Contra El Cancer (PADRES,) a non-profit organization committed to improving the quality of life for Latino children with cancer and their families. This little known charity has operated in Southern California for the past 20 years, but you’d hardly know it for the scant amount of press they’ve received to date. Things may turn around for the organization now that PADRES has just signed their inaugural spokesperson, Eva Longoria, who stars in the popular television series *Desperate Housewives*. “My wish is for PADRES to become a nationally recognized organization,” Longoria was quoted as saying in a recent press release.<sup>24</sup> It could happen; a high-profile gala event featuring Longoria is scheduled at the end of this month.

Are some causes more hip than others? “Sure,” Lee answers. “You’ll always find celebrities quick to jump on board an organization dealing with children and they’re also quick to jump on causes involving breast cancer and AIDS.” Lee doesn’t see the popularity of those particular causes diminishing, making it harder for other worthy causes to get noticed in the media.

Some causes are so hip that celebrities just seek them out. Others are so politically charged or of such low interest that it is difficult to find a well-known celebrity willing to take on the cause. Such is the case for Rhoda Dennison, president of the Los Angeles chapter of the Sjogren’s Syndrome Foundation in her quest to find a celebrity to champion this particular autoimmune disease. “If we had a nationally known celebrity, at least people would pay attention,” says Dennison, “but we can’t even find out who [in Hollywood] has the disease.”<sup>25</sup>

Celebrities are not the only ones hopping onto a charity’s coattails. A corporation will often connect an event with a charity to soften their image and entice a celebrity to get on board. “It’s easier to get press to a charity event than to a boring corporate dinner or product launch,” says Lee.

Farm Aid or Pharm Aid? Sometimes there is a fine line between corporate and charitable causes. Pharmaceutical companies gained notoriety several years ago for setting up health-related nonprofits then finding famous pitchmen to discuss their ailments.<sup>26</sup> “We operate on the belief that everyone should come clean if they are being compensated for an appearance,” said Barry Greenberg in a recent phone interview. Overall, Greenberg expressed that he did not think celebrities should be compensated for an appearance at a charitable event, except when they are not already directly involved in the organization or if they are performing.

In her experience with numerous social issue organizations, Celia Alario, media strategist and independent consultant for grassroots social change causes, is not aware that any celebrity has ever been paid for their time and involvement in client organizations. “Their expenses are usually covered and sometimes they have special requests, but celebrities are not paid for their time,” says Alario.

Lee acknowledges that the type of work required can also make a difference to the celebrity when deciding whether to get involved with a particular cause. As an example, it’s easier to get a celebrity to lend their name by attending a dinner than to get them to do physical labor for an organization like Hollywood for Habitat for Humanity.

## ***CREATIVE COALITION***

According to company information, the Creative Coalition exists to “educate, organize, and mobilize the arts and entertainment communities to ensure that those voices are strong, clear, focused and knowledgeable.”<sup>27</sup>

Founded in 1989 by a small group of entertainment industry talent, this non-profit, non-partisan organization is likened to an issues clearinghouse for the entertainment industry.<sup>28</sup> The founders’ vision was for celebrities to define themselves as people who use their communication skills and political savvy in effective ways. “We wanted to get beyond celebrity-in-politics tokenism and photo-ops to move inside the political process - to actually help shape policy,” according to actor Stephen Collins.<sup>29</sup>

*“The Creative Coalition was formed by a belief that we as artists had to educate ourselves about important issues, and then use our talents as communicators to educate others.”*

*Christopher Reeve*

## ***CELEBS AND THEIR CAUSES***

Charities can hire a public relations agency to find a celebrity, but often, the organization makes a personal contact with the celebrity directly. “Relationships are important,” says Christina Lee (Rogers & Cowan.) “Usually, someone knows a celebrity and that person makes the connection by introducing someone from the organization to the celeb.”

“Sometimes it’s a question of who makes the ‘ask’,” offers media strategist Celia Alario. “Sometimes celebrities will connect themselves to a cause.” Alario points to the antiwar organization, Win Without War, as an example of a cause acting as a magnet for celebrities to engage themselves in. The celebrity/cause model differs from the norm for Win Without War; celebrities become part of the campaign, not the spokespeople. Taking more of a background position, celebrities push victims to the forefront for this particular cause.

“It’s commendable when someone uses their fame for a cause greater than their own self-interest,” offers GOP consultant Dan Schnur. “Celebrities can help elevate an issue and boost the importance of an issue, but it takes more to mobilize mass support.”

"We have a spotlight on us," Irish rock star Bono explained in a television interview.<sup>30</sup> "I'm just doing what everyone else would do if they had the time and the money... use this spotlight to shine on bigger problems."

Sometimes the glow from a celebrity’s stardom can overshadow the cause – a potential hazard. Within the first two weeks following the devastating tsunami that hit Southeast Asia, pop idol Ricky Martin traveled to Thailand. Originally scheduled to travel under the auspices of UNICEF, the organization canceled its participation, leaving

Martin to make the trip on his own.<sup>31</sup> Serving as more of a disruption to the relief effort than aiding the endeavor, some Taiwanese expected Martin was there to promote himself.

By contrast, other celebrities demonstrate great sincerity in the depth of their convictions for a cause with focused attention on the issue. According to Lee, *Survivor's* television series host Jeff Probst is a master at steering press interviews that start to drift. If “What’s going to happen on the next episode of *Survivor*?” questions arise, Probst skillfully redirects a reporter’s attention back onto the charity he is there to represent. Probst also plays a strong role in eliciting involvement by the show’s producers with charitable opportunities, such as auctioning *Survivor* memorabilia on eBay at the end of each season with proceeds going to a charitable cause.

Halle Berry credits Karma and soul searching as her motivation to reach beyond what she describes as a shallow existence in entertainment. “When I can take that and use [celebrity] to do real good in the world, then I get it: This is one of the things I’m supposed to do with the abundance I’ve been given.”<sup>32</sup>

“I’ve tried to practice noblesse oblige (French word meaning ‘nobility obligates’)” offers actor Ben Affleck . “Those of us who’ve benefited have the obligation to continue to work for a better America and leave none of its citizens behind.”<sup>33</sup>

## ***POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN SOCIAL JUSTICE CAUSES***

There seems to be a difference of opinion over whether celebrity endorsements can shift political debates. Stars such as Martin Sheen, Janeane Garofalos, Sean Penn and the Dixie Chicks have suffered professional backlash after weighing in their opinions on the

war in Iraq, but there is no clear evidence to indicate that their actions affected public beliefs. It did, however, add to the dynamic of public discourse.

“Martin Sheen is an authentic example of someone leveraging his celebrity and notoriety to lend support for various issues,” says Celia Alario. The fact that Sheen has been arrested some 25 times over the course of his professional career and currently stars in the popular television series *West Wing* makes more of a difference, according to Alario.

But there is also a downside to advocacy. “I never imagined I would be penalized for speaking out in favor of social justice,” says comedian and actress Janeane Garofalo. “I never thought that anyone who spoke out for peace, and diplomacy, and social justice would be pilloried.”<sup>34</sup> Garofalo places heavy blame on the press for abandoning their journalistic responsibilities. “The mainstream media has, in my opinion, been so grossly negligent, so disturbingly devoid of authentic debate, and actual dissemination of information.”<sup>35</sup>

Stepping into the arena of serious advocacy, Richard Gere has championed the plight of the Tibetan people for more than a decade. He cites that when he first became involved, Tibet had no public voice, no contact with the media, and no presence in the United Nations.<sup>36</sup> Advocacy has not come without a price. Gere was banned as an Oscar presenter after he surprised members of the Academy and the world with a speech on Chinese repression in Tibet during the 1993 awards ceremony.

Advocacy demands very little political courage when not linked directly to U.S. policy.<sup>37</sup> The reverse of that statement is that it takes a great *deal* of courage to advocate for a cause that goes against prevailing U.S. political programs. After two decades, Ed

Asner still suffers the sting from the alleged subversive Hollywood blacklist. Asner witnessed cancellation of his series by CBS in the early 1980s for his advocacy in El Salvador after two major advertisers pulled their sponsorship. Political foes accused the actor of collaborating with enemy leftist guerrillas.<sup>38</sup>

Just how effective celebrity advocacy can be in creating change in global issues outside our own borders remains to be seen. Nadine Gordimer, South African Nobel laureate campaigns against poverty as a goodwill ambassador for the UN Development Program. “So far, those of us appointed do not have the opportunity to have an impact on globalization issues,” Gordimer says. “We are not the right people.”<sup>39</sup>

“It’s one thing to put a spotlight on an issue, it’s another to get into the inner workings of creating public policy,” claims actor/producer/director Rob Reiner.<sup>40</sup> On a state level, Reiner has headed campaigns on several policy-making ballot initiatives in California.

## ***MORPHING CELEBRITY ADVOCACY INTO FILMMAKING***

If celebrity is one of the few common languages that most people understand, than could cinematic filmmaking evolve into the professional language of the future? Tossing objectivity aside, the Rwanda genocide of 1994 made its way from the news journals to the film screen in this year’s entry, *Hotel Rwanda*. “We need to look to film to grant power to those who are marginalized or currently not represented,” says Yale law student Rick Herbst.<sup>41</sup> Before entering law school, Herbst received an undergraduate degree in filmmaking. He considers his major as a way to learn about power structures and the

way individuals influence each other.<sup>42</sup> People endowed with social power and prestige are able to use film and media images to reinforce their power, adds Herbst.

The communal nature of film has the ability to affect large groups. Movies have control of the mind's eye with widespread importance placed upon it in our culture, according to Steven J. Ross, professor and History chair, University of Southern California. Consider that a film may be seen by millions compared to the limitations of readership for a book (New York Times bestsellers list threshold is 50,000 copies sold.)

The superiority of film for stimulating public discussion may be in its underlying metamessage ("meta" is the Greek word for "beyond", "additional", or "transcendent") carrying implicit messages about the reason for the communication, how the message is to be interpreted, and the nature of the relationship of the sender and receiver.<sup>43</sup> In his lecture presentation, Professor G. Thomas Goodnight, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California, puts forward the notion that celebrity advocacy is a generative area leading to productive politics and political debate. More than just a "dead cat bounce," movement politics as presented in film and by celebrity advocates is likely to change the fundamental structure of political discourse. Goodnight adds that it will be the public sphere that transmutes deliberation into controversy.

## ***PUBLIC RELATIONS IMPLICATIONS MOVING FORWARD***

Would the 1994 situation in Rwanda have changed had a celebrity intervened to use his or her public draw to raise awareness for the issue? Would such intervention have significantly lessened the 100 days of genocide warfare that occurred? Could celebrity have elevated the discussion, thereby forcing world pressure for military intervention to

stop the violence? It may have, but it likely would not have had the immediacy of response as a product boycott or corporate censure can spark. That said, public relations and celebrity might still play a key role in mobilizing the masses, influencing policy decisions for intervention and relief efforts, and shaping public policy in the future.

“Celebrity advocacy can be an elixir, but not necessarily a primary agent,” says Dan Schnur. Schnur also points out that it may be difficult for a celebrity to create interest in an issue if interest is not already there. “Seeking celebrity involvement is one of several options available, but certainly not the only one. For a non-profit, it should be considered a tactic rather than the goal. There’s no guarantee that it will be the most successful or effective one available to them.”

Enlisting a celebrity is not always the best course of action to take. If you’re not careful, having a celebrity attached to a cause can potentially backfire. Celia Alario cites a personal experience that did not go as planned when the tactic superseded the message. In 1996, actor Woody Harrelson and others scaled the Golden Gate Bridge to make a point about redwood forests, tying up traffic for hours.<sup>44</sup> The message points that came through in the media were traffic-related, not cause-related.

It’s also not easy for charities to chase celebrities and stay on top of hot trends. “Sometimes celebrities can lose some of their celebrity status,” Christina Lee (Rogers & Cowan) remarked. When the spotlight starts to dim, charities will look for someone more popular.

By contrast, one of the biggest oversights charities make is not taking the time to cultivate relationships, allowing them to grow, according to Barry Greenberg (Celebrity Connection.) Greenberg maintains that organizations should use celebrities in a natural

way; forge relationships with talent early in their career and allow them to work their way through the ranks. “It’s a more appropriate and more honorable way to establish a relationship with a celebrity,” says Greenberg. He adds that finding a celebrity with a slightly lower profile who may be in more of a position to be involved in philanthropy serves to make a greater contribution than the top twenty charities going after the top ten celebrities, thereby diluting the whole process.

According to an article in *PR News*, take the time to do qualitative research to determine whether your potential celebrity’s audience crosses over into your target market.<sup>45</sup> To research personal biography, the article suggests flipping through the pages of celebrity tabloid magazines like *Enquirer* or *People* for windows into a star’s personal history.

Celebrity intervention can be effective when incorporated into a sustained, ongoing campaign. Rainforest Action Network (RAN) waged a four-year campaign against Citibank protesting their involvement in lending money to environmentally damaging projects. Even though many of RAN’s tactics received media exposure, it wasn’t until the organization enlisted the assistance of Susan Sarandon, Ed Asner, Daryl Hannah and Ali McGraw that Citibank asked for a cease-fire and agreed to talk.<sup>46</sup>

Charities beware; a real concern organizations should have is the fact that they have no control over the celebrity’s future behavior. Just think OJ Simpson, Kobe Bryant or Martha Stewart to realize the potential for negative press. To some relief, the Till-Shimp study examined changes in perception for a brand/cause based on negative celebrity information and found that the complex cognitive structures individuals possess insulate the brand/cause from negative celebrity press under certain circumstances.<sup>47</sup> This assertion only holds for well-known brands/causes.

## ***CHARTING THE TOP TEN LIST***

Without question, stars can boost the image of a social cause and elevate public discussion. As long as news reporting fixates on celebrity, then celebrities will continue to develop as power structures for influencing people. Under the right circumstances, celebrity attachment can effectively raise the profile of an organization or social issue, enabling the message to resonate with a broad audience.

From a public relations perspective, knowing when and how to use celebrity involvement and with whom is key to carrying forth a strategic campaign. The following summarizes the top ten considerations a non-profit, charitable or social welfare organization should take into account when engaging a celebrity to move a cause forward.

**Biography, biography, biography.** Something in the celebrity's past or their time and commitment in the current day that connects them with the cause or issue should exist. Table I depicts a sampling of celebrities and their associated causes with focus on level of involvement and biographical connection. Their biography can be personal, professional or in some cases, political. As an example, actress Halle Berry, herself a diabetic, lends her celebrity to Carousel of Hope, an organization for childhood diabetes. A biographical link to her work with international refugee camps is Angelina Jolie's adoption of a Cambodian orphan. Tom Hanks, after filming *Saving Private Ryan*, campaigned for the National World War II Veterans Memorial. With Hank's biographical connection, celebrity mixes with character, which gives reflective credibility and a strong association with the cause.

**Credibility.** Closely related to biography, credibility extends into a celebrity's personal and lifestyle choices. For instance, credibility would not be established if a celebrity known for driving a gas-guzzling sports utility vehicle and possessing other overconsumption of resource tendencies was paired with an environmental cause. Credibility is also achieved by the celebrity's passion, sincerity, knowledge and understanding of the cause and its mission.

**Good fit.** The celebrity should appeal to the same demographic as the cause. Along with a biographical connection, the relationship has to make sense to have believability. Whereas, an audience might not accept Brittany Spears as spokesperson for AARP, that same demographic would likely have instant affinity for Nancy Reagan speaking on behalf of the Alzheimer's Association.

**Transparency.** The connection between celebrity and cause should be clear and apparent. Their motives should be altruistic and selfless and disclosure should be made if some form of consideration is given to the celebrity by the organization. Transparency is important for organizations primarily funded and organized by corporations or other non-charitable interests.

**High recognition factor.** Likeability, familiarity and appeal of the celebrity can impact how well a cause's message resonates in the public domain. This does not imply that only A-list celebrities should be considered; in fact, celebrity overexposure caused by too many cause-related connections can create audience fatigue for that star. But they should be respectable, well-liked personalities with appeal, or the potential for appealing to a wide and expansive audience.

**Cultivate relationships.** Allow mutually beneficial relationships to flourish, strengthen and develop. For the most part, celebrities are reflective of the general population. Hypothetically, if 90 percent of the population is detached from societal issues and 10 percent represents those who are passionate activists, then it serves to reason that 10 percent of the celebrity pool will have genuine, inherent tendencies toward advocating for a greater good. The key is to identify those passionate souls early in their celebrity career and allow them to grow with the organization in a way that is direct and meaningful.

**Repeated exposure.** Think long-term commitment and strategic utilization of a celebrity. The more an organization can link a celebrity to its cause, the stronger the associative link will be in the public's mind. Flying a celebrity into an international disaster zone for a photo opp won't necessarily advance the cause. A celebrity turning out for numerous appearances, providing personal testimony and endorsement will have much greater impact.

**Acquiesce to the cause.** The glow of celebrity should not overshadow the cause. Putting in the time is not enough. A celebrity must also be willing to take a back seat to the purpose and mission of the organization, staying true to the cause and focused on delivering its message.

**Relevance.** Celebrity alone is not likely to create interest for a cause where no interest already exists. The issue must somehow resonate and connect with the mainstream.

**Point of entry.** Utilizing a celebrity should be strategic within the context of a campaign or organizational plan. In the Citibank example, the Rainforest Action

Network successfully laid the groundwork for its cause in the court of public opinion prior to engaging celebrity intervention. In other situations, securing a celebrity to advocate from the grassroots beginning of an organization might be a superior choice.

**Bonus: Who's asking?** A cold call to a celebrity or celebrity's agent won't usually get an organization very far in securing an advocate for its cause. A better approach would be to find someone acquainted with a celebrity that the organization is interested in forming a relationship with to make the introduction. Considered highly effective, a personal plea utilizing a friend-of-a-friend introduction is a bona fide, proven approach.

Celebrities serve as luminaries within our culture of idol obsession. The presence of intervening variables makes it difficult to isolate and quantify the effectiveness of celebrity attachment to a social justice cause, but increases in media exposure, public awareness and funding gains are evident. Operating on low budgets, non-profit organizations can advance their cause through celebrity-related public relations activities at a fraction of the cost that advertising would require.

Although it has not been established that celebrity advocacy alone can move the masses for political action or social change, it is arguably a powerful force in bringing issues to the forefront of public debate. For charitable and social welfare causes striving to gain share of voice in the philanthropic and social justice arena, the overall benefits of celebrity attachment far outweigh any negative downside. In the context of overriding considerations, celebrities can help a cause successfully navigate the complexities of setting political agendas and initiating social reform action.

Table I

## CELEBRITY ADVOCACY FOR CHARITABLE AND SOCIAL CAUSES

CELEBRITY	CAUSE OR ISSUE	LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT	BIOGRAPHICAL CONNECTION
Angelina Jolie	Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Refugee Agency, UNHCR	UN Ambassador; monetary donations; refugee camp visits; addresses members of Congress	Adopted Cambodian orphan; Film: <i>Beyond Borders</i> (2003)
Halle Berry	Carousel of Hope (childhood diabetes); Jenessie Center for Battered Women; Make-A-Wish Foundation	Fundraising for diabetes; hands-on with battered women's shelter and granting dreams of terminally ill children.	Diabetic; childhood history of domestic violence in home (father against mother and older sister)
Gary Sinise <i>CSI:NY</i>	Operation Iraqi Children	Started organization to provide school-supply kits for Iraqi children.	Two goodwill trips to Iraq
Sela Ward	Hope Village Foundation	Purchased 30 acres in Meridian, Mississippi and founded home for foster children; spends one month each summer; visits throughout the year.	Home state Mississippi
Tyra Banks	Tzone Project (LA)	Founder and primary funder; spokesperson	Feelings of inadequacy as a teenager
Brian Littrell <i>Backstreet Boys</i>	Brian Littrell Healthy Heart Club for Kids	Founder	Hospitalized with heart valve infection at age 5.
David Hyde Pierce <i>Frasier</i>	Alzheimer's Association	National spokesperson	Father and grandfather suffered from the disease.
Leonardo DiCaprio	Earth Day	Chairman	Experience with bad press by ecologists in Thailand claiming environmental damage after making the movie <i>The Beach</i> (2000)
Montel Williams <i>Talk show host</i>	Montel Williams MS Foundation	Founder	Diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1999.
Amy Grant	Scholarship America; Compassion International	Spokesperson	Mother of four, sponsors three children (Guatemalan)
Elton John	Elton John AIDS Foundation	Founder and chairman	Gay male; friends who died from AIDS
Bono (Paul Hewson) <i>U2</i>	'DATA Agenda': World Debt, AIDS and trade for Africa	Outspoken advocate for third-world debt relief	Spent a month working in Ethiopia after LiveAid concert in 1985.
Tom Hanks	National World War II Memorial; Freeplay Foundation (distributing Lifeline radios to orphaned children in Africa.)	PSA campaign; Ambassador (Freeplay Foundation)	Film: <i>Saving Private Ryan</i> (1998)
Janeane Garofalo	Win Without War	Outspoken advocate against the war in Iraq	Political party
Michael Douglas	Disarmament	Promotes gun control	Film: <i>The China Syndrome</i> (1979)
Shelley Fabares	Alzheimer's Association	Testimony before congressional hearing; national board member	Mother died of disease in 1992.
Steven Spielberg	Shoah Foundation	Founder	Jewish; directed <i>Schindler's List</i> (1993)

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## Interviews

Celia Alario, Media Strategist and Independent Consultant for grassroots social change causes; adjunct Instructor University of Southern California, Annenberg School for Communication; phone interview on March 19, 2005. Partial client list includes Rainforest Action Network, United Steelworkers of America, Sea Shepherd, and Amazon Watch.

Barry Greenberg, Owner, Celebrity Connection; adjunct instructor University of Southern California, Annenberg School for Communication; phone interview on March 24, 2005.

Adam Hochschild, Writer, Author, part-time Instructor University of California Berkeley, Graduate School of Journalism; phone interview on March 18, 2005.

Christina Lee, Senior Account Executive, Rogers & Cowan, Los Angeles office; phone interview on March 22, 2005. Partial client list includes Elton John AIDS Foundation, PADRES and Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation.

Dan Schnur, GOP Consultant and part-time Instructor University of Southern California, Annenberg School for Communication; phone interview on March 16, 2005.

# Lectures

“Sketches in Celebrity Advocacy: *The Passion of the Christ* meets *Fahrenheit 9/11*,” a USC Faculty Seminar Hosted by The Norman Lear Center, presented by G. Thomas Goodnight, Professor, University of Southern California, Annenberg School for Communication with Steven J. Ross, Professor and Chair, History, University of Southern California; March 11, 2005.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> [www.scvhistory.com/](http://www.scvhistory.com/)

<sup>3</sup> Claudia Stoicescu, “Earth Idols,” *Corporate Knights*, Toronto, Canada, [www.corporatknights.ca](http://www.corporatknights.ca)

<sup>4</sup> “UNICEF to celebrate 50 years of celebrity advocacy” Press Release, Los Angeles, CA (November 21, 2003) <http://www.unicef.org>

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<sup>6</sup> Note: UNHCR is an acronym for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

<sup>7</sup> Hillary Mayell, “World Refugees Number 35 Million,” *National Geographic News* (June 16, 2003) <http://news.nationalgeographic.com>

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<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Doheny, “Seeing Stars; Health-related causes and products are at the fore of the world of promotions,” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles, CA (January 12, 1998) pg. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Note: Although most studies cited tested celebrities with products, some mentions paired celebrities with non-profit organizations to test the validity of the research hypothesis.(ie) Madonna and MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving.) For the purpose of this discussion, brands and causes are assumed to be interchangeable.

<sup>16</sup> Op.cit., Till

<sup>17</sup> Op.cit., Doheny

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<sup>19</sup> Op.cit., Doheny

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- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> <http://home.inreach.com/>
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