

Getting Down to Cases

For readers who started receiving *free-range thinking* in February 2002 or later, here are five communications case studies on a range of issues that were published before you came along. If you see one or more relevant to your field, you can download the full story at no cost from the newsletter archive on my web site, www.agoodmanonline.com.

Environment/Transportation

Taking the Measure of Measure C (March 2000)

Measure C would have raised money to widen highways in traffic-choked Sonoma County, but some area environmentalists saw serious flaws in the proposed tax hike. How did the enviros convince frustrated commuters to reject an initially popular measure? Step #1: they stopped talking about the environment.

Right to Die

Polls: Finding the Rights Words in the Numbers (May 2000)

Facing an attempted repeal of a controversial “death with dignity” law, Oregon Right to Die polled voters on a range of issues. The results confirmed the group’s hunch: their primary message should not be about death.

Health/AIDS

When Speaking Your Audience’s Language is a Matter of Life and Death (June 2001)

How do you reach men who have sex with men but refuse conventional labels? Dr. Ron Simmons found one path by studying this group’s language and then aiming his HIV prevention messages “down low.”

Health/Smoking

How Do You Reach a Hostile Audience? (August 2001)

The Kansas Health Foundation’s campaign to protect children from secondhand smoke is a textbook case of designing and delivering a message that a hostile audience can hear.

Environment/Conservation

Why RARE’s Work is Always Well Done (December 2001)

How do soap operas, puppet shows, nature tours, and other low-cost activities add up to measurable environmental protection? Well, that’s an interesting story...

Free-range thinking™ is a monthly newsletter for public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses that want to reach more people more effectively. For a free subscription, send your request to: andy@agoodmanonline.com or call 213.386.9501. Back issues are available on the web at www.agoodmanonline.com

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a goodman

GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD CAUSES

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Reaching for the Stars

FOR good causes, celebrity spokespersons are like lumps of uranium. Handled properly, they can energize your campaigns and light up the brightest media spotlights. Handled improperly, they can make your hair fall out. In five years at the Environmental Media Association, I helped nonprofits connect with such luminaries as Harrison Ford, Maya Angelou, Pierce Brosnan, and Jane Fonda, and I witnessed my share of electrifying press conferences, nightmarish meltdowns, and everything in between. I also learned the rules of “celebrity engagement,” which are invaluable to any nonprofit on its own star-search.

Approaching celebrities to speak for your cause is a delicate process fraught with unwritten rules.

Until now.

Before committing those rules to paper, however, I consulted with two experts. Larry Winokur, the W of BWR Public Relations, has spent 25 years matchmaking stars and causes. His Beverly Hills-based firm represents numerous A-listers (e.g., Brad Pitt, Adam Sandler, Reese Witherspoon) and has helped garner attention for issues from breast cancer to global warming. Josh Baran, CEO of Baran Communications, has worked closely with one celebrity, Richard Gere, for several years, publicizing the plight of Tibetan monks as well as the AIDS epidemic in India. With Winokur and Baran’s sage advice—and a Geiger counter clicking in the background—I compiled the list that follows.

► **Rule #1:**
Find the right celebrity.

Soliciting celebrities for their star power alone rarely serves your cause or leads to long-term relationships. “Qualify your targeted celebrities for some kind of connection to your issue,” says Winokur. When the Scleroderma Foundation approached BWR for help, the firm reached out to Jason Alexander (former “Seinfeld” star) because his sister suffers from the rheumatic disease the foundation combats. Obviously, not everyone can be privy to such inside information, but Winokur and Baran repeated the same advice: do as much homework as you can to find the celebrity with the best fit for your issue. “Without a natural fit,” Baran warns, “it will never happen.”

Rule #2:
Find the right handler.

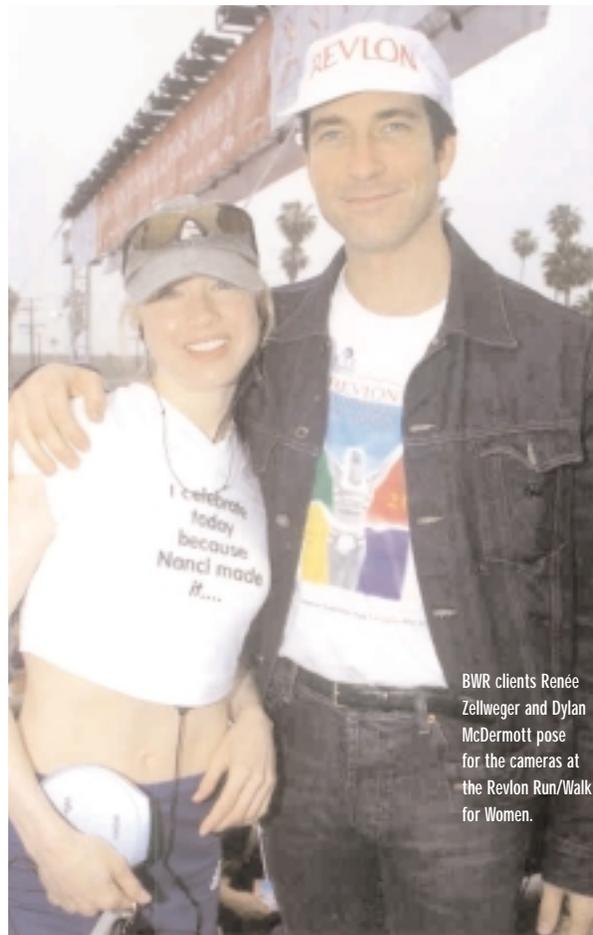
Like stars in solar systems, celebrities are circled by bodies of varying size and proximity. Your first objective is to determine which body—agent, manager, publicist, attorney, spouse, best friend, herbalist, or whoever—is the optimal carrier of your request. If you don’t have a personal connection or better information, try the publicist first. “Agents are loath to bring nonpaying opportunities to their clients, and 15% of nothing is nothing to their managers,” says Winokur. “So these kinds of requests usually fall under the purview of public relations.” The Screen Actors Guild maintains an “Actors Locate” line that directs callers to a celebrity’s representatives: 323.549.6737, 9 am to 4:45 pm (PT), Monday through Friday.

Rule #3:
Make your request clear, concise and in writing.

One of the most common errors non-profits make in pursuing celebrities is lack of clarity in their requests. “Too often it’s just a treasure hunt with no specific sense of the treasure they are pursuing,” says Winokur. And non-profits do *not* improve their chances by suggesting ten or fifteen different things the celebrity can do for them. “The ask has to be very specific and time sensitive,” Baran adds. Winokur recommends that the initial request be made in a letter supported by just enough background material to explain the issue without overwhelming the reader. “It’s better than a clumsy phone conversation,” he says, “and a fax or email can appear more half-hearted.”

Rule #4:
Have celebrities speak as informed citizens, not experts.

With rare exceptions (Ed Begley on environmental issues, Mike Farrell on capital punishment), celebrity spokespersons should not be positioned as experts. Once they agree to speak on your behalf, “they can comment from their heart, convey their passion, express their own personal interests,” says Baran, “but they can’t cross the line and come off as experts.” If their role includes delivering specific talking points, provide a script. “In many cases, celebrities *want* to be scripted,” says Baran. “They’re used to reading material and memorizing it. At the very least, provide bullet points.”



BWR clients Renée Zellweger and Dylan McDermott pose for the cameras at the Revlon Run/Walk for Women.

Rule #5:
No surprises.
Nothing fouls a relationship with celebrities (and especially their handlers) faster than a deviation from the agreed plan. If you asked for an hour, for example, keep the event to one hour. “The organizations that are smart defer to the individual’s handlers,” says Winokur, ensuring that an event is going as expected and the talent is content. Being clear on every detail in advance also protects the nonprofit from unpleasant

surprises. With musical artists who donate their time, Baran points out, the singer who made the commitment may be free, but the band and set-up may *not* be part of the donation. When in doubt, ask!

Rule #6:
Thank you, thank you, thank you.
After the celebrity’s time has been donated, thank you notes (or gifts) are in order for both star and handler(s). Contact the handlers to solicit candid feedback on how everything went from their client’s perspective, says Baran, and if there is an indication of interest in future collaborations, keep in touch. A friendly phone relationship or the occasional business lunch with a star’s handlers can help build the foundation for a long-term relationship.

Rule #7:
Be careful out there.
Celebrity spokespersons bring their own set of risks—just ask the organizations associated with Winona Ryder. Scandals aside, they can still eat up disproportionate

amounts of an organization’s time and attention and distract you from programmatic goals. That said, you can’t get away from the fact we live in a celebrity-hungry culture, and when the objective is to pull cameras into a room, few things are as magnetic as stars. “They bring tune in, they bring audience, and they’re usually subject to less scrutiny by journalists,” says Winokur. “That’s a pretty big window for the assertions you want to make.” ■

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