

CELEBRITY HEALTH CAMPAIGNS

THE NEXT GENERATION

Public relations campaigns with a sponsored celebrity talking about health have gone through something of a rough patch since 2002. Certain top media outlets are highly reluctant to interview these celebrities, particularly if the initiatives are branded. Celebrities with a cause has turned into a *cause celebre*.

Why has major media so changed its attitude toward celebrity health programs backed by pharmaceutical companies? How will this heightened sensitivity affect your company's marketing efforts?

A *The New York Times* article titled "Heartfelt Advice, Hefty Fees" kicked off the controversy. The article stemmed from an appearance by movie actress Lauren Bacall on "Today" in which she plugged a prescription drug for macular degeneration. The next day CNN aired a segment about these "hidden commercials" and announced that henceforth, as a matter of policy, all such celebrities would be identified during interviews as paid spokespeople. Reuters and Salon.com came out with me-too pieces.

Suddenly, the landscape changed. "Today"—the Holy Grail of TV placements for such campaigns—virtually declared itself off-limits for branded celebrity disease segments. *USA Today*, too, practically closed its door on such campaigns. Associated Press refused to name the medication a celebrity was taking on grounds it would be unduly commercial. Soon celebrity health campaigns, previously widely accepted practice, were termed "stealth" marketing and worse.

Why the big to-do? Through recent news coverage, and in our own extensive conversations with members of the media, we've learned that the overriding issue is that of disclosure. Some TV producers and newspaper editors have accused public relations people of offering celebrity health guests without identifying who was footing the bill. In one instance, a TV producer said nobody gave her a heads-up that a celebrity would mention a drug on-air, taking her by surprise. One CBS producer was quoted as saying that celebrity spokespeople for pharmaceutical companies was something "brand new."

Growing scrutiny of the pharmaceutical industry is an underlying factor. Bulls turned into bears on Wall Street, corporate scandals broke out, and grassroots complaints about high Rx prices and lawsuits over generic competition spread.

Nevertheless, celebrity health campaigns still have value. They work—for our clients, for our third-party partners, for the medical profession and for the general public. They educate. They leverage marquee value for a greater social good. They get results—hardcore, verifiable, quantifiable results. Interviews are conducted, media impressions generated, and key messages delivered. Patients initiate discussions with physicians, take diagnostic tests, and treatments are prescribed. Health is improved. Case closed.

Keep in mind, too, that some top media outlets—*People*, *Parade*, "The View" and *Prevention*, among others—still love celebrity health campaigns no less than ever before.

We speak from experience on this issue. Our agency has conceived and carried out about 25 celebrity health campaigns in the last six years, quite possibly the most of any public relations firm. Our longstanding expertise strongly suggests that although the current backlash against celebrity spokespeople is the harshest in memory, such flare-ups come in cycles.



by **BOB BRODY**
SVP/Media Specialist,
Healthcare Practice
bob.brody@ogilvypr.com

CELEBRITY HEALTH CAMPAIGNS

continued

Even so, we see no point in kidding ourselves or anyone else. A celebrity health campaign is a tougher sell nowadays. We, and you, have to adapt to the new environment, adjust our expectations, and freshen our approach. So here's some topline advice:

- Think hard about whether a celebrity is essential to your cause in the first place, then think again. Are you simply throwing this tried-and-true tactic at a health issue to see if it sticks? Celebrity campaigns should be done only if they make sense within the context of your messages and marketing objectives. You may well decide to forgo a celebrity altogether.
- Ask your public relations firm about its practices in pitching celebrities. Its guiding principle should always be full disclosure, fully and forthrightly revealing your identity as a campaign sponsor in its first conversation with a reporter or producer. It's your responsibility to make sure your agency is pitching your spokespeople honestly and ethically.
- Consider whether an unbranded program will better serve your purposes than a branded one. Celebrities spearheading standard disease awareness campaigns are more "bookable" and likelier to get the opportunity to deliver key messages.

Here's a report card on how certain top media we work with currently view celebrity health spokespeople:

Hard Sell

"Today:" "We're very concerned right now about doing anything with celebrity spokespeople for pharmaceutical companies," a producer told us. It appears increasingly unlikely we'll see brand mentions here for a while. Even with this proviso, pitches are given serious consideration.

"American Morning With Paula Zahn" (CNN): Upholds a case-by-case policy for appearances by paid celebrity health spokespeople.

Associated Press: No organizationwide stance, but health reporters routinely decline to cover—entertainment and sports reporters are often willing. In one instance, an entertainment reporter was set to do exclusive, only to be overruled by editor on grounds that celeb was a paid pharma spokesperson. In another, a sports reporter refused to mention brand and toll-free number.

USA Today: Quoth health editor Glen O'Neal: "We try to stay away from celebs who get paid by flacking for a company—it's kind of an ethical issue and puts us in a bad spot." Nevertheless, paper covered Terri Garr MS story.

"CBS Early Show:" Cutting down on the number of celebrities who are being paid by drug companies.

Receptive, With Stipulations

"CNN Live Morning News:" Will do interviews, but only on condition, cleared in advance, that spokesperson will agree to answer question, "Are you a paid spokesperson?" Brand mentions unlikely to receive approval upfront.

People : Will identify campaign name, deliver some key messages, and spell out relationship between celebrity and pharmaceutical company. Refuses, as a matter of policy, to mention brand or cite websites or "800" numbers. A top editor referred to celebrity health campaigns as a form of "indirect marketing."

CELEBRITY HEALTH CAMPAIGNS

continued

Highly Approachable for Right Story

Prevention: Will identify campaign, deliver key messages, provide action steps for consumers—gives agency look at manuscript for fact-checking.

Parade: Will usually cite brochures available, incorporate key messages, and give readers "800" numbers.

Reader's Digest: Has proved willing to do brand mentions

"Good Morning America:" Generally receptive to disease awareness campaigns, highly cooperative

"The View:" Open-door policy on celebrity spokespeople with messages to convey.

"Larry King Live:" Features many celebrity health campaigns, laissez-faire attitude toward branding.

This document and more like it can be found on the web at:

<http://www.ogilvypr.com/expert-views/index.cfm>