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PR reps battle success excess

Flacks: Adoration saturation

By GABRIEL SNYDER

In the celebrity infotainment complex, what's a publicist to do?

Time was when the biggest media-relations decision was choosing between Leno and Letterman, Vanity Fair and GQ. A photo shoot and a few goofy questions later, the job was done.

But there's been an explosion of outlets that want to delve into topics once confined to supermarket tabloids. As a result, the celebrity publicist's job has become even more defensive: swatting down rumors, anticipating stories and engaging in a careful dance with the media to ensure that your client's image doesn't get out of hand but doesn't disappear.

"There's this nonstop appetite," says Allan Mayer of Sitrick & Co., which specializes in helping celebs deal with scandals. "The days when a Pat Kingsley could control what was written or shown about her top-list clients are gone."

For instance, Cindy Guagenti recently had to deal with a pesky (and incorrect) "news story" about her client Brad Pitt buying Jennifer Aniston the yacht Richard Burton once gave to Elizabeth Taylor.

After London tabloid the Sun reported the story on July 20 (citing "pals of Hollywood's golden couple"), news of the purchase was carried in the Seattle Times, Philadelphia Daily News, Hello, WWD, Miami Herald, Daily Mail, Times of India and the Leader-Post of Regina, Saskatchewan, to name a few.

The proliferation of celeb-driven media, along with the Web, have meant a quantum leap in star stories -- and in star gossip.

"With the Internet, a rumor can start out of London and be printed in America so fast you don't have a chance to respond to it," Guagenti says. "You are spending a lot of your time fixing errors." While publicists once ignored tabloids like the National Enquirer and London's Sun, there is now a multitude of outlets relying on them as tip sheets -- and generating similar (and sometimes just as dubious) nuggets of celeb news of their own.

Differing publicity strategies -- each appropriate in different situations -- have emerged, from one extreme of trying to wall off your stars except when they have a movie to promote, to constant engagement and skirmishes, to a full-on preemptive strike.

One publicist laid the blame at the feet of the celebs: "If you don't want the coverage, you won't have it. You must be willing to not be the celebrity du jour. Do you want 15 minutes of fame or do you want a career?"

If it's the latter, the strategy is to focus entirely on the client's work and stay as far out of the public eye as possible the rest of the time. Another tip: "Quit going to all the parties."

Ken Sunshine, who reps Ben Affleck, Justin Timberlake and Leonardo DiCaprio, has asked the media to simply ignore his clients. "Much of what we say is, 'Don't cover us,' because most of the coverage we got we hated," he says.

Still, few outlets are likely to honor that request unless accompanied by a legal threat. Competitors say the Star has had a virtual news blackout on Jennifer Lopez after an episode involving a supposed interview she gave to columnist Victoria Gotti. The Lopez camp accused the mag of mis-characterizing a remark passed on by her then-PR rep; since then, the queen of the checkout aisle has disappeared from its pages.

The freeze may be thawing: Star notes that it has an exclusive unveiling of J.Lo's new fashion line in the current issue.

Star also came under legal scrutiny when it blared from the cover a report on Mary-Kate Olsen's rehab trip: "It's Not Anorexia -- It's Drugs!"

The Olsens camp vigorously denied the charge and threatened to sue. The Star has stopped mentioning cocaine (though the mag's rep says it stands by its original story) and instead has since featured the Olsens on two covers: one of the siblings reuniting post-rehab in their private jet and the latest issue, which is a progress report: "Mary-Kate's Recovery: 92 Pounds and Gaining!"

Journalists in the world of television need footage rather than a candid photo, which requires a greater deal of cooperation with stars and publicists than many print publications.

Even with magazines, star cooperation sometimes is required in even the fluffiest of articles: Stories on the baby toys chosen by celebrity moms are based on info directly from publicists. Some photos that look like they were snapped from the bushes were actually posed.

Clearly, some of the "unauthorized" news is cleverly orchestrated. But when it isn't, publicists often threaten to blacklist outlets, though that's often a hollow threat.

"There will be certain celebrities who won't talk to you this month because of something you said last month," says E! talent VP Barry Nugent. "But they'll talk to you in two months because they need you then."

Mayer, one of the few publicists with a journalism background (he ran Buzz magazine for several years), preaches the preemptive approach.

Handling clients like Halle Berry when she was implicated in a hit-and-run and Paula Poundstone when she was accused of child endangerment, his mantra has been: "If you don't tell your story, someone else is going to tell it for you, and you probably won't like the way it comes out."

That's especially true when a celeb is being pushed into the news by a scandal.

"We live in a news culture in which the operative assumption has to be that a story is going to get out," he says. "The idea that there are secrets involving public figures is an obsolete one."

Publicists once cried "privacy" when they felt a story struck too intimate a nerve. As boundaries break down of what content is and isn't appropriate -- thank you, Paris Hilton -- publicists are battling less about content than about behavior, usually that of photographers.

"What's happening in L.A. are the stalkerazzi following cars and actually trying to cause an accident," Sunshine says.

He has been urging PR reps to band together to boycott publications that print so-called stalkerazzi photos. "We need to once and for all demand that the publications that buy stalkerazzi photos don't get any cooperation. No red carpet, nothing."

He is also pushing for laws that would make it easier for celebs to get restraining orders against certain photogs, as his client Timberlake recently did against a photographer he accused of stalking him.

Ultimately, however, the relationship between star and media is a symbiotic one. As PMK's Simon Halls puts it, "At its base value, publicity is just an extension of marketing dollars."