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The Fame Game

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In today's media climate of internet immediacy and reality-show recognition, the spotlight on celebrity in America is shining brighter than ever before. But "being famous for being famous" is not necessarily the criterion that translates into power, prestige and moneymaking potential.

While there may be "many different degrees of celebrity," what the term means today, says Stuart Fischhoff, Ph.D., emeritus professor of media psychology at Cal State University Los Angeles, is "the idea that somebody for some reason was pulled out from the herd of mediocrity from the anonymous mass and made important by their appearance in or discussion in the media." Adds Celeste Gertsen, Ph.D., adjunct assistant professor at Dowling College on Long Island, New York, it's somebody "who's famous in the eyes of many people. They're rewarded publicly; receive a lot of accolades. They're very visible."

Our Line of Royalty

Celebrities are America's "royal family." And while there are some people who momentarily garner media interest thanks to the reality show du jour, they are the "brief breed of celebrities," says Fischhoff. Whether they're people testing their survival skills, big business savvy or personal fear factor or have the gloss of a family name and paparazzi fame like Paris Hilton, they have a limited shelf life.

True celebrities, explains Irving Rein, professor of Communication Studies at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, and co-author with Philip Kotler and Martin Stoller of *High Visibility: The Making and Marketing of Professionals into Celebrities*, give "a kind of texture to our lives. What would baseball be without baseball players or movies without stars? We need these people to provide the stories and the context and the texture that we need for our lives." They "fulfill a need or inhabit a niche in a person's life," agrees Fischhoff, "that nobody else is inhabiting or fulfilling in the same way. Usually it's somebody whose life they want to become part of and the only way they can is to become a fan."

The media, says Kenneth Hirst, president of Hirst Pacific, a strategic design firm in New York City that specializes in luxury goods, "is a key player." It's what builds a celebrity, affording them "superstar status." And how long a person is exposed and re-exposed to people in the media, says Fischhoff, determines how long a person lasts as a celebrity. And the media, he says, "is in such need of new things to talk about that celebrity can be a much briefer life."

There are some people, however, whose stars manage to shine brightly for a very long time. The reason, Gertsen says, is that they capture our attention — someone like Cher or Madonna. "It hits at something within us. I think that there's timing to it — what the values are at that time and who fits into that and brings that back to us, such as Elvis Presley or Marilyn Monroe."

Some people "develop a popular appeal and then build on that," says Hirst. "Sarah Jessica Parker has become part of the culture of the U.S. at the moment. Through 'Sex & the City,' she defined women's sexuality and became synonymous with fashion and fashion design. And she became very established as a long-term celebrity, almost an icon herself."

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While we do look up to celebrities says Gertsen, “and think they’re wonderful and watch them and think about them and they’re part of our consciousness, we also like to throw tomatoes at them if we can.”

And in this “Media-soaked age,” says Claude Singer, senior vice president, Siegel & Gale, a brand-consulting firm in New York and Los Angeles, “no one is immune to criticism. It will all come out in the wash. Everybody is exposed.”

“I think it’s predictable and cyclical,” says Rein. “People like to see the rise of the young aspirant. They read about their great achievements, their beautiful houses and they enjoy seeing it go down. Not to say that there isn’t a moralistic issue here, but there’s almost this sheer pleasure of watching Martha Stewart go to jail.

“The celebrities become models for our life. People can see in them pieces of their own lives. And there’s great emotional satisfaction in the rises and falls and trials and tribulations because they add texture to the story and also give us the feeling that our lives aren’t so bad. Martha Stewart goes to jail but we aren’t in jail.”

Stewart, while personifying a celebrity brand, is also a cautionary tale of the downside of celebrity. Comments Singer, “I think the problem with Martha Stewart is that she created in her shows and magazines and advice a perfect world and what took people aback was that we got a peek behind the veil and behind the curtain was a mere human being who was trying to make money and got a little greedy and when confronted might not have told the truth. Compared with other entrepreneurs, I think she was particularly vulnerable to misstep because of the image of perfection that she tried to create.”

The Branding of Celebrities

Celebrities can be inspirational leaders and aspirational juggernauts in selling products today. They offer a powerful connection with consumers. They “bring attention and for certain people identification issues,” says Fischhoff. Adds Rein, “In High Visibility we talk about power, pay and privilege. Profit-making could be nonprofit as well — it could get people to a charity, it could get people to watch a baseball game, go to a movie, get people to come to your store or buy your pretzel, whatever it happens to be.”

Celebrities can bring the element of “buying into a fantasy,” says Hirst, that can help “convince a person to move away from a product they’ve been using on a regular basis to a new one.” One area where celebrity licensing has been a success, Hirst points out, is the fragrance industry. With each new product, “Fragrance houses had to build equity in a whole new subbrand in their arsenal of fragrances and this was very expensive. Then they started licensing celebrities and one of the reasons I believe is because the celebrity already has a ready-made market, a big fan base. They are an established brand, essentially, in their own right. So the ability to launch and get brand recognition on a new product is much, much quicker and much less expensive to do. Probably the first celebrity who got into this in a big way was Elizabeth Taylor,” says Hirst.

There are criteria that should come into play when choosing a celebrity to represent a brand, Singer points out, such as “relevance to your business” and relevance to your target audience, both to their demographic profile and to their psychographic profile. “You need someone who is relevant, reliable and who is suitably well-known,” Singer sums up. “It is also critical that companies know their brand very well and its brand attributes. Then they can find a celebrity who matches that profile.”

One of the reasons brands make the celebrity connection, points out Robert Passikoff, founder and president of Brand Keys, Inc., a New York-based brand and customer loyalty research consultancy, is to attain a “heightened level of borrowed equity” to help distinguish a brand from others within a given category. “More and more brands on their own really can’t differentiate themselves. You know their names but there’s really nothing different about them.” Part of the process consumers go through to pick and choose from all the communications they receive is to compare the brand to a set of expectations for a particular category. “By using a celebrity,” Passikoff continues, “your brand isn’t standing there naked being assessed against this yardstick. It’s standing along with a celebrity who — for better or worse — has certain values that are inherent in him or her. It’s virtually a co-branding exercise given that some of the celebrities are as well-known as the products and even better known than the products.”

As a result of using a celebrity, brand values are hopefully reinforced. Sometimes, however, they are not. Whether or not the celebrity represents those attributes or "category drivers" that make a person purchase a product is something Passikoff's company has studied. They found that some celebs didn't necessarily succeed. "P. Diddy in fact didn't fit for the cola category. Madonna didn't really do much for Versace against the particular drivers, partly I think because she doesn't have a consistent image." On the other hand, Nicole Kidman worked extraordinarily well for Chanel because, Passikoff says, her values of "being iconic and being something special" matched Chanel.

There is a risk and reward in using a celebrity, points out Singer. "The reward is that you get attention and a human face. And if you choose wisely, you get a very attractive and appealing one. The risk is if that person falters in some way."

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