

Pharma Marketing News



Reprint

Use of Celebrities for PR and DTC Advertising *"Break a Leg," But Avoid Pratfalls!*

PMN Reprint 71-01

This is a reprint of an article that appeared in the January 2008 issue of *Pharma Marketing News*.

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Published by:
VirSci Corporation
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Newtown, PA 18940
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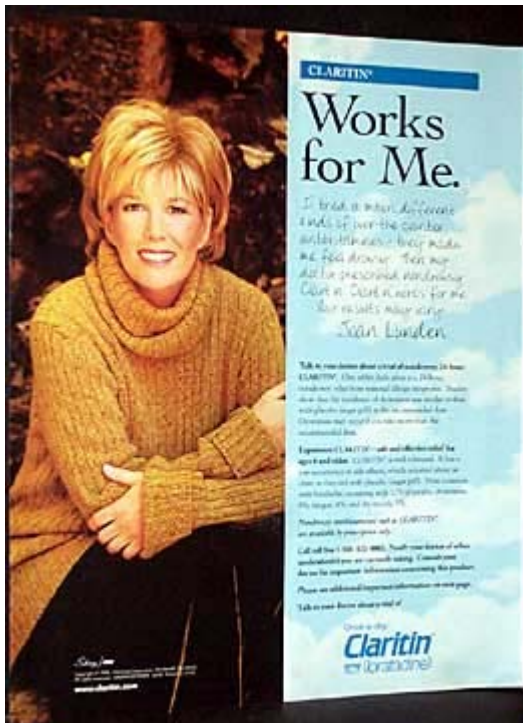
Feature Article

Use of Celebrities for PR and DTC Advertising

“Break a Leg,” But Avoid Prtfalls!

By John Mack

What do Rob Lowe, Danny Glover, Sally Field, Kelsey Grammar, Lorraine Bracco, Bob Dole, Julie Andrews, Cheryl Ladd, Amitabh Bachchan, Robert Jarvik, BB King, Jimmy Carter, Magic Johnson, John Elway, Lauren Hutton, Kathleen Turner, Jack Nicklaus, Lance Armstrong, Loni Anderson, Olympia Dukakis, Terry Bradshaw, Anna Nicole Smith, Lauren Bacall, Joan Lunden, Katie Couric, Abe Lincoln, Montel Williams, Ty Pennington, Mandy Patinkin, Mary Lou Retton, Jerry Hall, and many, many other celebrities have in common?



They all make or made a lot more money than you or I!

More to the point, some of that money comes from endorsing products like cereal, soft drinks, and drugs. In fact, all the celebrities mentioned above [or, as in the case of Abe Lincoln, actors that look like them] have either endorsed specific brand name drugs or were hired by pharmaceutical companies to be spokespeople for disease-awareness or public assistance programs.

Works for Me

The first celebrity endorsement of a brand name drug was Joan Lunden's appearance in Claritin print ads in 1988, which was way before the era of broadcast direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising, which began in 1997 when the FDA loosened regulations.

You don't know who Joan Lunden is, you say? Well, maybe that's why she's no longer endorsing drugs. But don't worry, she's leveraged her Claritin gig to become the author of at least one healthy living book.

That's just one of the problems with celebrity endorsements—celebrities get old and forgotten, but hopefully not BEFORE the same fate befalls the brand drug!

Some celebrities, however, get better with age. Take Sally Field, for example. She's getting up there in age and no longer works as an actress as far as I can tell—unless you consider her Boniva TV ads acting.

Age hasn't prevented Sally from becoming one of the most successful drug industry celebrity endorsers of all time. In fact, for a drug like Boniva, which is indicated for the treatment of postmenopausal osteoporosis, older age is an asset and even a necessity for any endorsement. The Boniva "Rally with Sally" campaign won the 2006 DTC National Advertising Bronze Award in the Best Use of PR in a DTC Campaign category.

"Boniva gets viewer interest in their message because Sally Field is recognizable, likeable and delivers the message well," says Bob Erlich on the DTC Perspectives Blog. "I would say choosing her over a no name actress adds to the ad's effectiveness. Overall this is a good use of the celebrity endorser."

Continues...

Not everyone, however, likes how Sally tries to hawk Boniva, especially on talk shows. I pointed this out in the now infamous Pharma Marketing Blog post "[Web 2.0 Hates Sally](#)," in which I republished the following comments made to the [National Psoriasis Forum](#):

To Martha Stewart...Sally Field was on her show today and mentioned that she has osteoporosis and wanted to talk about Bone Health. (She's their spokesperson.) Sally mentioned medications, and said she takes the once-a-month Boniva. Martha interrupted her to ask if it's full of vitamins and minerals. Sally said, "No, it's a treatment." Martha said, "Reeeally, no minerals?" WTF? Then Sally finally said she wanted to talk about Bone Health again, and again, Martha cut her off for a commercial break. (I've worked in television, and I know full-well how that works, but there are much smoother ways to silence a guest - saying, "We'll talk about that, and more, when we come back," is one great way.)

One more segment, Sally has twice said, "I wanna talk about Bone Health," and Martha just went right back to talking about the flowers they were planting and then asked her about The Flying Nun. Now time's up, Martha said, "Good luck with the osteoporosis...thing," and then asked if men can get it. Sally finally got a few seconds to plug the website, and that was it...

I give Martha credit for side-stepping Sally's attempts to plug Boniva and "bone health." But here's what I'd like to know: Are celebrities paid more if they mention the drug name? Are they paid less if they cannot get the whole message on the show? Also, did Sally mention that she was a paid spokesperson on the show?

Celebrity Endorsements: Clear and Prominent Disclosure

"The blatant plugging of Boniva on other shows is a whole other issue," said Chris Truelove, Editor, Med Ad News, in a comment to my Sally Field post. "It would be great to see more disclosure, but unless companies are legislatively forced to require this in every celebrity appearance on their behalf, Sally is going to continue to irk the average non-osteoporotic viewer and get cut off by talk-show hostesses."

It's interesting to note that FTC has a position on celebrity endorsements that is absent in any FDA "guidance" regarding Rx marketing: endorsers of products—celebrities or non-celebrity patients—are required to provide "clear and prominent disclosure of any relationship that would materially affect the weight or credibility given to a user testimonial or endorsement."

Perhaps if it could, FTC would go after celebrity endorsers of Rx products. Nowhere on the Boniva Web site, or in the print and TV ads featuring Sally and the "Rally With Sally For Bone Health" campaign can I find any disclosure that she is paid for her endorsement.

Sally is also touting the benefits of Boniva in the press without disclosing that she is a paid Boniva spokesperson: "I feel it's kind of a miracle," she was quoted as saying in *The Oregonian*.

You won't see the FTC go after Roche, however. The FDA and FTC have agreed that Rx products are the FDA's turf and OTC drugs are FTC's turf. So, while the FDA may assume consumers understand that Sally is paid to make these comments about an Rx drug, the FTC apparently does not make that kind of assumption in its oversight of OTC weight-loss drugs, for example.

The FTC is, however, considering tightening the rules regarding celebrity endorsements in ads of all kinds. This could affect everything from celebrities' claims about brands on talk shows to fact-checking assertions of benefits in ads. In the Boniva ads, Sally claims her bones are "stronger" and there may be some small print regarding bone density tests as an "asterisk" that explains what that means. Would this pass muster with new FTC rules, assuming FTC asserts authority over Rx DTC ads?

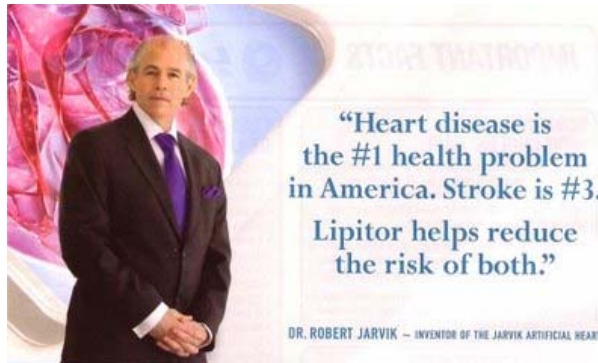
Congress Probes Celebrities

FTC and FDA may have some authority to modify regulations regarding celebrity endorsements in drug ads, but drug marketers fear Congress, which can write new laws that give these agencies greater authority.

This fear was realized recently when Reps. John D. Dingell (D-MI), Chairman of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, and Bart Stupak (D-MI), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, announced that they are opening an investigation into the use of celebrity endorsements of prescription medications in DTC advertising—specifically Dr. Robert Jarvik's appearance in Pfizer's Lipitor commercials.

"We are concerned that consumers might be misled by Pfizer's television ads for Lipitor starring Dr. Jarvik," Dingell said. "In the ads, Dr. Jarvik appears to be giving medical advice, but apparently, he has never obtained a license to practice or prescribe medicine." Says Stupak: "Dr. Jarvik's appearance in the ads could influence consumers into taking the medical advice of someone who may not be licensed to practice

medicine in the United States. Americans with heart disease should make medical decisions based on consultations with their doctors, not on paid advertisements during a commercial break.”



In discussion of this issue on the [Pharma Marketing Roundtable Forum](#), Mario Cavallini, Director of Competitive Intelligence at Rosetta ([public profile](#)), said “Given the event that triggered this thread—the amazing assertion by two lawmakers that any person saying things in an ad about a drug to no person in particular can somehow appear to be rendering medical advice—the main “don’t” to be learned about this would be: don’t do anything that can become political fodder during a major election campaign. Good luck finding a year that’s not part of a major election campaign.”

Other Roundtable members felt it was a non-issue. Chris Mycek, VP, Health & Wellness at imc2 ([public profile](#)), said “I’m surprised at how much the Jarvik event has been covered in the press, as it really seems to be a non-issue...the man is an expert in cardiology and states the facts with fair balance. I guess the rule is to always be 100% transparent, and anticipate how anything may be negatively perceived. (Disclosure, Lipitor is a client).”

When the Jarvik Lipitor ads first aired, he was touted as the first “real” doctor to be used in a drug ad—as opposed to fake doctors like the one suggested by Mandy Patinkin (who played Dr. Jeffrey Geiger on CBS’s Chicago Hope TV show) in the Crestor ads. The Lipitor ads could be misleading consumers into believing that Jarvik is a doctor similar to the doctors they are used to seeing in real life—one that treats patients and has experience with cholesterol medications. Why else would we believe him as an endorser of Lipitor?

When Celebrities Go Bad

Worse than falling out of the public limelight, however, is when a celebrity goes off the deep end at the height of his/her career and while working for the drug industry. That happened recently when Montel Williams, the spokesperson for PhRMA’s Partnership for Prescription Assistance Program, threatened Courtney Scott, a teenage Intern who interviewed him for a *Savannah Morning News* story (see [“Montel’s Bomb Blows Up in Blogs!”](#)).

Joseph Cosey, a Web content producer for the newspaper, described the confrontation this way: “As we were preparing to film, Montel walked up with his bodyguard and got in Courtney Scott’s face pointing his finger telling her ‘Don’t look at me like that. Do you know who I am? I’m a big star, and I can look you up, find where you live and blow you up.’”

“Given the poor industry image, do they want someone who threatens teenagers to be an official spokesperson in their own DTC campaign?,” asked

Continues...

Rule #1: Prepare Your Celebrities for Media Interviews

When the story about the Congressional investigation of Pfizer’s use of Dr. Robert Jarvik in Lipitor commercials was being actively discussed in the mainstream media and in blogs, Jarvik appeared on the “Good Morning America” show to answer critics who say he should not be pitching a drug as a doctor who cannot prescribe medicine because it’s misleading consumers.

Unfortunately, it appeared that Jarvik was not coached on how to handle provocative questions from the media and he faltered badly on national TV when Diane Sawyer asked him “What about generics? Why don’t you mention generics?”

There was a long pause ... then the response:

Jarvik: “I don’t know. We have talked about generics in the ads...”

Sawyer: “You have?”

Jarvik: “Well maybe there’s an ad that hasn’t come out yet that you haven’t seen.” (smirk)
“So, we do address those issues.”

If Jarvik is ever called to testify before Congress, he’ll need better coaching.

See [Jarvik Falters in His Own Defense](#) for the video.

Bloggers Weigh In on Montel and Jarvik

Should Montel Be Fired? That's a question posed in a poll on [Pharma Marketing Blog](#). The results from 100 responses were:

- **Yes**, because I support zero tolerance for this kind of behavior: **61%**
- **Yes**, because he's now a PR liability: **23%**
- **No**, because he has apologized: **10%**
- **No**, because it's no big deal: **4%**
- **Unsure**: 2%

"What with the recent flap over Montel Williams, PhRMA's patient assistance spokesperson, threatening to 'blow up' a high school student, and now the revelation about 'Doctor' Jarvik, it makes us wonder whether celebrities are the best choice for drug ads..."

-- Prescription Access Litigation Blog

"Quite frankly, I'm shaking my head a bit. It is one thing to go after celebrities who know nothing about medicine and another to go after a guy who happens to have contributed more to medicine than most practicing docs."

-- Peter Rost, BrandweekNRx Blog

"I would recommend that Pfizer, for the sake of full disclosure, put a super on the commercials saying Dr. Jarvik does not practice medicine. I do not think Pfizer should pull Jarvik as the spokesperson. He did go to medical school after all. He is a real doctor. He is the inventor of the artificial heart. The question of whether the ads are misleading consumers into thinking Jarvik is more than he appears should be debated within Pfizer."

-- Bob Ehrlich, DTC Perspectives Blog

Bob Ehrlich, chairman of DTC Perspectives, recommended keeping Montel on the payroll after the "usual commitment to anger management treatment and the tearful apology." So far, I don't think that has happened or I haven't heard of it. There may be some litigation involved and this story may pop up once again in the media.

"When considering using a celebrity in an ad, one pitfall to be aware of is the possibility that your celebrity's fame may suddenly be for something you don't want your brand connected with," says Alfred O'Neill, Pharma Marketing Roundtable member ([public profile](#)) and SVP, Group Director at Ryan TrueHealth. He quotes a passage from the advertising book Hey, "Whipple, Squeeze This!:"

"It doesn't happen very often, but celebrities have a way of turning up in hotel rooms with persons of questionable character, doubtful employment, and large Ziploc baggies of 'Peruvian Marching Powder' tucked into their orange vinyl boots. Are you willing to bet a client's financial future that your superstar won't end up manufacturing license plates?"

Luckily, Montel was not endorsing a particular drug brand, so the impact of his "mis-statements" on the bottom line of any one company is practically nil. The same can't be said, however, if a celebrity closely associated with a brand does a Brittany nosedive. Boniva, for example, is now closely associated with Sally Field and vice versa. While it is unlikely that Sally would ever get caught up in a celebrity "crotch shot" scandal, Roche may have hedged its bet by not mentioning the name "Sally Field" in any of its TV ads for Boniva. Everyone knows who she is, so why mention her name especially if that affords you some distance if needed?

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