

Working with Celebrity Ambassadors



Why use celebrity ambassadors?

We have heard again and again about the need for messaging to break through marketing “clutter” to reach the unscreened, particularly those who are not getting screened because of competing priorities or procrastination. In many instances, the unscreened generally know they need to be screened for colorectal cancer, but for whatever reason, the messages they have received about screening have not been enough to move them to action. In these instances, the challenge for the public health community is going beyond providing a rational message about the need for screening and to instead, engage the unscreened at a more emotional level. Finding someone who is well-known — a “celebrity” — to deliver the message is one way to do that.



What qualifications are needed from a celebrity ambassador?

Thinking broadly about who is a celebrity is an important first step. Beyond film and TV stars and professional athletes, more and more self-made “talent” is emerging from the digital space. There are influencers — whether they are fashion, food, fitness or animal bloggers — who have a huge captive audience they reach daily with tailored content. The growing number of digital influencers have very strong connections with their audiences, who tend to be very engaged.

Additionally, many approachable and recognizable local celebrities should not be overlooked: community officials, regional news anchors, weather people, radio hosts, members of local sports teams and coaches, university and even high school mascots; we’ve seen animal ambassadors with truly impressive social media followings!

The Greater Chattanooga Colon Cancer Foundation (GCCCF), for example, had success asking recognizable leaders from the community to appear on billboards about screening, such as the county sheriff, the monsignor from a Catholic church, a Baptist church pastor and various political leaders, such as the mayor, a state representative and a US Senator. These familiar local leaders grabbed the attention of those driving by, creating visibility for the campaign that was not present when a previous campaign used unknown individuals.



Identifying celebrity ambassadors with a personal connection to the cause and mission of the campaign can also help your message resonate. American Cancer Society market research has found that unscreened audiences are much less likely to have had a personal connection to the disease. Using talent who've been personally touched by the disease can leverage the familiarity that the fan base feels toward a celebrity, helping make the risk of colon cancer feel more "real." Local New York City newscaster, Roma Torre, for example, was a particularly effective ambassador for colorectal cancer screening awareness, speaking publically on NY1 News and creating public service announcements about screening, having been diagnosed with the disease herself.

Similarly, identifying an ambassador with a connection to a priority ethnic community or age cohort can provide greater reach to existing and potentially new audiences. The GCCCF, for instance, made a real effort to feature African American leaders from the community; seven of their 17 billboards feature recognizable African American local leaders. They also required that those featured on the billboard be 50 or older, and they confirmed that the local leaders had actually undergone screening, in order to protect the integrity of the campaign.

Dispelling myths

Celebrities can also help educate and dispel myths. For instance, market research showed that in some cases, the unscreened benefit just from hearing about successful experiences with screening, i.e., the prep wasn't that bad, or the test was no big deal. Celebrities who have undergone colonoscopies themselves can create authenticity for these messages and help counter common fears about screening.

Considerations

When preparing to choose a celebrity ambassador consider the following questions:

- What are your goals for the campaign? What will success look like?
- Who is the audience you are trying to reach?
- What talent will resonate as a "messenger" to that group? Considerations to take into account include age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status.
- Have you researched the prospective "ambassador?" Do you know about any potential vulnerabilities that could impact effectiveness, i.e., any public statements, controversies or embarrassing moments? Have you researched other campaigns or organizations that they publicly support?



- Is social media an important component of your campaign? If so, does your talent have social media reach? Be sure to check their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram following.
- Is the ambassador geographically desirable? Where is your ambassador located compared to where your event/campaign takes place?
- If you're creating messaging that encourages people to get tested or screened, has the ambassador undergone that test? Or perhaps can that ambassador refer to a family member's experience?
- Have you carefully mapped out how much of a time commitment you will need from the talent?

Tips for making a celebrity request

Once you are ready to send an "ask" to a potential celebrity ambassador, you should make sure you understand what the ask entails and include details in the letter including: date, time, length of time required; expectations of the talent (will they need to speak or be photographed); whether transportation and/or hair, make-up is provided; if you want talent to participate in press interviews, be mentioned in press releases or participate in photos with key executives should also be covered. If the individual is 50 or over, you may need to inquire if they have been screened to protect the integrity of your campaign.

Be a good partner to a celebrity ambassador; recognize their time is limited

If you need ambassadors to record an audio or video public service announcement (PSA), or participate in press interviews or speaking engagements, you should provide key messaging documents in advance. It will help the individual feel prepared and ensure they hit all important points. Also, if mentioning celebrities in press releases, it's really important to give their team ample time to review the announcements. Lastly, if an ambassador will be meeting any key executives either on-set or at a photography shoot, always provide bios in advance so they are aware of whom they will be meeting. Be flexible and recognize that their time is limited. If the talent is being featured in a print PSA, consider requesting a stock photo, rather than conducting a new shoot (though of course, this limits your creativity with the PSA design). Common organizational courtesies such as these help talent feel valued, equipped and able to squeeze your worthwhile request into their very busy schedule.

Ensuring success

When working with local celebrities, you may want to give some thought about how to feature the celebrity to make the most use of their appearance. For instance, the GCCCF enlisted a professional photographer to either photograph the local ambassador in a recognizable setting (the morning news anchor was featured in the studio) or with props that helped jog the public's memory of who they were seeing (a local monsignor was photographed wearing his altar robes). Further, the GCCCF kept the billboards uncluttered, but included both a clear action step and a website to direct the public to more information. This website also used a unique url, which helped GCCCF track engagement.

Perhaps most importantly, make sure that the desired action step for the audience is clear, such as either "Get screened," or "Talk to your doctor about screening." PSAs from Screen for Life are great examples of clear educational messages combined with a straight forward action step.

Celebrities in action

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) engaged in a collaboration with The Entertainment Industry Foundation (EIF) for some of its Screen for Life PSAs, featuring celebrity ambassadors Katie Couric, Morgan Freeman, Jimmy Smits, Diane Keaton, Terrence Howard and Meryl Streep. These PSAs have generated billions of impressions. Each of these celebrities had a personal connection to cancer. For example, Terrence approached EIF shortly after his mother's death from colon cancer, intent on doing something to help raise awareness, especially within the African American community, which has a higher rate of developing the disease. Cancer is also personal for Katie Couric, as she lost both her first husband and her sister to it. When Katie's colonoscopy aired on the Today Show, it had a real impact. Scientific research actually showed that her colonoscopy and the campaign around it led to a sustained increase in the number of colonoscopies performed nationwide. This increase was dubbed the "Katie Couric Effect."

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