

# Celebrities say and do the darndest things!

by Bruce A. Love

Several years ago I had the privilege of meeting a legendary sports figure who skated for my favorite hockey team, the Philadelphia Flyers. I was at an annual dinner meeting attended by all of the most respected companies in the county when it happened. I spotted Bernie Parent at a nearby table and knew I just had to talk to him. After all, he was the goal tender for the Flyers when they won their only two Stanley Cups!

I waited patiently for the right moment. Bernie was surrounded by a gaggle of guardians assigned to ward off undesirable commoners – like me. But when I saw him slip away from his escorts, I made my move to intercept this hockey legend.

I don't remember everything that we talked about, but I do remember him being very interested in what I was doing with small business. I also remember his face lighting up as we shared memories of the "Broad Street Bullies," and seeing that emotion fade several minutes later as one of his handlers came to whisk him away to meet higher value targets.

Bernie Parent was at that dinner meeting for one purpose. He was hired by a security systems company to help promote their products. They knew the value of his celebrity status in the Philadelphia area. The message the company hoped to convey was that Bernie protected against goals, just as their products guarded against unwanted intruders.

Celebrities, viewed as opinion leaders, are often hired to endorse a variety of products and services. The expectation is that they will influence potential consumers to buy whatever product they are representing. Persons of celebrity status include actors, sports figures, politicians, and others who are widely known and respected.

In the world of marketing, the more recognized and admired a person is, the higher their Q-rating. One year after his third retirement, Michael Jordan still ranks high in this popularity contest.

With higher ratings come bigger endorsement contracts. For example, Tiger Woods, who has the highest sports Q-rating recently reached a \$100 million deal with Nike to represent their products for the next 5 years.

Obviously, celebrity endorsements are big business. There is an expectation that these large corporate investments will translate into larger corporate profits. With such high stakes, it is understandable that companies devise safeguards to protect their investments. Endorsement contracts typically include a "morality clause" that give corporations the right to terminate contracts if the celebrity becomes associated with criminal, or immoral, behavior.

In recent years, we have seen these clauses invoked with greater frequency. Dell quietly let its contract expire with the "Dell Dude," after he was arrested while trying to buy marijuana. The indiscretions or alleged crimes committed by Kobe Bryant have cost the basketball star millions in endorsement fees. Ten years ago, Hertz terminated its contract with O.J. Simpson after he was arrested for murdering his former wife.

Criminal behavior is not the only grounds for invoking the morality clause. Big mouths and moral indiscretions of celebrities can also trigger contract termination as companies attempt to preserve their image during a celebrity scandal. In this politically charged election year, companies cannot afford to lose half of their customers when the celebrity endorsing their product uses crude remarks to bash one of the candidates. Whoopi Goldberg should have let the professionals (politicians) handle that dirty deed.

The Dixie Chicks, Tonya Harding, and Magic Johnson, have all allowed their mouths, their actions, or their associations, to cost them huge endorsement fees. It's little wonder why some companies like GEICO turn to a computer-animated lizard to promote their services. At least the lizard won't embarrass the firm!

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