

The Need to Be Flexible

When recruiting celebrities for your events, creative thinking can lead to a perfect match

As anybody who works in the sports-event industry knows, there are many times the old adage, “the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry” comes into play. But how much better is it to take the same situation and apply the old familiar saw “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade” instead?

Whether it's in marketing, event management or the world of celebrity relations, being prepared and on top of things also means being flexible, adaptable and creative when new and better opportunities present themselves. And this strategy includes the times when you're combining all three—such as the marketing of your sports event by incorporating a celebrity appearance into it. Here are some key points for event organizers looking to incorporate a celebrity into their sport event, tour or program:

Try to match the celebrity's interest to help fit your agenda.

In a unique opportunity several months ago, actor Joe “Joey Pants” Pantoliano (“The Sopranos,” “The Fugitive,” “Midnight Run”) was interested in participating in one of our Goodwill Military programs that we call Ambassadors of Hollywood Tours. Under the proposal, Pantoliano would be joined by other actors and would go to Afghanistan primarily to participate in meet-and-greet opportunities and autograph/photograph sessions to be held for the troops.

Pantoliano also communicated to our office his desire to deliver his message of how he is personally combating and dealing with the mental illness and depression he has suffered from over the last several years. He felt there was a strong need to share his personal travails with military personnel, revealing and disclosing his story in the hope of having them come forward when they require help.

While we were excited to work with him, the particular tour we were planning clearly would not be the right forum for him to deliver this message. Unfortu-

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nately, Pantoliano ended up having to cancel his participation in our Ambassadors of Hollywood Tour due to his own production schedule. Ironically, though, what we thought at the time was the end

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of what could have been a fruitful, humanitarian and long-term relationship took a completely different turn.

In our workplace, we continued to be intrigued with the message that Pantoliano wanted to share. Our challenge, then, was how could we make it work?

Keep special ideas on the backburner and always consider: “Who wants it? Who needs it?”

After much internal discussion and research, our agency determined that the military men and women overseas with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, as well as the soldiers who are and will be battling PTSD upon their return from war, had a strong need for Pantoliano's insight, recommendations and information. Having coordinated more than 150 tours of Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait, we decided we would present this concept to the military and possibly tie it into National Suicide Prevention Week in early September.

Our concept was that we would build the “product,” hoping somebody in turn would want it. After receiving preliminary interest from our military contacts, we presented them with the concept that we would secure the participation of Pantoliano as well as a model/actress who also was passionate about and committed to this cause, and a medical expert in this area. We conceived that this trio would host seminars to present Pantoliano's message to the military, as well as view his new film, “No Kidding, Me Too!” We

also knew we needed to assemble press and marketing tools that would go along with the tour—items such as an educational brochure, an autograph card, question cards, media kits and the like.

Build your product with a diverse group of participants and secure commitment from the client.

After presenting the Stomp the Stigma Tour concept to the military, they were captivated by it and quickly gave their blessing to the endeavor. This type of “visit” to our troops had never been done before and everyone agreed that there was a need for this type of

program. Pantoliano remained passionate about helping us organize and coordinate the tour, as well as personally participating in it. He recruited model/actress Lisa Jay to join the excursion; and we added the renowned psychiatrist Dr. Robert Irvin, to guarantee we would have a diverse group of individuals to whom all facets of the military could relate in one way or the other.

The “Stomp The Stigma Tour” visited Iraq and Kuwait from August 31 to September 10, 2009, and was a huge success. Other “expeditions” are sure to follow.

The lesson learned here is that if you have a valuable “product” but also a situation where the “nut doesn't quite fit in the bolt,” be open to new ideas and concepts that can utilize and sell that particular product. In this case, we were fortunate and successful with Joe Pantoliano's initial interest in making a difference...and kept the idea alive. While he did not participate in our original tour, with flexibility, creativity and perseverance we were able to develop a program specifically for him and a product that we felt would work well for the military. This same type of flexibility can help sports-event organizers hoping to use celebrities to help market their own events. ■

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