



High Visibility

**The Making
and Marketing
of Professionals
into Celebrities**

**Irving Rein • Philip Kotler
Martin Stoller**

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High Visibility

TO LAUREN & PERRY REIN,
NEIL KOTLER, AND MELISSA STOLLER

P r e f a c e

Much has happened since we took our last look at celebrity phenomena and the underlying celebrity-making industry. First, the public has become more accepting of the celebrity phenomena, more ready to treat celebrity information as providing diversion or entertainment. Second, we suspect more people are ambitious to achieve celebrity-status. They are recognizing the higher pay, perquisites, and privileges bestowed upon those whose reputation precedes them. Third, celebrity-making has become a more pronounced phenomenon in certain sectors. For example, it is no longer rare for business or religious leaders to enlist professional help in building their public skills and image. Fourth, there has been an explosion in the number of channels for disseminating the celebrity's image. We see Michael Jordan's image almost daily, not only in the standard print and broadcast media but also on film, T-shirts, dolls, athletic shoes, in on-line discussion groups, and so on. Fifth, we believe that the technology for entrepreneurial self-celebrity-making has advanced in the last few years. The advent of home video-recorders, home recording studios, fax machines, E-mail, widely available local coaches, and public relations specialists multiplies the opportunities for shaping one's skills and diffusing one's image to a wider audience.

This book is meant to clarify the ambiguity that surrounds the celebrity culture. It will examine the role that celebrities play in

our lives and the fact that everyone is involved in either producing or consuming celebrities. Through TV advertisements, restaurant openings, charity balls, trade shows, and sports events, our lives are celebrity-saturated. But for all its impact, celebrity has scarcely been understood. *High Visibility* explains the mechanisms that create and sustain celebrities; it uncovers the daily workings of the celebrity-making industry, its chief players, methods, and concepts. *Importantly, by showing the systematic steps by which a person can climb to stages of higher visibility and repute, it is designed for readers who want to understand and use visibility in their own careers and lives.*

This book is not a quick fix. If our research has proven anything, it is that high visibility is powerful, complex, and high-risk. Unfortunately, many writers on celebrity and high visibility have emphasized short-term goals, simplistic formulas, and common folk wisdom couched in behind-the-scenes anecdotes. The emphasis in *High Visibility* is on long-term goals, realistic marketing strategies, and uncommon approaches to celebrity. Any quest for high visibility should be thoughtful and deliberate, for the quest—while an adventure—needs to be managed.

A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

A book on a subject as complex and all-encompassing as celebrity requires a great deal of help. We are indebted to many people for assisting in the reformulation and updating of *High Visibility*. Ronnie Pirovino provided great energy and assistance throughout the process. Christine Arrazi Carlson, and Vijay Tellis-Nayak also provided critical help in research, editing, and concept development. Brian Fink proved to be a valuable research assistant. Richard Russakoff, Tony Gama-Lobo, and Rebecca May contributed to our case studies.

Our original research was informed—and speeded along—by the work of a number of researchers who have explored celebrity and related areas from different perspectives. Foremost among them are Daniel Boorstin, whose pioneering work on image prepared the ground for our work; Erving Goffman, whose work on impression management was very helpful in our understanding of transformation strategies; Richard Dyer, whose work on stars in cinema and literature helped round out our view of character analysis; and Orrin Klapp, who inspired our understanding of social types and their importance to celebrity-making.

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High Visibility

C o n t e n t s

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xi

1 Sculpting the Image 1

2 The Visibility Premium 13

3 The Celebrity Industry 29

4 Marketing Celebrities 61

5 Celebrity Sectors and Hierarchies 83

6 Celebrity Consumers: Watchers, Seekers,
Collectors, Fans, and Insiders 105

7 The Building Blocks of Transformation 149

8 The Techniques of Transformation 185

9 Delivering the Image 235

10 Publicity: The Voice of Visibility 271

11 Sustaining Celebrity 299

Epilogue 333

Index 339

2 **High Visibility**

in her market, and surgeon Z the most highly paid in the city. This is the new world of industrialized celebrity, a type of manufacturing in which individuals with basic skills in a field can be elevated to a level of visibility unimaginable at any other time—and be compensated with unimaginable rewards.

Like a Virgin

Richard Branson, chairman of Virgin Corporation, is a one-person PR machine. For Branson, high visibility is a strategic tool that has made his personality inseparable from his products. He, like Anita Roddick (Body Shop), Dave Thomas (Wendy's hamburgers), and Herbert Kelleher (Southwest Airlines), has used his celebrity status to sell his wide array of products including music, airlines, broadcast stations and television programming, and soda pop. Branson manages a whole support system of policy planners, ad agencies, and media advisers who work behind the scenes to orchestrate the production of his image as a quirky yet accessible exhibitionist. At the opening of his Virgin Megastore in New York City in 1996, the largest music store in the world, he descended from the top of the building standing on a gigantic silver balloon. Whether Branson is appearing as Spiderman or a daredevil aviator for his business interests, he is collecting free publicity and generating sales for his multinational corporation. The success of Branson can be understood only in the context of his deliberate high visibility.

Granted for some people, the search for high visibility is not deliberate, but rather is accidental or the result of some wildly outrageous talent. Tales of stars who are discovered on street corners or simply marry well abound in popular culture. Celebrity makers and storytellers render the process even more elusive by describing the celebrity transformation as if it were a magical event. However, these modern-day “Merlins” don't accurately reflect what is happening in today's celebrity culture. Celebrity has married business—information and entertainment channels can now transmit images at a rate and capacity never before known or understood—resulting in opportunities for aspirants who want to use their name as a brand and as a marketing tool. The search for high visibility is a reflection of the pressures of a

crowded and competitive marketplace. A name can give a product greater recognition and credibility to attract and retain new business. The rush in most businesses and professions to create a brand distinction around a name will increase as companies discover the power of visibility and its ability to create free news coverage and dedicated customers.

Of course, the visibility pursuit has pitfalls. Anyone who has been associated with celebrity knows there can be intrusions and even threats. Becoming visible means that the media will not only glorify acts but also magnify sins. In extreme cases such as Tonya Harding or Michael Jackson, the lights glare and threaten to ruin careers. In interviews, celebrities often question the limelight, and some seem destined to fill slots in tabloid TV shows and newspapers as hopelessly bedraggled and entangled in media controversy.

Murphy Brown's Whipping Boy

Dan Quayle, the former vice president of the U.S., is unquestionably the "most ridiculed, mocked, and abused politician of modern times."¹ When he was selected by Republican nominee George Bush to be his running mate, Quayle's popularity quickly fell, and he became a political disaster. His descent was framed by the revelation that he was a poor student in college and needed special favors to get into law school and the military reserves. His performance as vice president was regularly sabotaged by his knack for inappropriateness: he scolded a schoolgirl for not adding an *e* to *potato* and, misquoting the well-known slogan of the United Negro College Fund, philosophized, "What a waste it is to lose one's mind." He capped his performance with an Alfred E. Neuman-like smile that seemed to mask some special joke that no one else got. Attempts to reframe his image were futile. He started a business, joined corporate boards, and coauthored family values books. Despite these efforts he is still characterized as the slow-witted rich kid who bought his way into high office and was beaten up by Murphy Brown.

Such disasters notwithstanding, most of the complaints we hear from celebrated individuals ring insincere. In numerous interviews with well-knowns, we *never* meet a celebrity who would opt for being ordinary. Ours is a celebrity-based culture in which the rewards and benefits of fame overshadow anonymity. When

4 High Visibility

comedian Jerry Seinfeld arrives at Thirty-One Flavors after 10 P.M., taps on the window, and begs for a mint-chocolate sugar-free nonfat yogurt, the store opens. For the rest of us, it's back home for a glass of water and a Ritz cracker.

The very appeal of visibility has nurtured a strategic change in visibility marketing. Depending on the sector choice, the seeker and manager of visibility making has many options. Aspirants can set off on their own—self-teaching, managing, and publicizing their own careers. The advent of infomercials and the Internet has introduced cost advantages never before available to the beginner. A step up is the selective use of coaches, agents, publicists, and other professionals. In some situations the pursuit of visibility is fully industrialized with a team of experts managing every step of the ascent.

Alanis Changing

Alanis Morissette is one of the most successful female singers in the world. Her album, *Jagged Little Pill*, has sold more than 14 million copies, won four Grammys, and surpassed *Whitney Houston* as the top-selling solo debut album by a female artist in U.S. history.² She is the product of a skillfully managed marketing effort. Morissette's discontented and confrontational image has afforded her overwhelming success; yet, this image is an extreme departure from her Canadian career as first a "G-rated" child TV actress and then a teen disco singer. When her syrupy dance-pop career wore thin, she moved to Los Angeles determined to reconstruct her career for a third time. She teamed up with Glen Ballard, producer for Michael Jackson and Aerosmith, to provide new focus for her musical talents. Her new musical direction was aimed at the market pioneered by "alternative" female artists such as P. J. Harvey, Liz Phair, and Tori Amos, who are characterized by a poetic musical style and a female perspective. These artists gained success within the then relatively small alternative market, opening the door for Morissette by establishing a market for female singers noted for fierce independence and an introspective nature.

What is it about Morissette that enabled her to become a leader in this sector? Her lyrics, while similar to those of other alternative female artists in their use of sarcasm and controversy, have a pop quality: they are simply written, employ catchy "hooks," and are musically framed with dance rhythms. The sexually explicit con-

tent of some of her songs is tempered by a relatively asexual physical appearance that conjures the image of an introspective-earthly female character with a quirky natural beauty. These qualities make her music more accessible to the large teen audience. Morissette's attack on alternative is not unlike Microsoft's invasion of the Internet: she found a deeply committed but narrow market, blended it with a lighter, more commercial touch, and, in her third reconstruction, became the market leader before she was twenty-two.

In our discussion in this book of the manufacturing and marketing of celebrity, and the methods used, two themes dominate. First is the change process—the transformation of people into the desired product. Second is the equally important proposition that the visibility search can be systematic and not dependent on happenstance.

The Pygmalion Principle

*"I think she's got it! By George she's got it!"*³

• • •

So cried Henry Higgins, the main character in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* made so memorable by Rex Harrison in *My Fair Lady*. Why was Higgins so excited? Because he realized that he had successfully transformed a coarse cockney girl into a well-spoken, well-mannered fixture of high society. Higgins, undertaking the remanufacturing of Eliza Doolittle on a gentlemen's wager, was motivated not by greed, but rather by pride, the desire to show Colonel Pickering that he could do the undoable. The rewards—for himself and his pupil—were mostly intangible: vindication, self-discovery, broadened horizons. Today the stakes in transformation have soared. Still, underlying it all is the very same Pygmalion Principle: *that people can be manufactured into, and marketed as, celebrities in any field.*

The notion of transformation goes back to antiquity. In Ovid's ancient myth, Pygmalion, a young man who hated women, was

“bent on forming a perfect woman and showing men the deficiencies of the kind they had to put up with.”⁴ Visualizing the perfect woman, he set out to sculpt her. As she took shape, he began to fall in love, but because the ivory statue could not respond, Pygmalion grew morose. This drew the attention of the goddess of love, Aphrodite, who was intrigued by this new kind of lover. One day, as Pygmalion lovingly caressed the statue, Aphrodite brought the ivory to life. As is the custom in such tales, the two lived happily ever after.

Fortunately for Pygmalion, divine intervention ensured a happy resolution. In Shaw’s modern recasting of the myth, divine intervention is replaced by human intervention—namely, the actions of a transformer, Henry Higgins, professor of phonetics.

In Shaw’s view, transformation is enabled by changing the subject’s language and appearance and conducting some strategic staging. Shaw had advanced the idea of transformation—but only so far. In his *Pygmalion*, the transformation was an amateur venture. The transformer, Higgins, undertakes his task on a whim, a wager. Today, an entire industry manages the business of transforming unknowns into celebrities, sculpting virtually every possible element of personality, appearance, and character. The industry operates not by whim but rather by design, not for pride but instead for profit. In fact, the ability to transform people into celebrities has become so sophisticated, and the rewards of high visibility have become so awesome, that the Pygmalion Principle is now at work in essentially every area of life.

Hillary Clinton: My Fair Lady

In many ways, Hillary Clinton is a modern-day Eliza Doolittle. The daughter of a middle-class family from Park Ridge, Illinois, she has managed to create the perfect conflicting image profile: a smart, loving, understanding mother and a scheming, mean, achieving politician. The problem is that she has too many Pygmalions in her transformation. Advisers harden and soften her image according to the whims of the latest polls. On one day the first lady is baking cookies in the morning, sipping tea with Girl Scouts in the afternoon, and then spending the evening tree trimming with Martha Stewart on her Christmas show. Conversely, on the following day she is lend-