

Celebrities on Boards

Numerous organizations are interested in having celebrities serve on their boards to raise the organization's profile and expand its recognition. Many celebrities are active in charitable work and extend their names, money, and time to further the work of these nonprofits. Serving on the board, however, is a different issue. Board service comes with serious commitments and liability. Matching the needs of the organization to a celebrity's willingness or ability to commit is not easy; it requires finding a middle ground. Not all matches are made in heaven.

Where are they?

Look for a celebrity with a tie to your organization's source of inspiration. Check the board lists of other similar organizations to see who serves on their boards. Read the entertainment section of your newspaper to learn who went to which charity ball or other special event. Keep a file of articles in magazines or posts on Web sites about celebrities who have had personal experience or been active with your cause: dealing with an aging parent's struggle with Alzheimer's, participating in AIDS marches, adopting a child, attending performances of the local symphony, or giving to a scholarship fund helping minorities.

Often people migrate to causes that already have attracted big names. This is true for celebrities as well. If you have a big name involved with your organization in some manner, you may find it easier to attract others. People go where the winners are.

The carrot

When approaching a celebrity, tie your organization to his existing interests. Demonstrate what you have accomplished and indicate how his participation would help the organization reach even further. Use his expertise, experience, or interests (rather than his celebrity) as the main attraction, and try to convince him that your organization is the best tool for him to achieve his objectives.

How to turn a celebrity into a good board member?

No one is a born board member. If you are unable to find celebrities who have demonstrated awareness or commitment to the issues you work with — you need to awaken that curiosity. Make your organization the must place to be. Clarify what board service means and negotiate terms for activity and expectations. Welcome the new member and then make sure his time is worth the effort.

You *must* explain what you expect from a board member. This is where many recruiters lose focus. A celebrity, just like any other busy person, must come to meetings, take the job seriously, and understand the liabilities that come with board service. It is your duty to clarify your needs.

If the celebrity is not able to accept the basic covenants during this discussion, she probably should not be invited to serve. Use her in some other way.

Challenges

Some celebrities can bring a real blessing to your board; others can be a source of tough headaches. Just like “normal” board members, some will give and participate, understand their role within your organization, and bring in added value. Others will accept the invitation but then never be seen again.

Other options

Because some celebrities have already formed their own organizations or foundations, they may not be willing to extend their commitment or compromise any loyalties. If the missions of both organizations are identical, this decision is probably well justified. Investigate if collaboration is possible.

Celebrities are constantly bombarded by people in need. Individuals want their money, organizations seek their involvement, and those who simply seek the limelight want to be associated with them. Don't get discouraged if you get turned away abruptly. The celebrity may simply not be interested in getting involved at that moment — or you may have to fine-tune your approach to create a connection. The more you learn about the celebrity, the easier it is to be convincing. Do your homework.

If your objective was to associate this celebrity with your organization and not necessarily through board service, there are many other options left. If being a board member is too demanding, consider asking her to join a less rigorous advisory panel, act as a spokesperson for the organization, participate in a special event in a flashy manner, lend his name to a campaign, co-sign fundraising letters, be interviewed by your newsletter, or simply make a contribution. Remember, however, to ask for permission to take advantage of his connection and use it for publicity purposes.

However you involve a celebrity in your organization's activities, keep in mind that this involvement is about your organization and not about the famous person. Your organization must come out as the winner at the end.