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Who Needs a Personal Publicist?

Press, parties, posters, and positioning all play a part.

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By Simi Horwitz

Let's get this out of the way quickly: For most performers, a personal publicist is completely unnecessary. In fact, if a publicist is legitimate, chances are he or she will turn down an actor seeking his or her services unless that actor has a very good reason for needing them.

"Most of the people I represent are on the cusp of moving up to the next level," says New York-based publicist Susan L. Schulman, who primarily promotes theatre actors. "When I represented Harry Groener, he already had two Tony nominations and had appeared in seven or eight Broadway shows. But by the time I came on board, he was the lead in *Crazy for You*. Similarly with Kathleen Chalfant: She was a well-respected

actress, especially regionally, and very well known within the New York theatre community. But then she was on Broadway in *Angels in America*. Same for Karen Ziemba, who I took on when she appeared in *Contact*. Previously she was known as the talented go-to girl when producers were looking for replacements. She did show after show after show, was well-liked and a team player. But in *Contact*, the situation had changed for Karen."

In short, there was something to publicize and the time was ripe. Personal publicists will tell you that they cannot generate press, create personal-appearance requests, or stoke public interest if the performer has nothing of consequence going on.

The same rule applies on the West Coast, says publicist Craig Bankey of PMK-HBH, who represents many Hollywood stars but doesn't want to violate their privacy by naming them. "I believe actors may want to hire a personal publicist when they're part of an upcoming project that warrants attention. Usually these actors are well-advanced in their careers, although publicists can break someone in if the project is interesting enough to entice editors and writers to want to write about it."

But no matter how groundbreaking a film or TV show may be, an actor with a small role and no significant projects on the horizon shouldn't be seeking the services of a personal publicist. The project's own press representative will do the job of creating media buzz, for both the project and its standout performers.

A personal publicist, whether specializing in theatre, film, or television, does substantially the same job as a project's publicist, though some West Coast publicists insist that the pressures they face are greater, given the financial risks involved in almost every project. Indeed, several personal publicists on the West Coast did not want to be interviewed for this story, while others agreed to do so only if they could remain anonymous, contending that for them to be identified was unethical: Instead of promoting their clients, they would be promoting themselves. The same view was voiced by East Coast personal publicists who represent film actors. The New York theatre publicists, on the other hand, had no problem being interviewed and identified and didn't hesitate to cite their clients by name.

The Right Hook

So what exactly do personal publicists do? Put simply, they push a client's name out into the media frenzy, galvanizing as much press interest as possible and arranging for photo opportunities. Beyond that, the job depends largely on the client. A veteran performer may need repositioning to be seen in a fresh light. A newcomer may require media coaching, especially if he or she is involved in a controversial project: Many young actors have to be trained in how to deflect tricky questions. In Hollywood, actors and their publicists will often decide early on what they will or won't

reveal about the performer's personal life, "because once personal information is on the record," says Bankey, "it becomes fair game for the next reporter."

Lesser-known actors, of course, just want to be noticed. That's why they hire a personal publicist and in some cases stay with that person for many years. Actor Kate Linder, who has played Esther Valentine on the daytime drama *The Young and the Restless* for 24 years, has been with her personal publicist -- one of those who did not want to be identified -- for two decades.

"I had a very small part in the beginning, and I knew that if I didn't do something for myself at that point, I might not be on the show much longer," recalls Linder. "I also didn't only want to be known as Esther Valentine. I credit my personal publicist with fans coming up to me and saying, 'Oh, you're Kate Linder.' I also credit my publicist with my being on the show 20 years later. Thanks to her, I've been interviewed by People magazine, I've been on talk shows -- which led to my doing infomercials -- and I've done USO tours. And success breeds success."

In addition to being a full-time actor, Linder also works part-time as a flight attendant. In all these years, she has never given up her "day job." She admits that her unusual story generates interest, and she and her publicist orchestrated a promotional campaign partly based on it. Linder adds, "Anyone who is thinking about hiring a publicist should ask around, do research, and take meetings with that publicist, find out if he's representing anyone else in the same show and if there are conflicts."

New York-based actor Karen Ziemba agrees. She hired Schulman based on her reputation "for working very hard for her clients. And she is knowledgeable about theatre and theatre press." Ziemba also liked that Schulman "works on her own time," meaning she does not also function as the press agent for the play: "When I was in *Contact*, I decided I needed a personal publicist because all the elements had come together, and that's very rare. It was a high-profile show that had received wonderful reviews, I had a role in it that fit me to a T, and I was receiving very favorable reviews." Ziemba, who ultimately won a Tony Award for her performance in the show, knew it was an opportune moment to change the industry's perception of her and advance her career.

Which is just what Schulman did. She arranged for Ziemba to appear on TV programs and at benefits and concerts. For the show's opening-night party and the Tony Awards ceremony, Schulman helped Ziemba select the right designer gown and accessories -- she borrowed some Fred Leighton jewelry for the occasion -- all to promote an image of stardom. (Schulman recalls picking up the jewels in a brown manila envelope and carrying them through the streets of New York, terrified she'd be robbed.) The publicist also helped Ziemba organize her time and served as an advance woman. "*Contact* was nominated for so many awards and there were so many parties to attend," Ziemba recalls. "I needed someone at my side, fronting for me."

Says Schulman, "At parties, I make sure the press knows my client is there. I may arrange for a photo op with my client alone or with someone else at the party I think my client should be photographed with. And I always make sure press and photographers identify my client appropriately. If my client is interviewed, I will always sit in on it. If something that should have been said hasn't [been], I will point it out, and if some thought needs clarification, I will do that."

Schulman also helped boost Kathleen Chalfant's visibility when she earned raves for her performance in *Angels in America*. An actor doesn't need to have a starring role to warrant hiring a personal publicist, says Schulman; an extraordinary secondary or even small role can be a career turning point, too.

Chalfant admits that the idea of hiring her own publicist was a tad embarrassing at first. "I did it because my agent thought it would be helpful to the play and to my career," she says. "It wasn't my first Broadway play, but it might as well have been. My agent referred me to Susan, who I hoped would let it be known that I was part of the Broadway community. She got me interviews in The New York Times, Back Stage, a mention in Liz Smith's column, and appearances on the Food Network, as well as various charity events. Susan presented me to the press as a New York woman working in the theatre, with two children and a long-term marriage and a longtime interest in politics," which had relevance in light of the play's subject matter.

"If you're an ambitious and serious actor and you feel you're at a turning point in your career and need personal attention, I would recommend hiring a personal publicist," Chalfant says. "And anyone doing solo work, such as a

cabaret act, you should have a personal publicist from the very beginning. Unlike an actor in a play that has a press agent, a cabaret or solo performer is on his own."

A New Image

Schulman takes on clients -- those who have been referred to her and those she is pursuing on her own -- because she admires them and believes they are at a point in their career where she can help them move to the next level. Bankey notes that most of his clients -- 60% to 70% -- come through referrals from managers and agents. Others he will pursue based "on the roles they've accepted, the type of press they've had in the past, and what it is they've had to say about their careers. I represent serious actors who are generally not interested or even comfortable with publicity. I like to work with actors who will talk about their craft, not their personal lives. And I'm not interested in actors who generate press in tabloids."

A better way to boost a client's image, Bankey says, is to get him or her interviewed by one of the "tastemaker" publications, such as The New York Times or Vanity Fair -- "publications that are read by other writers, directors, and financiers, those people who can directly provide opportunities for future projects. If we want to promote an actor in a small independent film, especially if it's award-worthy, we'll go after an interview in The New York Times. If it's a bigger project, we'll go after television interviews. Through the Internet we can target specific audiences, including those demographics that drive the box office. If it's a big studio turkey, we'll only do TV and avoid print."

Addressing an actor's image on posters and other advertising materials is also part of the personal publicist's job. "For example, if an actress is playing a woman dying of cancer who has lost her hair and is suffering, that's not the image we'll put on a poster," says Bankey. "It doesn't draw audiences into the film, and it doesn't help the actor either." A personal publicist may also make costume, makeup, and lighting suggestions for photo shoots -- which is especially important for actors trying to change their image, he explains. "If he's only done comedy and wants to be thought of as a dramatic actor, the right photographs can help him be viewed in a new way."

The role of the personal publicist has evolved and "will continue to mutate, as will the media," Bankey says. "There are just many more outlets to deal with. My role has also changed in that I'm often asked to be an adviser and consultant in ways I never was before. My role goes beyond securing interviews and photo shoots. One constant is art versus commerce: That'll always be an issue."

So will the struggle of actors trying to decide whether and when to hire a personal publicist -- and whom. Linder has never left hers. Ziembra and Chalfant are no longer employing one, but each insists that if her career abruptly shifted course, she would call Schulman in a heartbeat.

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