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How to engage famous people to further the stuttering cause

Celebrities can be a valuable asset to any not-for-profit enterprise, especially for those organizations that deal with stuttering. Many people who stutter understandably have no wish to be in the limelight, yet it's always refreshing to see a person stuttering openly in the public domain. I say 'openly' because for far too long, we have made reference to old, dead or out-of-date celebrities who stutter, or those who stuttered in childhood and then 'got over it'. The message should be that you don't need to 'get over it' to be a success. There are plenty of success stories of stutterers in the media and elsewhere that can serve us well. This 10-point guide is aimed at explaining the best way to try and engage celebrities to promote stuttering in the public eye.

1. Widen your parameters of what is 'famous', then choose carefully

When you think of a 'celebrity', the mind defaults to those involved in mass media: film, television, radio or the written word. There are influential figures in the public eye who can be beneficial to the stuttering cause without being engaged in those common media entities. Successful businessmen and women, government or parliamentary representatives, Royalty, or *close* relatives of anyone involved in any of the above are all routes worth pursuing (e.g. spouses - good previous examples are Annie Glenn and Vivian Sheehan. Someone's aunt's sister's godson or other such tentative family ties are of no use to anyone). Also, consider actors who have played people who stutter. Although they were after all, just 'in character', they may have empathy for your cause.

Something else to think about is that the airwaves are rapidly getting saturated with 'Reality TV' (e.g. Big Brother, the Idol programmes) in almost every country. People featured on such things are usually only famous for a temporary amount of time, but you may be able to 'piggy back' onto their success for a while. However it's worth nothing that during the height of their 'fame' these people are often as hard to contact (and just as much in demand) as any A-list celebrity.

Choose your target subject wisely. Is this someone you would want to align with your organisation? Are there any possible embarrassments or controversy they may cause you? The saying goes that there's no such thing as bad publicity, but it's something you can do without, if only for the administrative costs of fielding queries about them!

2. Plan your contact - you only have one chance to make an impression

Many charities make the mistake of firing off a generic letter to as many celebrities as they can, sticking to the axiom that the further they cast their net, the more likely they are to have someone bite. This is not only insulting to the celebrity involved (generic letters are easily spotted and shows a blatant lack of real interest in them), but it will ruin your chances of contacting them again. In addition, organisations similar to yours will get tarred with the same brush. The celebrity in question will probably only remember your cause (e.g. stuttering), rather than the charity name. If a different organisation (with the same cause) initiates contact afterwards, the celebrity is more likely to be dismissive, thinking 'oh, it's those stuttering people again'.

Depending on the 'market' of the celebrity (e.g. is it just in one city, one country, or international?) similar organisations should club together and write a joint letter, so it carries more weight and avoids future conflicts of interest. Alternatively, if your subject is only known in one country, that country's national association should be the main contact and author of the letter, with support from the umbrella organisations.

3. Research your subject

"Knowledge is power", never more so than when trying to infiltrate the inner circle of your chosen subject. Have they been involved in any other charitable causes? What kind? Why? It's true that some celebrities will align themselves with big charities to heighten their profile, but there are many who genuinely do care about their chosen causes, and will keep their charitable activities under the radar so they aren't lampooned for seeking attention.

Some celebrities set up foundations or charitable trusts, which are usually run independently of them (apart from a funding stream coming from that celebrities' income, and yes, it is handy when it comes to tax relief!). There are a few celebrities who are actively involved in their own foundations (the Elton John AIDS foundation, for example), and there are some who will provide the setup, or lend their name to it, and then disengage themselves. If you are seeking money from a foundation, contact the foundation, not the celebrity (who to contact is covered in more detail later).

Other research to consider is how approachable your chosen subject is. Are they reclusive or reasonably happy in the public eye? Try and speak to other organisations that have successfully had contact with them (and make sure you're not moving in on their territory). Some, if not most celebrities will ignore you completely for various reasons, some of them not their fault. Others will turn you down via their spokesperson, secretary or agent. Some will turn you down personally (rare). Some will show an interest and get in touch (extremely rare). Which brings me onto the next topic...

4. Don't be presumptuous or arrogant about their interest in you

"Oh, Mr. X stuttered as a child, he *must* really be interested in what we do". Not so. Even if someone still stutters now, they may have no wish whatsoever to speak about it (find out if they've ever *voluntarily* mentioned it publicly), let alone get involved with a charity for people who stutter. Before you start thinking that this makes them a horrible human being, consider the general public. The majority of stutterers out in the world are not involved in any organisation at all; otherwise the memberships of the various associations would be a lot higher than they are. Maybe some people don't know we are here. But you can bet that some of them are just not interested. For example, I have suffered from tinnitus all my life, but I have no wish whatsoever to join the British Tinnitus Association! Being linked to your organisation's cause does NOT obligate a celebrity to care, and it's arrogant to presume that it does.

5. Writing Your Letter

Yes, letters (or phone calls, but that's almost impossible) are still the way forward in contacting the rich and famous. Emails less so, because they can get lost in between the many 'gatekeepers' (more on them later) who are close to your chosen subject. A physical letter still feels more authoritative, and of course your letterhead shows you are a genuine entity, whereas an email may not.

a) Keep it short

The cardinal rule. If you're lucky enough to have your letter fall into the hands of your chosen subject, and it's long and drawn-out...you'll lose their attention. One look at it, and they'll be on to the next one. A short, well laid out letter on one page is more likely to be read to the end. I used to think that celebrities who can't be bothered to read a letter through to the end must be lazy or selfish. This isn't true. The sheer volume of requests is often such that they have to employ full-time people to open or answer mail for them (or even sign autographs!)

b) Show that you've done your research

Show the celebrity that you are very much interested in them, and only them. Quote them in a recent interview if they have talked about stuttering or charity work. Talk about any similar people/organisations they have helped or been involved with. Acknowledge that you know they will be busy because of X project they are doing at the moment, and so on. It's very important to gain trust by mentioning any mutual contacts, friends or the person who put you in touch with them (again, more on these 'gatekeepers' later).

c) NEVER ask for anything upfront, especially money

Not only should you never ask for money, you shouldn't even hint at it (e.g. "we are short of funds"). Would you do it in person when meeting them for the first time? Hopefully not. It's true that celebrities often get asked for funding by all sorts of organisations, even if they're completely unrelated or irrelevant to that person. However, what most people don't realise is that they also get asked for money by *everyone*. By that, I mean the general public as well. Take Jim Davis, the creator of 'Garfield' as an example. You'd think that the main bulk of his fanmail related to his work, but actually, he says the No.1 question he is asked is "can I have some money?", and that's just a comic strip writer, not an A-list Hollywood star! People presume all celebrities are rich (sometimes they are, in fact, asset rich and cash poor) and money is the most common thing asked of them. Don't go there. If they want to give some to you, then they will. They are not stupid; they know that a charity needs funds. Begging, no matter how polite, usually doesn't work.

Another thing you should not ask outright (at least in your first correspondence) is to meet with them, or ask them to come to an event - another extremely common request. A private audience with a celebrity is something that TV and radio stations struggle to do, even when paying them a fee: it's amazing that charities think they are any different. Incidentally, having a celebrity at an event is often more trouble than it's worth, because of the risk of being intercepted by their fan base, the increased amount of security needed, and the fact you will often need to correlate the relevant coverage. If a celebrity really wants to go somewhere, they, or their agent, will take care of these aspects themselves. That is not to say that you cannot leave it *open* for them to attend something. Tell them where and when your event is, especially if it's in their current locale. Mention that they would be welcome to come. But don't ask outright unless it is a genuinely big event with a mass audience that they would also benefit from. This kind of thing is covered next:

d) Understand the currency of fame: what's in it for them?

If you shouldn't ask for money or their time, what else is there to gain? Plenty – if you understand the currency of fame. Money and time are the biggest things a celebrity has to offer, which is why they don't often offer them. What they could do instead, however, is lend you their name. A celebrity name is an incredibly valuable asset. Perhaps they don't want to get involved in your charity at all, but they will write a letter of support (Prince Charles did this for the British Stammering Association: the connection was that his grandfather, King George VI, stammered).

If you're lucky, they might become a patron (again, perhaps without any direct involvement). Being a patron is a mutually agreeable contract where there is something in it for them (being associated with a charity without doing any work, if they choose), and something for you to gain (the authority of having their name attached to your organisation, and an excuse to send them the odd newsletter, perhaps influencing them to be more involved in the future). Another example is if they donate memorabilia or their autograph for a charity auction. This requires little to no effort on their part (most of these things are sent out by their agent, who often have a stockpile of them), yet they are still helping you out. It's also an excuse to get in touch again, thanking them for the item and telling them how much it raised. Such pleasant, 'hands-off' transactions may be repeated. They may even take a greater interest in you the next time around, or when they have more time.

e) Make it easy for them to say yes

It's important to leave the onus of action on the celebrity, so that they still retain the power that they are used to wielding. They should feel like helping you is their choice, not an obligation. Your letter should not demand anything (as above). Tell them a little about your organisation, and mention ongoing projects that may be of interest. Say why you've contacted them (and only them!). Make sure they know what's in it for them. Be polite... not to the point of cloying adulation (leave that to the fans), but a little flattery may sometimes get you somewhere. Remember, all the power rests with the celebrity. You want them to help you. Never act like it's the other way around and that you're doing them a favour! Read over your letter, putting yourself in the position of the celebrity. Would YOU act on it, or would it put you off?

6. Knowing where to send your correspondence

Most letters, beautifully written or otherwise, never reach the intended recipient. There are many people employed within the world of a celebrity who are designed to act as a buffer against them and the public. It's very rare that you'll get anywhere by sending emails or letters to management companies or the like. Sending your letter there will mean it ends up on the slushpile along with the thousands (yes, sometimes it is literally thousands) of gifts, fan mail, autograph requests, and lots of other things that get sent to celebrities day in, day out. Some famous folks do read "every piece of fanmail", or so they claim to, but these are rare. To greatly increase your chances of getting in touch, you need to find a gatekeeper.

7. Gatekeepers

A gatekeeper is someone who is directly or indirectly personally linked to the celebrity, and who can offer you a route to them, or another, bigger gatekeeper. Yes, some high-profile celebrities have several layers of gatekeepers that you'll need to traverse!

a) Personal Gatekeepers

These are the best kind, and take many forms. This is where those odd claims to fame of 'My brother's boss's son works for so-and-so' may be useful to you. Try to get hold of someone with the least amount of 'degrees of separation'. For example, I met Gareth Gates via his friend (and McGuire speech coach) Michael Hay. Because I already knew a singer who stuttered (John Larkin, AKA 'Scatman John'), other McGuire graduates who could vouch for me being who I said I was, and I was also a trustee of ELSA, it was deemed ok for me to meet Gareth: I had some credentials that indicated I wasn't a crazed fan! As a side note: celebrities often have the problem of fans trying all sorts of things to meet them. For example: there were incidences of young girls faking having a stutter in order to get on McGuire courses where Gareth was coaching. For this reason, people close to celebrities are often very touchy about being constantly asked about their

famous friend, so be aware if you're approaching them as a stranger. They have every right to be cautious about your intentions. If they think you're genuine, they may pass something on.

b) Business Gatekeepers

A celebrities' agent is the No.1 business gatekeeper: they are the ones who are approached by anyone serious about involving the celebrity in any business or charitable activity. However, big agencies also have their own gatekeepers to the agent (usually a receptionist who tells you the person you want to speak to is forever in a meeting). That said, an agent often knows the celebrities' personal preferences very well, and if they think your letter will interest them, they will pass it on, and it is therefore almost guaranteed to be read.

Other ways of accessing business gatekeepers are people such as journalists, webmasters of the celebrities' site, photographers, those who work for concert companies, TV or radio, or any other entity that will come into contact with famous people (known in the business under the collective term of "talent", whether they have any or not!). Because these people work with agents and celebrities often, they can get you through that first initial barrier. However these people are often reluctant to compromise their professionalism in order to pass things on. Working in the BBC has given me access to many celebrities, but if I was to approach one for an autograph (or sometimes, even to say hello), I would be severely reprimanded. It would, however, be appropriate to pass on a letter to an agent if they were present at the same time.

It's worth mentioning that many celebrities own companies or trusts, as part of their ongoing battle against paying lots of tax. Most actors have a production company, for example. With very little research you can find a company address to write to that may not be commonly known, so it's another angle to try.

c) Long shots or chance meetings

Let's say you're eating in a restaurant and lo and behold, your chosen celebrity walks in with their family or friends. Usually, the establishment itself will become the gatekeeper, making sure nobody approaches the table, and you will be duly thrown out if you try. You could offer to pay for their meal (if you can afford it!) and send a note with the bill, or other creative angles: but this can sometimes be seen as unwelcome bribery. One of the best such 'creative angles' I ever heard was someone paying a taxi driver to hand over a letter when he took a particular celebrity to the airport. Not having anything else to do on the plane, naturally the letter got read (and acted upon). Going to such lengths can impress or annoy a celebrity, so be careful if trying such routes. If it's a more casual setting, you may be able to approach them. This greatly depends on who it is. If you've done your research, you'll know if the person in question is likely to be polite and receptive or throw a tantrum.

Most (but not all) celebrities do NOT like being approached, because it happens to them every day and it can become a pain. I know how hard it is to resist (I've done it myself), but sometimes the best thing is to leave these people alone and give them some privacy. Alternatively, smile at them: they may just start the conversation themselves (this has happened to me and people I know, in elevators. I suppose even celebrities feel that social pressure to say something!).

8. Failure

This section comes before 'success' because very often failure is what you'll experience when trying to reach celebrities. The worst kind of failure is not hearing anything back from them at all, because this could mean either your letter never got to its destination, or it was duly ignored. Do not be discouraged, and send it again after 6 months or so. Remember that some celebrities are so busy; they only set time aside to answer mail, say, once a year. Speaking as a former

autograph hunter, it's not uncommon for some people to take up to two years to answer you! In your follow up or repeat letter, do not express annoyance at their delay in answering. Remember, it is them doing you a favour, and not the other way around.

Sometimes you may get a response, albeit a negative one. You may be politely turned down by a gatekeeper, which could again mean that your letter never reached its intended person. Respond anyway, and thank them for their time, and politely ask that your letter be kept for any future reference. At least you have established contact, and if appropriate, you may write to them again some months later for a different request.

a) Turning failure around

If it's the celebrity themselves that turn you down, this can (in some circles!) be regarded as a success. They have acknowledged your existence and therefore know what your cause is, but have decided it's not for them, at that time. I say 'at that time' because they may bear you in mind in the future. Depending on the type of rejection (is it because they are too busy right now? Will they be less busy later?) You can assess what to respond when you reply and again, thank them for their time. Politeness costs nothing, and it will do you no good to express anger or disappointment if the intended person is just not interested in what you're doing.

Whether you've been ignored or rejected, there are plenty more things that you can do without having to make contact. Write a (positive!) article on the celebrity, explaining their connection with your cause. Send a copy of it to the celebrity in question – some of them read many articles written about them and will save them, or at least their publicist will.

9. Success

It's a wonderful feeling if a celebrity wants to help you. This may come in many forms, from giving a telephone interview, to speaking at a conference, or even donating to your charity. Naturally once you've got this person interested, you want to maintain their interest for as long as possible. You should take just as much care in 'looking after' the celebrity as you did trying to make the initial contact. There are some things you shouldn't do, that will doubtlessly alienate them:

a) Don't take them for granted or treat them as your property

Just because a celebrity has helped you once, it doesn't mean that they'll do it again. In the *extremely* rare event that they want to enter into any kind of contractual agreement (for example, donating the proceeds of a sale), you'd be wise to seek the advice of an entertainment lawyer. Remember celebrities can 'jump ship' any time, and have no obligation to you, just like at the start of your contact. If they give you an interview, leave it a considerable time before you ask for another one, and make sure it's on a different and equally relevant topic. Don't invite them to all your events if they turn up to one. If they make a donation, never ask for more money. The situation may become different once they have supported you several times over a number of years, but this is still relatively uncommon.

b) DO give them special treatment, unless they say otherwise

I'm someone who hates the "don't you know who I am?" attitude of some celebrities, but it's something you have to bear in mind once you're dealing with a famous person. Not all celebrities are prima donnas, in fact some of them are refreshingly humble. However, they should still be looked after and treated like the valuable asset they are. If they become aligned with your association, or become a member, give them separate attention. *Don't* send them all the usual mailings, unless they request it. Most celebrities will only want the newsletters to keep themselves informed on what the charity is doing. Don't be so foolish as to charge them the

membership fee! If they do come to an event, offer to pay their expenses: yes, of course they can afford it themselves, but still offer. Send taxis for them if they need picking up. Remember their birthday, thank them for their support. All these little gestures may sound like you're excessively pandering to them, but it's a necessary evil.

c) Don't act like a fan

Having a celebrity on board is a business consideration like any other, even when an organisation is not-for-profit. Be professional. Incidentally, usually you'll only be dealing with their agent: don't expect access to the person themselves, even if they're helping you out. If you do come into contact with them personally, being starstruck will hinder rather than help you. Yes, celebrities are used to it, but it can be very off-putting. Perhaps you really are a genuine fan. That's fine, but resist the urge to act like one. The same goes for your trustees, board or staff. Don't ask for their autograph or a photo unless the situation lends itself to it (e.g. if they are posing for pictures at a conference, or you want to write an article about the meeting). Avoid 'fan questions' irrelevant to the situation (e.g. asking them the meaning of lyrics in a song, asking what it was like to work with X, Y, or Z, or about their personal relationship details you read in a paper!). By all means, show an interest in their work and ask them how their current project is going. But stick to the business at hand... they'll appreciate it and feel much more comfortable dealing with you.

d) Remember you're now a gatekeeper

You now have access to a person that other people will be trying to get hold of. Needless to say, if you have gained any kind of personal information relating to the celebrity, keep it well away from everyone else's (e.g. don't stick their personal, home address on your mailing list where it can be easily accessed by others). **Don't give out their details under any circumstances.** This is not only illegal but is also a massive breach of trust. If you get a letter handed to you, you can pass it on if you think it's appropriate. If the celebrity wants to respond, they will. Every celebrity has a fan base and there are always a small percentage of fans who will try *anything* to get close to their idol. They may gatecrash your events, fake an identity, or a myriad of other crazy things. Be aware of this and act appropriately. If something bothers you, report it to the authorities.

10. Remember what you're here for, and it's not for celebrities

If the pursuit of one or more celebrities starts taking up an inordinate amount of a charity's time, then that's a terrible thing. A celebrity supporter is a nice thing to have, but don't lose focus on what your real purpose and goals are. Volunteers, staff, trustees, boards and the normal folks who donate and join your association are every bit as valuable, if not more so. Some of them will become mini celebrities in their own right, in the correct circles: and you should treat them as such. They cost very little but give a lot. Some of them even write long articles to help you out, so....

Anyone want my autograph? ☺

Gina Waggott
