



# The Fine Art of Celebrity Wrangling

By Kelli Richards

## From Seinfeld to Huey Lewis and more: How to Engage the Right Celebrity for Your Event

Celebrity involvement with brands, companies large and small, and with fundraiser events has become so commonplace that there's even a colloquial buzzword for it: "star-ups."

From Jay Z and Tidal to Jessica Alba and The Honest Company (not to mention Ashton Kutcher and, well, just about everything!), celebrities love working with companies and projects that they resonate with.

But that doesn't mean getting a celebrity on board is easy. Struggling startups, for example, may not be ready. Even well-funded, established companies should have a strategic reason to partner with celebrities and be able to offer sufficient cash, equity, or something else that's meaningful, hopefully relevant -- and incentivizes the celebrity to want to participate.

During my many years with Apple leading the company's music and entertainment initiatives (and my many years working with musicians and celebrities as a talent producer for award shows and fundraiser events),

I've developed a broad range of trusted relationships and strategic insights that allow me to engage all manner of talent for diverse opportunities.

## When Celebrity Partners Make Sense

Companies engage celebrities to participate at launch or marketing events, milestones and anniversaries, sales conferences, or other events to honor and celebrate key employees and VIP customer appreciation events. Brands engage them to endorse their products and bring visibility and awareness to help them reach a broader audience. High net worth individuals engage them for fundraising events and special celebrations.

For example, for Cisco's 25th anniversary, then CEO John Chambers wanted a big-name comedian to surprise and delight employees, and Jerry Seinfeld was his top pick. Cisco is a well-known, well-established company, but it still took me and key members of the Cisco team many weeks of negotiations to get Seinfeld and his team on board in a way that satisfied both parties.

It was worth it, though. Cisco employees are still talking about it after many years, and Jerry saw a nice payday from his participation.



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Kelli Richards with Kevin Costner. Image provided by Kelli Richards.

## Getting Real and Moving Past the Glamour

So what are the next steps to get in on the "star-up" game?

**1. Define the rationale.** Why are you engaging a celebrity in the first place? Determine whether this is a commercial relationship or a perk for an employee event OR is it a private fundraiser or special celebration. Then, think through the mutual benefits. If you can provide the celebrity with more than a paycheck -- like exposure from a great event or something that's tied into one of their initiatives -- you're on the path to a good deal.

**2. Manage expectations.** My clients (individuals or corporate) typically start with a list of talent they'd love to engage for a specific activity. I weigh in to help the client choose an artist or celebrity that's a good fit for what they're trying to achieve and offer my experience and insights from working with those celebrities. Then, I ask about the project budget. After that reality check when I give them feedback on their expectations, we identify the best talent options (those who make the most sense in the budget range) and finally, I begin outreach efforts to confirm interest from chosen celebs.

Remember that cash is king. In select situations, celebrities are open to taking equity in exchange for involvement, but this really only happens for the Apples and Airbnbs of business (or other sexy companies with a strong brand) OR they may be willing to reduce fees for fundraising events focused on causes they care about personally. Without momentum, visibility, resonance, alignment (fit) and/or impact behind your brand or initiative, the risk and time commitment may simply not be worth it for certain celebrities. However in truth, there are plenty who will accept the check!

**3. Recruit the right talent.** Not every celebrity is right for every event, so make sure the talent aligns with your goals. I once invited Kenny Loggins to play at an Earth Day event held at Silicon Graphics Inc. (SGI), a hot tech company at the time. It was the perfect match because his music resonated with the environmental theme of the day. Many years later, I invited Kenny to perform at a private fundraiser for Abby Sobrato's Walden West school in Saratoga focused on environment education & sustainability which I knew was a passion for him again the fit was there. The event was a huge success and remains very memorable for those who were in attendance.

**4. Avoid scandal.** Like the sponsors that jumped ship when Tiger Woods' scandal broke, you can't put your shareholders at risk by aligning with a troubled celebrity. If you're in talks with someone like

R. Kelly and he gets into legal hot water, for example, it may be safer to consider other candidates until things cool off.

**5. Secure an experienced celebrity wrangler.** Respected, experienced celebrity wranglers are the middlemen between you and the star's team. They're knowledgeable, trusted by talent reps as inside peers, and worth their weight in gold. They'll be able to negotiate better deals for an optimal strategic fit and ensure the whole experience runs smoothly. Without a celebrity wrangler, you'll likely end up with the wrong talent for your event and will likely pay a whole lot more than you need to. *NOTE: You don't need to work through a major Hollywood agency and pay exorbitant fees if you work with an experienced, well-connected celebrity wrangler like myself.*

## How Celebrity Wranglers Work & Why to Engage One

In recent years, I've invited acts like Darryl Hall, Huey Lewis, KC & the Sunshine Band to perform at a private fundraiser event in Portola Valley run by called LymeAid (Stand4 Lyme Foundation's annual benefit & dinner) by reaching out to the artist directly or to their managers. I explained the situation and how my friend, the chair of the event, was suffering from Lyme disease herself. In the case of Huey Lewis, we got Huey to confirm within 48 hours, and the foundation raised more than \$600,000 at the event -- and my friend accrued the 'halo effect' of securing great talent for her cause. My experience, knowing the right approach, the 'ins' and 'outs' of working with artists & celebs, and having long-standing trusted relationships with talent and their reps allowed me to create this win. And it's something I've repeated many times over the past couple of decades.

Celebrities can bring loads of fun, energy, visibility, and impact to your event, and they can increase your chances of breaking through the noise by helping you and your company or event stand out and rise above the distractions we all experience every day. Just remember to sync your goals and vision with your budget to secure a strategic brand match made in celebrity heaven that results in a win for all parties. Reach out to me if you're considering working with talent and let's create a win for you.

*Kelli Richards, founder and Managing Director of The All Access Group is the exclusive provider of business consulting, mentoring, and strategic connections editorial in Atherton Living and Los Altos Hills magazines. For more information, visit [allaccessgroup.com](http://allaccessgroup.com).*

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