
Shallow Review of Celebrity Fundraising



Celebrity fundraising is the process of getting a well known person to ask their fans to contribute to your cause. It differs from Peer To Peer (P2P) fundraising in that the relationship between fans and celebrities is unidirectional. In most cases the assumption is that increased donations come from increased awareness and a halo effect, not because the celebrity has particular expertise in the cause. However, an endorsement from someone who is known to be an expert would likely be more effective, at least on a per-person basis.

I'll consider two types of celebrities: mainstream celebrities that are popular with wide swaths of the population, and niche celebrities who have fame or influence in subpopulations likely to be sympathetic to Effective Altruism (EA), e.g. rationalists, atheists, skeptics, bronies. I exclude people popular solely within EA for likely having a low marginal return on additional evangelizing.

Mainstream celebrity fundraising can take many forms: tweets, interviews, telethons, presence at fundraising events, etc. In this document I have focused on forms with minimal costs like twitter and video. Events like telethons and celebrity golf tournaments are

expensive and require a lot of specialized expertise to host, and it is incredibly unlikely Charity Science (CS) finds success with them without first finding success with lower investment strategies.

Hard data is incredibly hard to come by, but reaching for a mainstream celebrity is unlikely to be an effective strategy for CS. Reaching out to niche celebrities might be, and is worth experimenting with. However simple links are unlikely to generate much value, serious fundraising would require a prolonged campaign.

Research

MAINSTREAM CELEBRITIES

Celebrity publicity is extremely popular in global poverty fundraising. Red Cross and Oxfam both keep stables of celebrity ambassadors. Small charities are occasionally the beneficiaries of celebrity-driven campaigns, but do not appear to have much agency in creating them. Despite the popularity, hard numbers for celebrity fundraising are extremely hard to come by. Many announce the amount of money earned but not their expenses, which is especially troubling in the cases of events with large costs (e.g. Live Aid) or celebrities pitching their personal charities. The mainstream charities using celebrity endorsers (e.g. Red Cross) for prolonged period do not release numbers on their efficacy. Even if they wanted to, “ambassadors” work in parallel with other fundraising efforts for the same charity, making it difficult to tease apart the effects. Even the symposium on Capitalism, Democracy and Celebrity Advocacy does not have a paper with dollar figures.



The following is what I was able to gather in terms of hard numbers. Because data was so scarce, I included case studies of celebrities driving changes in medical behavior.

- ❖ HIV awareness campaigns took place over many years and the net effect of each celebrity would be hard to assess, but for example HIV tests went up ~60% after basketball player Magic Johnson disclosed he had HIV, for at least four weeks after the announcement [1].
- ❖ After Katie Couric had a colonoscopy on film, colonoscopies increased 20-40% in the populations studied for the next nine months, before returning to baseline [2]. Colonoscopies are expensive, uncomfortable, and time consuming, so an increase of that magnitude indicates a powerful effect.

- ❖ Couric attempted to do the replicate her success with mammograms; there was no effect [3].
- ❖ Researchers found no change in public ability to interpret data after Angelina Jolie publicized her BRCA test and her decision to act on the data [4] despite widespread publicity [5].
- ❖ Mark Ruffalo's campaign for Water Defense (considered exceptionally dedicated, but lower level of fame) raised \$180,000 over three weeks [6]. This is the gross sum, including both cash donations and various merchandise purchases.
- ❖ Stephen Amell (also extremely involved in cause, somewhat more famous) moved \$225,000 worth of merchandise for for Fuck Cancer [7]. This is the gross sum, expenses are unknown. This is likely due to the high cost of physical merchandise).
- ❖ A 100+ celebrity twitter campaign to benefit Haiti reports generating 30 million hits and \$500,000 [8].
- ❖ The same organization reports using the same tactics to raise \$100,000 for emergency aid for soldiers [9].
- ❖ John Scalzi and Jim Hines (science fiction writers with popular blogs, currently averaging 320,000 and 45,000 unique visitors per month respectively) raised \$50,000 (split among several charities) via a series of embarrassing photographs [10]. The only incentives were pictures so financial costs were minimal, possibly zero. The numbers for month of this campaign lasted for is unavailable.

Based on survey data (not studies of amounts raised) Dan Brockington concludes that the public at large is indifferent to celebrity recommendations [11] but that they are a major draw to political and business people [12]. Charities may provide a way for corporations to buy goodwill from celebrities, e.g. Bank of America's collaboration with U2: [13] these collaborations only occur with very large charities.

NICHE CELEBRITIES

I'm defining niche celebrities as people who are extremely popular in a very small subculture that we have reason to believe would be exceptionally sympathetic to EA. I also focus on bloggers, because other social media seems to have a very low return and niche celebrities are unlikely to be making speeches to that many people.

Possible scope: The largest skeptic blog (scienceblogs.com/pharyngula) had 1.4 million unique visitors last month [14]. How that readership would translate into referrals is harder to know, and there are no published numbers. If they achieved the same results as John Scalzi and Jim Hines (likely an upper bound, since that was a prolonged and involved campaign), that is ~0.13 cents/unique visitor, so Pharyngula could potentially generate \$200,000, which is actually higher than the likely net of the more mainstream celebrity campaigns. Even the smaller-but-still-big blogs could generate in the thousands of dollars.

Subjective Sense

Celebrity awareness building can be extremely valuable when a subject is taboo or genuinely not well known. Global poverty is unlikely to fall into either category. Arguably Effective Altruism could fall into both: the vast majority of the population has never heard of it, and quantifying human life is taboo. However the effectiveness of celebrity publicity goes down with complexity, and EA is a complex topic.

Recruiting mainstream celebrities is extremely hard, and often requires specialized personnel. At CS's level of popularity they are unlikely to convince a mainstream celebrity to support EA via a cold call. However if a celebrity dropped into CS's lap, it would be worth the time to help them publicize EA. Selling public goodwill towards celebrities to corporations is a potentially viable plan for a much larger and better connected organization. Niche celebrities have a surprisingly high draw if they invest in fundraising, and are definitely worth pursuing if they are already interested in EA. However if they are not excited enough to put in significant time, it will likely amount to very little.

Estimated Potential

Pursuing mainstream celebrity without personal connections: essentially zero.

Mainstream celebrity falls into our lap, puts enormous amount of effort into publicizing: best case scenario, \$200,000 for 20-40 hours of celebrity's time, with at least the equivalent of that from Charity Science. Likely much lower, with potentially a lot of effort leading to no publicity at all.

Niche celebrity, already into EA: very high in terms of awareness building, perhaps up to \$200,000 in fundraising.

Niche celebrity, not already into EA, personal connection: same potential pull as celebrities already into EA, but requiring more time and less likelihood up success.

Potential Minimum Experiments

Idea	Disadvantages	Time Investment	Time to Fruition	Cost
Purchase tweets from mainstream celebrities	Audience unlikely to be receptive	1 day	Almost immediate	\$2000-\$8000/tweet [15]. Need many tweed to reduce useable data.

Idea	Disadvantages	Time Investment	Time to Fruition	Cost
Buy ads on niche celebrity's blog, track referrals.	Target audience uses ad block	2 days	Almost immediate	Unknown, WAG \$300-\$600
Solicit blog posts from niche celebrities that already support EA	Fewer followers than mainstream celebrities	5-6 days	Potentially months, depending on celebrity's schedule	Time only

My recommendation is for the 3rd plan, which I will describe in more detail: Get niche celebrities who already support EA to publicize (e.g. write a blog entry about) EA, or CS, or a particular effective charity, with a trackable link (possibly its own site to ensure inclusion of type in traffic and second order links. This would up the time and potentially monetary cost significantly). Ideally organize a prolonged campaign with cheap incentives for donations, similar to Scalzi and Hine's campaign (e.g. celebrity does something embarrassing). Track referrals.

The time estimates above are for set up only, and do not include evaluating the results. Time cost for evaluation depends on the existing setup, but if referral and action tracking are already in place, < 1 day. If separate webpage used: add time to design webpage. Defer to CS tech guy on this.

Further Research

There is an absence of good data in this field, and even if they existed the confidence interval for predictions for any one campaign would be enormous. I believe the focus should be on learning how to create small, testable experiments, rather than looking for existing data. That involves:

- ❖ Identifying individuals already in EA with large followings outside EA.
- ❖ Identifying communities sympathetic to EA and opinion leaders within them. This may require a local expert
- ❖ Learning how to give elevator pitches to niche celebrities not currently aligned with EA.
- ❖ Looking for other examples of successful celebrity fundraising campaigns to identify common elements.

You could also consider Dan Brockington's book, symposium, and blog. He is focused on survey and interview data and as far as I can tell never measures money directly. Unfortunately he is the only person I can find doing quantitative analysis at all.

References

1. <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/07/nyregion/hiv-tests-up-60-since-the-disclosure-from-magic-johnson.html?scp=6&sq=magic%20johnson%20hiv&st=cse>
2. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15578503>
3. There are articles written before the procedure but none on its aftereffects. Given the frequency of post-colonoscopy articles touting the Couric effect, my conclusion is there was no effect.
4. <http://www.nature.com/gim/journal/v16/n7/abs/gim2013181a.html>
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