

The Oprah Effect: The Industry Behind Her Show's Guest List

JULY 13, 2010 07:15 AM



By Steven Barboza



It's common knowledge that self-made billionaire Oprah Winfrey, who sits atop the latest Forbes Celebrity 100 power list, is both kingmaker and rainmaker.

She helped to change the political calculus of the race for President, early on throwing her weight behind Candidate Obama. As a media personality she wields her influence as a sort of magic wand, creating instant winners in the marketplace. Oprah, as we all know, has the unique and highly prized ability to tap into the spending impulses of tens of millions of female consumers.

What's not well-known, however, is that the "Oprah effect" itself has spawned an entire industry — a national corps of publicity mavens who cater to the whims of those who dream of some day becoming an Oprah guest.

"There are people now whose job is to get you on the Oprah show, or to get an Oprah promotion," said James Lou, U.S. Chief Strategy Officer for the DDB ad agency. "I don't think Oprah necessarily would think ideally about that, because I think she wants [people] to feel like she has discovered things, as opposed to this group of systems and companies that actually feed her things."

But the Oprah juggernaut is too huge to be spoon fed by Oprah herself. She alone couldn't possibly ferret out all the books, goods and services worthy of being featured under the umbrella of her brand, and so it was inevitable that the "O" empire — consisting of a television show, magazine, website, movie production house, book club, radio channel, and now a TV network — would give rise to an Oprah-servicing industry.

Publicists, media coaches, and all manner of PR folks indirectly support the show. They pitch potential "Oprah stories," train would-be Oprah guests, and smooth the rough edges of speakers, celebrities, authors, politicians, doctors, subject experts and others who need polishing in order to graduate to Oprahdom.

Oprah's ability to run through thousands of guests per year creates a need for well-prepped guests. (Other shows benefit as well.) Her show is now in its 25th season, and 4,425 original shows have aired, featuring 28,000 guests, according to an Oprah spokesperson. That equates to an average of between six and seven guests per show. "That's an industry in itself," said Lou, adding that potential guests want to be attached to the show. Oprah after all is at the crest of a \$7 trillion wave of female

consumer buying power.

Oprah's immense power, he noted, "basically demonstrates the need for many people, including entrepreneurs, to know that Oprah is an awesome brand to be connected to. It is a brand that has an ability to be very generous. Her brand acts just like she does. It's very giving. It's able to lift others."

A few publicists have a knack for getting people on the show. By her own count, Cynthia Stine, president of [Promote Success](#) in Dallas, TX, has gotten six acceptances so far. But she is careful never to make promises.

Oprah.com receives 20,000 emails per week. In addition, according to one media expert, Oprah receives 25,000 letters per week. So the odds are stacked heavily against a potential guest getting noticed. "Generally I don't like to take on a client just for Oprah, because Oprah is a long shot," Stine said. "Even if you have a really good story, and it's right up Oprah's alley, it doesn't mean that it's going to be a home run. There's so much competition and there are so many factors outside of our control. I've had really great stories that they've said no to."

Stine's past successes may increase the odds in her clients' favor. "Once you get your first client on Oprah, it's a lot easier, because now you have a producer you can call and that you can work with," she said. "At least with our producer contact, we know that he'll take our call. So we already have a leg up on Oprah. It's not a guarantee, but it does help."

Stine was able to book Iranian-American Anousheh Ansari, the first female private space explorer, on Oprah's show. Stine said Ansari "really wanted her story to inspire women around the world, particularly in Iran. Oprah is one of the few [American] shows that air in Iran."

"Our client remembered being a young girl in a burka looking at the stars and thinking I'm going to get there some day — and she made it happen," said Stine. "We pitched Oprah. We promised the first interview once she landed and that she would shoot some footage in space." The show aired in 2006.

Fees for pitching Oprah vary widely depending on the publicist or agency. Stine charges a basic rate of \$150 per hour to draft a pitch and coach a client, relatively low by industry standards. Some agencies charge hundreds or even thousands of dollars per hour.

Media coach and marketing strategist Susan Harrow, who literally wrote a book about getting on Oprah, notes on her website that hiring a publicist to get booked on a top talk show might cost \$2,000 to \$10,000 per month on retainer – with no guarantee of success. One consultant charges more than \$1,500 just to try to get a client booked on Oprah, Harrow noted. Another charges \$30,000 once a client is booked on the show.

How does a publicist get a person booked on the show? Celebrities take their own route to Oprah's couch. For non-celebrities, the trip might start with first getting accepted as a publicist's client.

Media experts say a publicist's pitch usually entails an attention-grabbing headline and a paragraph detailing what's intriguing about a guest or what he or she is promoting. Adding statistics helps. "Your goal is not to give producers all of the information on a subject. Your goal is to get them to call you," Harrow said.

A respectable publicist will work with a client only if there's a chance of success. "Long shots" need not apply. "People think that Oprah's going to change their lives, and she can," said Harrow. "They believe that Oprah is the holy grail that's going to make them a million overnight. While it can happen, it's the person who is really completely ready for that kind of fame and fortune that it really works for. And you do have to be ready. It's the highest level of media that there is – the top talk show in the world."

In the past, Harrow noted, the websites of fledgling businesses publicized on the Oprah show have been overwhelmed, crashing as a result. Oprah's producers now try to ensure that a potential guest's business can handle millions of website hits and astronomical sales increases.

"The real work begins after the show," said Harrow. "If you're not set up systemwise, then you're not taking full advantage of being on the show. I mean everything from having enough inventory to having a call center to fulfilling orders to being able to respond to the kinds of [new] opportunities that are there. You have to have your back end completely ready."

Lisa Price, president of Carol's Daughter, now a multimillion dollar hair and skin care company with nine stores nationwide, learned just how difficult it could be to meet the demand of new customers after an Oprah endorsement. She appeared on the Oprah show in 2002. "The exposure was huge and immediate," Lois Haram, general manager of Carol's Daughter, told CNBC. "The phones [were] ringing off the hook. The orders were coming in and Lisa was very, very quickly outgrowing even the size of the business that she had already created."

Eventually, and in part due to the "Oprah effect," Price attracted influential business partners, raising \$10 million from a group of investors that included such celebrities as Jay-Z, Jada Pinkett Smith, Will Smith and record producer Tommy Mottola and his wife, the singer Thalia. Price was then able to open a sleek flagship store in Harlem and the brand began appearing in Sephora cosmetic stores and Macy's.

So far, Harrow has media trained four Oprah guests. They all share certain characteristics, she said. "The person needs to be natural and authentic — comfortable with him or herself. The other thing is, the [person] must be an expert in a field or topic, and must be able to express [him- or herself] clearly, and jargon-free. That might seem obvious, but I can't tell you how many academics I've trained who don't speak [jargon-free] English."

Harrow is constantly contacted by people vying to appear on the show. “I get everything from corporations to your local poodle shop,” she said. “I even get murderers — like, ‘I just got out of prison for murder and I want to get on the Oprah show.’ “I get people who are merchandising items, health techniques; everybody who’s got a diet book or has an idea for a diet book.”

She strongly recommends against trying to get on Oprah before going on other shows. “What I recommend is that you don’t even contact Oprah unless you’ve done a lot of local shows,” she said. “You can’t run a marathon unless you have walked a mile. Walking a mile means that you need to get on local shows, then you get on regional shows, and you work your way up to national shows. But it’s very, very fast-paced, and I recommend that you get a lot of experience on radio, so you can be fluid in speaking about your topic. And you should also have a demo tape for national TV. People want to see that you can handle yourself in a situation where you can speak for 10 to 20 seconds in a conversational manner and be relaxed about it.”

Harrow also recommended that media training progress slowly if possible, so clients will gradually grow comfortable on the interview couch. There’s plenty to make them nervous – they will be talking to Oprah in front of a studio audience of 300 people, and as many as 49 million watching on television worldwide.

“I would say it takes quite a lot of practice,” Harrow said. “I always start with a nice interview, and very slowly, until my clients get the soundbites down, and then we practice the other types of interviews. I’ll go through the rambler [interviewer], the interrupter, the nice [interviewer], the uninformed, and the hostile. I always recommend that people work with the questions they don’t want to be asked so they will get the feeling of what it’s like to be on the hot seat. Once people feel like they can deal with it, then their confidence level goes up.”

Here are 10 tips to getting on Oprah’s show from Harrow’s book entitled [“The Ultimate Guide to Getting Booked on Oprah.”](#)

- #1: Tape and watch the show
- #2: Explore Oprah’s website
- #3: Get to know Oprah’s preferences.
- #4: Pitch a hot topic.
- #5: Put together a winning press kit.
- #6: Create six dynamic soundbites.
- #7: Make sure you’re “blurbable” – that is, that you can speak your message in 10-20 seconds.
- #8: Get booked on local shows first.
- #9: Build your credentials – and practice your public speaking – by teaching.
- #10: Wow the producers with brevity.