

# PRWEEK

8th November 2002, Page 9

## A testing time for PROs and the cult of celebrity

**In today's celebrity-obsessed culture, prolonging the longevity of a star's fame and fortune requires increasingly sophisticated communications work. Ian Hall reports**

When **Taylor Herring Communications** was hired last week by the TV presenter at the centre of date-rape allegations made by Ulrika Jonsson, the agency assumed a brief some say they wouldn't touch with a barge-pole.

One media relations expert says the delay between Channel 5's Matthew Wright inadvertently naming the presenter at the centre of the allegations and any reaction from the individual in question meant the kind of reputational damage no PR advice in the world can recover.

The other TV star mauled in the papers in recent weeks – former *Have I Got News For You?* presenter Angus Deayton – is also understood to have brought in PR support, specifically his friend Matthew Freud, to help with recent media coverage. By common consensus, he is likely to remain in demand on TV, but with his reputation tarnished.

The 'products' of reality TV shows –

such as *Big Brother* or the various takes on the *Popstars* format – are the clearest example of short-termism. They epitomise, in many critics' eyes, the triumph of immediate buck-making and the defeat of long-term brand building, despite the brands in question – celebrities with great sway over consumer behaviour – holding vast potential.

Pop band HearSay was created from ITV1 show *Popstars* but, after enormous initial popularity, split five weeks ago in what many have seen as a massive indictment of reality TV.

But what do the PR advisers who not only work for – to quote one *PRWeek* source – 'celebs in the shit', but also work for showbiz stars on long-term contracts, think about the prospects of raising the ambition of their sector?

Borkowski PR chief Mark Borkowski says there is a 'malaise' in celebrity PR: 'People without skills are representing celebrities. The quality of advice isn't there. The good people you would go to, you can count on the fingers of one hand.'

MacLaurin Media MD Ian Monk admits to frustration that much of



**HearSay...** split is seen by many as a massive indictment of reality TV

the work he is asked to handle tends to be damage limitation. He says some potential clients decide against hiring him, saying 'If we ever need you, we'll call'. But, he adds, 'when that call comes, it's usually – by definition – too late'.

The tactical nature of celebrity PR is visible to those targeted by this type of communication. Dominic Mohan, editor of *The Sun's* entertainment section, Bizarre, says there is a growing demand for 'troubleshooting' media relations professionals.

Neil Reading, who runs his eponymous PR firm, says: 'In the UK not many people have personal publicists. If something bad happens, they have to go scrambling round to find someone to advise them.'

A further spur to taking a long-term view of reputation management in showbiz might have been technological advance, but according to some, the reverse has happened.

Henry's House founder Julian Henry says the most significant change in the celebrity PR field in recent years has been the advent of websites such as popbitch.com. 'News is now not daily; it is hourly, minutely,' he says.

Showbiz PROs are divided as to whether the media's increased focus on celebrity will, or has, resulted in a backlash against celebrities. But all emphasise that possessing talent is the key to long-term popularity. And Mohan says 'policing coverage' is crucial in order to avoid creating the

appearance that the main aim of projects such as HearSay is to make a fast buck.

He suggests PROs should avoid striving for blanket coverage and instead 'hold stuff back'. In terms of generating any form of long-term success for bands such as HearSay, Mohan says 'less is more'.

In HearSay's defence, Polydor press head Sundraj Sreenivasan, who handled their PR, says: 'We did have a strategy but it was also a case of taking each day as it came. In terms of credibility, we got them on the cover of *The Face* and *NME*. For the second single we went for *Marie Claire* and *GQ*,' he adds.

Because of the circumstances of the band's birth, for HearSay, the backlash started as soon as they formed. But there is a feeling that those advising Will Young and Gareth Gates, who finished first and second in the subsequent *Pop Idol* show, appear to have learned lessons from HearSay's rapid fall from favour.

Charlotte Hickson, who works for 19 Entertainment, which handles media strategy for the pair, insists 19 takes a long-term view, and aims to eschew early blanket coverage. Gates, for example, is limited to one teen magazine appearance per month.

PROs are keen to point out that talent is the first requirement of a long-term profile. But they are unanimous that they would rather be hired as the celebrity equivalent of corporate advisers than for the sort of damage limitation required by the stars currently in the headlines. □