

Tight Hollywood Connections Pay Off

A novel approach cultivates loyalty for MS products among celebrities and TV and movie producers. Microsoft's strategy builds relationships around the technologies, not the endorsement transactions.

By Aaron Halabe

Millions know Eva Longoria as the star of ABC's hit television series "Desperate Housewives." Less obvious are her Windows Vista demo skills, which Microsoft helped build.

The company cultivates relationships with prominent actors, athletes, musicians, directors, and producers who often publicly endorse Microsoft products or subtly promote them by weaving them into TV and movie story lines.

In both scenarios, Microsoft's unconventional approach – no demand of quid pro quo – creates loyalty that benefits Microsoft and sets it apart from other companies that would connect products to celebrities, said Shawn Sanford, director of the Lifestyle Marketing group. He has worked with some 100 entertainers such as Jessica Alba, Steve Martin, Jimmy Kimmel, and Brittany Murphy.



Microsoft's Shawn Sanford has built such a rapport with actress Eva Longoria that he was among the guests at her birthday.

"Every company in the world sits down and says [to celebrities], 'I will give you 30 plasma TVs for your house, and what you need to do for me is two press releases, three interviews, and one appearance,'" Sanford said. "I wanted to break this transactional approach. I don't ask [celebrities] for anything upfront, which confuses every person I meet with."

Personal Approach Breaks Down Barriers

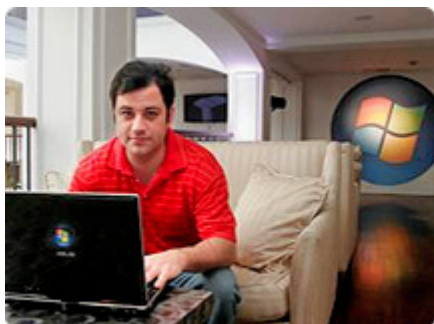
Sanford, a liaison for multiple product groups, builds rapport by personally teaching celebrities about products like Zune, Windows Vista, Media Center PCs, and Xbox 360. Stars also receive ongoing tech assistance.

"The foundation of the relationship is built around technology, not me hiring them or paying them or them doing something for us," Sanford said. "It doesn't mean we won't ever ask them for anything – because we do ask." But requests for promotional help often come many months after the initial contact, when Sanford has established a dialogue with the celebrities.

More often than not, the strategy pays off and the stars agree, sometimes without additional fees, he said. "You're more likely to help a friend than you are with somebody you don't really know or somebody who says you're obligated."

Longoria spent months getting to know Windows Vista, and when Microsoft asked her for promotional assistance during launch, she gladly gave an "Access Hollywood" reporter an on-air technology overview.

Sanford tapped Molly Sims, a model and actress in the TV series "Las Vegas," to promote Zune in entertainment magazines. "Because of



Talk-show host Jimmy Kimmel and more than 20 other celebrities attended a Microsoft-hosted Windows Vista introduction event in January.

the long-term relationship we have with Molly, we got for free what a company would typically pay tens of thousands of dollars for," Sanford said

Sims previously had demonstrated her loyalty by praising and posing with her Windows-powered Portable Media Center at a New York party celebrating the launch of Tivo ToGo.

"That moment validated our approach. These people want to do things for the company as a friend," Sanford added. "We're not some faceless company to them."

Relationships Also Yield Product Placements

Big companies often pay \$1 million just to discuss product placement on high-viewer reality shows, said program manager Andy Ma, who works with Sanford. Coca-Cola paid \$9 million to place Coke-labeled cups in front of "American Idol" judges, he said. But when Ma is involved, Microsoft generally pays nothing to display products in television shows and movies. He fosters relationships with TV and movie producers.

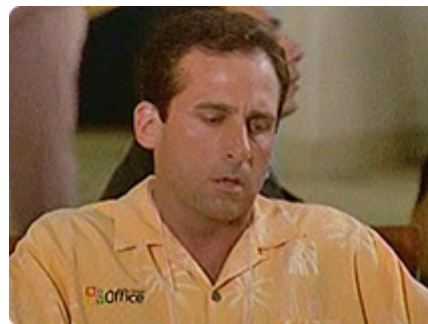
The appearances, however subtle and fleeting, help reinforce Microsoft's brand and introduce consumers to new technologies.

Microsoft is one of the few companies in Hollywood that is offered fee-free product placements. In exchange, production companies get a direct line to Ma, who provides tech support about Microsoft products and general PC guidance, and who can quickly get hardware to producers, by dint of his close relationships with OEMs.

Ma has helped place Microsoft products in 27 movies, including "Firewall," a Harrison Ford film, and 17 television shows, including "30 Rock" and "CSI Miami," the latter of which is integrating the Surface computer concept into the fall season's series.

Corporations typically must approach TV and movie studios through product-placement firms or public relations agencies, Ma said. He appreciates the opportunity to work directly with partners.

Producers of "The Office" TV series, planning an episode in which star Steve Carell attends a trade show to collect swag, asked Ma if Microsoft would outfit a couple of booths for the show. It did, and Ma worked with the prop master to put Carell into a Microsoft Office-emblazoned Hawaiian shirt for the episode's last several minutes.



Product placement has included a Microsoft Office Hawaiian shirt worn by "The Office" star Steve Carell.

Fee free is good business, but Microsoft makes concessions for not paying: It doesn't dictate how long or how often a product is shown onscreen, and agrees not to seek royalties for displays of its copyrighted products.

Return on investment is an unknown. "There's no standard way to measure what type of increased sales results are coming out of product placements," Ma said. "Until someone comes up with a reliable way to quantify this, there's no way ... to equate it to a standard, quantifiable Microsoft metric. But there's value - people do recognize these products, sometimes on an unconscious level."

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