Nightclubs, hotels host A-list names to create buzz

by Penni Crabtree

What's in a name? If it's Paris Hilton, dancing in your swank new nightclub or staying at your upscale hotel, the answer is instant - if not necessarily durable - success.

CREATING A BUZZ - Stingaree is one of the many upscale nightclubs and hotels in San Diego that court celebrities to help build awareness of their businesses. The club paid an undisclosed sum for singer Beyonce to hold a party. CNS Photo by Sean M. Haffey. BEING SEEN - Fans of Beyonce tried to catch a glimpse or take a photo of the singer who appeared at Stingaree after her concert recently at Cox Arena in San Diego. CNS Photo by Sean M. Haffey. In a celebrity-besotted culture, businesses of all kinds are courting, cajoling and occasionally paying cash on the barrel for actors, rock stars, athletes and the assorted society glitterati who create buzz and build recognition for a brand name.

In San Diego, a new crop of upscale hotels and nightclubs are playing the name game with a vengeance, crafting celebrity-studded events designed to garner national media attention and transform their venues into the latest hot hangout. Downtown's newly opened Ivy Hotel hosted a celebrity charity poker tournament with actress Jessica Biel - co-star of "The Illusionist" and sometime Justin Timberlake companion - while the trendy Stingaree nightclub hosted the after-concert party for singer Beyonce.

A new Hard Rock Hotel scheduled to open in October has forged an alliance with hip-hop group Black Eyed Peas, guaranteeing that the act will headline the hotel's grand opening and help bring in a slew of up-and-coming bands for future events and performances.

The cult of celebrity has reached such a pitch that some companies now hire so-called celebrity wranglers, specialists in getting the famous and infamous to put in an appearance.

"In this culture, everyone is celebrity-driven. They want to go to places that celebrities find cool," said Carrie Wick, a publicist with Fingerprint Communications, a public relations firm with offices in New York and Los Angeles that provides celebrity-wrangling services for events. "People want to be part of this fantasy world, so to have a celebrity involved in a brand or a product really garners attention."

Most companies are reluctant to admit that they hire celebrities, or the firms that can land the celebrities. Entertainment industry insiders say appearances can range from thousands of dollars to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Paris Hilton, the No. 1 person searched on Google in 2006, reportedly was paid $100,000 to host a New Year's Eve party in Las Vegas last year. The New York Post reported that Hilton and her sister, Nicky, are offering Las Vegas nightclubs the right to buy their New Year's Eve appearance this year for a cool $500,000. Paris Hilton's publicist has denied the report.

Luring a celebrity isn't always a cash-on-the-barrel proposition; there are more subtle ways to land someone on the celebrity A or B list.

The Hard Rock Hotel in San Diego, an upscale hotel with condominium units, donated one of its 17 Rock Star condo-suites, which are priced at $1 million and upward, to the Black Eyed Peas' nonprofit Peapod Foundation.

Under the condo-hotel model, buyers purchase rooms but can occupy them for only about a month per year. The rest of the time, the rooms are reserved for traditional hotel use, and their revenue is split between the hotel and the condo owner.

The Peapod Foundation's suite will rent for about $2,500 a night, and part of the revenue will go to the nonprofit. In return, Peas producer and frontman Will.i.am will help book quality musicians for The Vault, the hotel's 500-seat music venue.

"There are obviously celebrities who are happy to make appearances for their own personal gain," said

Robert Todak, general manager of the 420-room hotel. "Anything we do will be tied into some kind of charity. That is the appropriate way to operate in these situations."

Michael Kelly, co-owner of the Ivy Hotel in San Diego, said his company hired Capian Enterprises, a Los Angeles firm that specializes in hooking up celebrities with corporations for charitable causes, to help put together the hotel's official opening celebration.

The $250,000 in proceeds from the charity weekend - $10,000 bought two seats in the tournament, accommodation at the Ivy and access to events at the hotel - went to benefit the Hollywood Entertainment Museum and Make The Difference Network, a charity co-founded by Biel.

"We didn't pay any celebrities," Kelly said. "We were raising money for charity through the sale of tickets to play in the tournament."

The benefit was still designed to benefit the hotel's bottom line, Kelly said. The hotel sought, and received, national media attention and celebrity word-of-mouth buzz.

"Extra," the nationally syndicated television program that covers celebrity news and events, was given exclusive rights for live coverage, and several national magazines - including In Style and People - were on hand to cover the Ivy event.

"We consider ourselves an international destination, not just a local hotel," Kelly said. "Clearly, we are hoping for some national press to help build awareness of the property."

In the few months since the Ivy opened, celebrities already have stayed the night, dined at its restaurant or

partied in its downstairs nightclub, including Gwyneth Paltrow, Robert Downey Jr., Jessica Alba and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson.

Kelly said the hotel respects its guests' privacy and does not leak details of celebrity visits, but celebrity "sightings" reported by other guests also help create buzz for the hotel.

Stingaree, a popular downtown San Diego nightclub, isn't so reserved about name-dropping. The nightclub paid an undisclosed sum to play host to a post-concert party for singer Beyonce, after she performed at San Diego State's Cox Arena. Her anticipated appearance was advertised widely, and most of the 1,200 people who attended paid as much as $50 to gain entrance to the nightclub that evening.

Once inside, several eager partygoers held aloft cell phone cameras to try to get a picture of Beyonce through the gauzy curtain that enveloped the penthouse lounge where she and her entourage partied. The singer, who briefly greeted the crowd before retiring to the lounge, stayed about an hour.

Chris Bourus, 33, said he attended the Beyonce concert and came to the nightclub to prolong the experience. Bourus said the nightclub's air of exclusivity, and its cult of celebrity, is a winning strategy.

"People want to be in the environment of celebrities," said Bourus, a local DJ. "Celebrities set the pace, they really do."

Stingaree co-owner Dana Shertz said the nightclub rarely pays for celebrities to appear. Instead, Shertz said, celebrities come of their own accord or are invited as guests.

Sometimes celebrities pay their own bills, and sometimes the club picks up the tab for drinks, security and a

private place for the entourage to party.

"For a lot of celebrities, that's why they love coming," Shertz said. "They get privacy and security in their own VIP space but can still see the crowd and be seen by the crowd."

In return, the nightclub often gets bragging rights in the form of "celebrity sighting" items leaked to national publications that cover celebrities.

Shertz said celebrity fever is nothing new, and the entertainment and leisure industry depends on it.

"There has always been a fascination with movie stars and celebrities. I don't think it is any different today than it was in the 1920s and 1930s when people followed what Charlie Chaplin and Clark Gable did," Shertz said. "Of course, maybe some of the celebrities back then were more authentic, earning celebrity through accomplishments."

In an era of reality TV shows - where unknowns can catapult into instant fame - and spoiled, pretty, rich kids who trade more on notoriety than talent, celebrity can be fickle. But Shertz is philosophical.

"Consumers decide who celebrities are and who they want to be fascinated with," Shertz said. "We just roll with the punches."

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