

GOSSIP SELLS THE GOODS

Celebrities and the paparazzi are now in the business plan

BY ANNE KINGSTON (MACLEAN'S AUG.4 '08)

Before last Wednesday, few people had heard of plainmary.com, a website selling posh baby gear. By week's end, the site had more than two million hits and had received orders from as far away as Dubai. Credit a tiny item in Rush & Molloy, a gossip column in the New York Daily News, that reported **Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie** had, six weeks earlier, ordered two of its US \$190 monogrammed mats for their then-unborn twins. What made the story buzz-worthy was the news one of the mats had been ordered for "Rex Leon," not "Knox Leon," as their latest little boy is named, suggesting a last-minute change of mind.

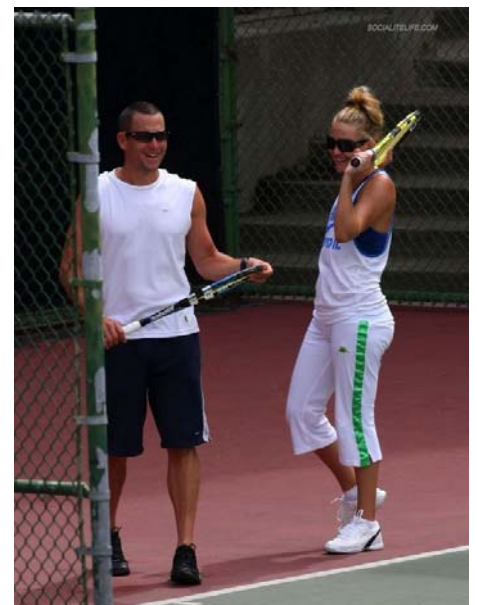


The source of this breaking news? That would be Andy Behrman, plainmary.com's publicist, who learned gossip fundamentals writing for New York magazine. "It's critical for a company like plain mary to have celebrity associations," he says. "I mean who gives a s--t about a plain mary baby mat? But, all of a sudden, if the tush of a sainted Jolie-Pitt is peeing on this \$190 microfibre mat, that's a \$10,000 mat that we'll see on eBay shortly."

Behrman comes to the job having sharpened his tabloid incisors repping Petit Trésor, the celebrity-gossip-fuelled Los Angeles purveyor of baby paraphernalia recently hyped in People's gushing coverage of Jennifer Lopez's Versailles-style nursery. Its two stores have become go-to destinations for paparazzi seeking "baby bumps," and the celebrities vying for their attention. "When Tori Spelling goes into Petit Trésor, she knows there will be 10 photographers there because I'm going to call," he says.

Even negative publicity has burnished the store's celebrity cred. In May, Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes thrust the company into headlines with a cease-and-desist letter that complained bogus information had been leaked that they had dropped between US\$350,000 and US\$400,000 at Petit Trésor in the two years since their daughter had been born, in an "off the record" quote to Life & Style magazine "for the purpose of enhancing [the store's] image and obtaining a commercial advantage." (Behrman says the number was an estimate of what they'd spent in total, not only at the store.)

Such is the power of strategically placed celebrity gossip, next to which product placement in movies seems downright quaint. Today's smuthound may think she's catching up on the latest chapter in the **Kate Hudson-Lance Armstrong** romance as the pair are paparazzi-ed playing tennis. But the fact they're **outfitted in gear from Nike**, a company Armstrong represents, suggests another agenda may be at work, one in which the gossip consumer is in fact the one being consumed. Paparazzi and celebrities routinely work together, says Mario Lavandeira, a.k.a. Perez Hilton, whose blog PerezHilton.com has made him a bona fide



celebrity. It's not uncommon for paparazzi to pay a celebrity for exclusive shots, he says. "They all work differently. Some will get cash upfront-- \$10,000, \$15,000. Or they'll get a cut of the profit." Product placement happens a lot, he says, noting **Lindsay Lohan was paid to carry a nicotine replacement** a while back. "Spencer and Heidi were photographed last week holding up some Nintendo game," he says, referring to the much-gossiped-about stars of *The Hills*. "It's like a free ad."

Bonnie Fuller, the former editor of *Star* who has just formed Bonnie Fuller Media, views the current scandal involving Madonna's alleged affair with New York Yankee Alex Rodriguez as a classic example of gossip being marshalled into marketing buzz. Her sources tell her the two have known each other for months. Yet Madonna chose to make their association public-- appearing in Rodriguez's box at Yankee Stadium--just as reports that sales for her upcoming world tour and latest CD were flagging, Fuller notes. "She's very sophisticated and aware of how publicity plays into celebrity. She has courted controversy throughout her career to boost her profile." Madonna is untouched by negative press, says Fuller. Being named an alleged home wrecker able to lure a much younger athlete only reinstates her bad girl, man-eater rep, a shrewd move for the 49-year-old, she says.

"There are no coincidences in Hollywood," says Elaine Lui, the Vancouver-based blogger behind *Laineygossip.com*, the popular site that avidly chronicles the photo ops and smut eruptions that occur just before a tour or movie release. "I think certain celebrities and publicists are savvy to the fact that they can no longer control the message the way they did before, so this is their attempt to control the message and use it to their advantage," says Lui, who's currently trying to track down whether Naomi Watts, who recently appeared at a Donald Trump-sponsored event, is angling for an apartment in one of his buildings. "She's not like Nicole Kidman, she's not a fame whore, so I'm thinking, what's going on here? And real estate is at such a premium in New York. Even rich people can't get the home that they want. So I'm like what can Donald Trump offer? Real estate."



Jennifer Aniston is a masterful player of the game, says Lui, referring to news of her relationship with singer John Mayer breaking a month before his North American tour. "I do think it's a real thing," she says of the relationship. "But it doesn't mean people don't exploit what's real to further their careers." Aniston is also known to exploit "candid" paparazzi imagery: last year, the British model Paul Sculfor was photographed leaving her house **carrying a bottle of Smart-Water, the brand she endorses.**

Quantifying the value of gossip as marketing currency is difficult, but it's increasingly being done. In 2006, Fraser Ross, the Toronto native who operates *Kitson*, the Los Angeles store beloved by celebutards like the Hilton sisters, took a stab at it during a legal skirmish with *Us Weekly*, not long after the magazine gushed that *Kitson* was "L.A.'s

hippest hot spot." Ross opened the store in 2000 on a strip of Robertson Boulevard frequently staked out by paparazzi covering the nearby celebrity hangout The Ivy. Shunning traditional advertising, he forged a symbiotic relationship with photographers and publications who displayed the Kitson name and products prominently. Halle Berry was captured by paparazzi leaving the store in 2002 just after her Oscar win with an initialled "H" handbag, which became a million-dollar seller, says Ross. Nicole Richie held her book-signing party there. Matthew McConaughey's girlfriend will be launching her new jewellery line there next month.

The formula has garnered Ross a US \$25-million-a-year business, a place on the Los Angeles Times' "100 most powerful" in southern California for controlling the "celebrity fashion machine," and he's turned the store into a tourist destination. In a legal action that exposed the quid pro quo underlying the machine, Ross sued a Us Weekly editor for not paying the bill for a private party held at the store. He claimed he had been guaranteed a two-page spread that didn't materialize. He also alleged the magazine had suppressed the Kitson logo in credits, captions or photographs, a snub that cost him an estimated US\$10,000 a week in lost publicity. All's been patched over, says Ross. Indeed, in January of this year, Us Weekly featured photographs of pop singer Britney Spears during her highly public breakdown during a 2 a.m. shopping spree at the store, which opened specially for her.



The Canadian outfitter Roots has also long parlayed celebrity associations with both athletes and performers--from Wayne Gretzky to Jessica Biel and Justin Timberlake. Recently, Paris Hilton was photographed in a Roots "Stop Global Warming" leather bracelet, and **Catherine Zeta-Jones was shot carrying a Roots Midtown Slide bag** on the New York set of an upcoming movie, *Rebound*. "We like celebrated people wearing our product," says Roots' co-founder Michael Budman. "We encourage them. We're not throwing crazy money at people. But we definitely give people product when it's appropriate and when we feel it's appreciated." Hilton, who's said to collect six figures to show up at Las Vegas clubs, wasn't paid a dime for shopping at the store, he says. "She loves Roots and sweats. Look, that really helps the brand. Paris Hilton is probably one of the most popular figures in pop culture." Celebrity endorsement of a specific product does register in a spike in sales, he says. "And if you get a great item in Us Weekly or People on a celebrity, that's the formula for success. It can take it into the stratosphere."

Debra Goldblatt, a publicist with Toronto's rock-it promotions whose clients included the Drake Hotel, Lobby Restaurant, and Hazelton Hotel, says celebrity association is crucial. "We strategically invite certain people to visit stores, hotels, restaurants and then tell [the press]," she says.

The ever-increasing clout of gossip columnists and bloggers reflects a bovine public eager to imitate celebrities who have become products themselves, able to earn more money for endorsement than performance. "The stigma that used to accompany making commercials has disappeared," says Joanna

Molloy of Rush & Molloy. "Just five years ago, any serious actor would be ashamed to do a commercial in the U.S.; they used to sneak off to Japan. But with the Internet, there's nowhere to hide."

Given the obsession with what stars purchase, it seems only reasonable some are paid to shop. "I'd say about 20 people are being paid to shop and those people are tabloid fodder who are tabloid friendly," says Lavandeira of PerezHilton.com. "Her career isn't hot, but Lindsay Lohan gets paid to shop."

Ross blames the managers and publicists who get a cut: "They're pimping these people out far too much," he says. Lavandeira, whose own fame has resulted in a clothing line and record imprint at Warner Records, sees it as smart business. "Look at Las Vegas," he says. "There's so much competition you have to do whatever it takes to stand out, get noticed, and get people into your venue. Even if they're paying someone like Kevin Federline 10K to 15K to show up somewhere, he may not draw a big crowd but he'll draw a lot of media."

He believes the concept of "selling out" is outdated, noting that even indie musicians do it. "Feist, one of my favourite Canadians, sold out big-time with iTunes, but it didn't seem like she sold out because it really helped boost her career. People make music because they want people to hear it."



"Celebrities have become part of the business plan and the business model," observes Sam Frier, a New York City publicist and cofounder of The Hall Company, whose clients include high-profile restaurants Bouley and Dos Caminos. Boldface mention in **the New York Post's Page Six, the Mount Sinai of gossip**, can have definite financial consequences, he says, as can mention on certain high-profile blogs. "If a restaurateur is looking to open in Vegas, he wants Page Six name recognition; that will cinch the deal. Or if you want a better rent or better lease terms, you want it because it will guarantee to the landlord you'll be around." Julian Niccolini, a partner in New York's Four Seasons restaurant, has said a one-line mention in Page Six is of more value to him than a full-page advertisement in the paper, which costs US\$30,000. "Anybody can place an ad," says Frier. "And you don't want to be in their company."

"Getting your name into Page Six is gossip's equivalent of getting one's company listed on the New York Stock Exchange," says Shinan Giovani, the society columnist for the National Post, whose scoops have been picked up by the column and who's considered Canada's closest equivalent. The smallness of the Canadian gossip universe distresses publicists. "In my dream world, I'd love to see 10 columns like that," says Goldblatt of Giovani. The impact of a reference in his column can be measured two ways, she says: "From a marketing point of view, we quantify it through an ad value in a circulation rate: we calculate what it would cost to purchase that kind of ad mention in the National Post on a specific day, and how many people we are hitting. The second measure is response, both in website hits and mentions. So it does work; his mentions do push people to buy things and go places."

For publicists, the upcoming Toronto Film Festival, which brings an influx of boldface names, is like Christmas, says Candice Best of Best PR Boutique. "Every day is like 10." Cinema is secondary as newspaper writers are assigned to cover who was where, who ate where and who bought what. Goldblatt says she's regularly contacted by People and Us Weekly to serve up dish on who was where with whom. Getting product in gift bags that might end up in celebrities' hands is key, says Best. "That

alignment with celebrity and gossip is instant validity." Given the mass-market appropriation of celebrity gossip, a new measure of exclusivity has emerged: no gossip mentions. "I have several clients who want no kind of gossip press at all," says Frier. "They want to keep celebrities coming in. We tell no one, the staff is trained to tell no one, we obviously can't help it if somebody spots someone, but we don't force it and we don't sell it."

Meanwhile, Behrman is plotting how to publicize plainmary.com. "You want mention in anything with a nice-sized readership--New York Times, the New York Post, the New York Daily News. You want People, you want People.com, you want MSNBC, anything that's going to drive traffic to an e-commerce site. You'd love to see it get to Canada, Australia, the U.K.--anywhere English-speaking," he says. In a baby-obsessed culture in which pregnancy is viewed as a good career move, he holds the ultimate bait. "You're talking to someone who has five pregnancies nobody knows about," he says. "I can tell you Uma Thurman is pregnant." What she's ordering, however, he's saving for Page Six.