

Pharm Aid

FOUR OUT OF FIVE TALENT AGENTS AGREE:
CELEBS ARE STAR DRUG PUSHERS BY ROBERT ITO

THE PROSPECTS HAVE BEEN whittled down to 16. *Temptation Island* host Mark Walberg is a possibility; so are Fabio and *Smallville* star Tom Welling. *NYPD Blue*'s Henry Simmons is a front-runner. At a weekly staff meeting of Celebrity Connection, agents pore over head shots of young male actors and athletes, looking for a spokesperson for Xenadrine EFX, a weight-loss supplement.

"They want, like, 'hot cop/detective' on a current show," says Terry Merrill, the agent handling the account. It's an easy gig. No commercials, no personal appearances—the celebrity just needs to pose for a photo, which will be made into a life-size cutout and placed at discount-store check stands. He won't even have to use the product, which its manufac-

turers claim to be "the single most effective fat-loss, performance-enhancing supplement ever created!" "None of these people need to lose weight," says Merrill. "We're paying them to give us a picture so we can put it on display."

Celebrity Connection, which was founded in 1981, makes most of its revenue lining up stars to appear in special network programming—say, Gary Coleman and "that robot girl from *Small Wonder*" for a VH1 '80s retrospective. But it is in a little-known niche market that Celebrity Connection is an industry leader. It finds famous pitchmen to discuss their ailments or hawk drugs and surgical procedures for pharmaceutical companies and health-related nonprofits.

A decade ago this business hardly exist-

ed. The Food and Drug Administration's 1997 decision to allow drug manufacturers to sell directly to consumers changed all that and cleared the way for people like Joan Lunden and Rafael Palmeiro to hype Claritin and Viagra on national TV.

With drug-advertising dollars nearly tripling in the past five years, finding celebrity spokespeople is now a lucrative business. Recent Celebrity Connection clients include AIDS Project Los Angeles and the March of Dimes, and the company maintains a database of 10,000 celebrities that notes who has what

disease and who supports what medical cause. It recently renewed Delta Burke's contract to promote the antidepressant Effexor XR. According to founder Barry Greenberg, Celebrity Connection has received queries from "every pharmaceutical company I can think of."

Years ago, when celebrities discussed their medical problems on TV or made an appearance at a muscular dystrophy fund-raiser, money rarely changed hands. "Quite often you have to pay them now," says company president Bob Miller. The rate often runs \$20,000 a day and up, though some stars are willing to appear at benefits in exchange for Banana Republic gift certificates, say, or tickets to Vail. "Every day I get calls—'We're a children's hospital in Des Moines. We read about you. Can you help us?'" says Miller. "I ask them what their budget is, and they tell me they don't have any mon- ▶▶

▶▶ them, 'Well, that's why not every nonprofit has a celebrity.'"

The shift, says Greenberg, began in 1999 with Bob Dole, who received an undisclosed sum to discuss "men's health issues" from Pfizer, the makers of Viagra. "When he started talking about his limp dick, the floodgates opened," he says. "If the almost-president of the United States can go on national television and talk about erectile dysfunction, what can't you talk about?"

Celebrity Connection's offices are in a nondescript building in Mid Wilshire. The conference room, like the rest of the work spaces, is bathed in Gymboree colors—pinks and blues and yellows. "This is the house that Nick at Nite and TV Land built," says Greenberg, referring to the company's two largest clients. At meetings Miller is the all-business, buttoned-down guy. Greenberg, who sports a shaved head and goatee, is the most apt to rip on celebrities. "Our clients are the pharmaceutical companies, not the celebrities," he says.

At today's meeting the agents, women in their twenties, discuss possible hosts for an annual cerebral palsy telethon. "Last year Tom Bosley did it, and [the telethon people] were not happy," says one. "Who's Tom Bosley?" asks another. The shortlist this year includes Dixie Carter (*Designing Women*), Laura San Giacomo (*Just Shoot Me*), and Donny Osmond. "I'm almost a hundred percent sure that Dixie Carter's brother died of CP, and Laura San Giacomo has a child with CP," says a third. What about Donny? "He has no connection. They just love Donny Osmond."

Greenberg admits that attracting top celebrities can be tough. "There is no day rate you can give Tom Cruise," he says, "that will be worth him telling the world he has polyps in his colon." But plenty of other, well, lower-level celebrities—company agents pointedly avoid using terms like *B-list*—have made themselves available. After all, a little fame goes a long way outside celebrity-saturated cities like L.A. "In Peoria," says Greenberg, "we can bring actors who haven't been on a television series in 20 years, and people are thrilled to be around them." (L.A.)

L.A. MOMENT



CONTENTION JUNCTION: Two Orthodox families cross Chandler Boulevard on their way to temple. Gerard Burkhart shot the former Red Car tracks in North Hollywood as part of a documentary project on L.A. neighborhoods. The MTA has approved the incorporation of the stretch into the "Chandler Busway," a 14-mile high-speed transit line that would connect Woodland Hills and North Hollywood. A local group representing home owners—including many Orthodox residents—is appealing the decision.

