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The Business of Cause Marketing: A Conversation with Judi Ketcik

Judi Ketcik's career plan was initially towards corporate management, but her volunteer experience for the Ronald McDonald House Charities led her to the business of philanthropy. Her path to this work mirrored a societal shift towards volunteerism and ethical consumerism, in which most major companies affiliate with philanthropic endeavors. Now Judi Ketcik is a partner of the Los Angeles-based cause marketing and media group CK&D, which was founded in 2010. She often pairs organizations such as the American Heart Association (AHA) and Easter Seals (an international charitable organization that assists people living with autism and other special needs) with celebrities to increase awareness for their causes and new campaigns. Ketcik and her company function as the middleman in celebrity-driven

charitable campaigns, working to establish catchy, pop-culture driven messages. Ketcik's strategy is rooted in a synthesis of a corporate mindset and pop culture acumen. Celebrities, companies and charities all appear to benefit from positive publicity and branding to promote worthy causes. Ketcik and her team create viral campaigns such as the AHA's Hands Only CPR video, starring *The Hangover* (2009) star and medical doctor Ken Jeong. We sat down with Ketcik in her West Hollywood office to talk about what led her to this niche area of expertise, working both within and outside the entertainment industry, the importance of online marketing rooted in social media, and the rise of the socially conscious individual pervasive throughout American mainstream society today.

"This interview was edited for clarity and brevity."

SM: What's your background like? How did you embark on your current profession in cause marketing?

JK: Honestly, I am very lucky; I started because I literally was a volunteer at the Ronald McDonald House. The agency I worked for in Chicago, Golin/Harris, has the longest holding record of the McDonald's account, and part of that is Ronald McDonald House Charities, and my firm was in this awkward place where nobody at the national level had any experience volunteering with the Ronald McDonald House. And here I was, in that I had legitimate volunteer experience at the Ronald McDonald House, and so my predecessor asked me to join the account. [At that time] I was working on all kinds of corporate accounts and I said "No, why would I want to do charity work?" I thought my career was going to be in corporate communications in which I would tell CEOs what they're going to do. And my predecessor sat me down, and I thank him every day of my life, and he said to me, "You don't understand, you are talking about the biggest brand in the world, what about this are you not getting? And you get to help kids." The [Ronald

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McDonald] charity runs like a marketing agency, but [it is] doing really good work, and having huge success all around the world. It was a very exciting time, because McDonald's was opening charities in countries all over the world and it is literally the largest and probably the most impactful charity helping sick kids.

SM: How did working for Ronald McDonald influence your work ethos and strategies when you started CK&D?

JK: After some time I realized that this cause marketing was how I wanted to build my career. The thing about McDonald's was because of the company's strength, I had access to talent, so I did things with five presidents of the United States and celebrities like Michael Jordan and Garth Brooks, so lots of big names helped us propel our message. And I had the resources I needed because I was in a marketing firm, and really that's what Ronald McDonald is, so I had the power to do a lot of good. I had the opportunity to come out here [to L.A.] to work for the entertainment industry and start work on great causes, like colon cancer with Katie Couric and the Stand Up to Cancer initiative. After the experience with the Ronald McDonald House, I never looked back.

SM: You became a part of this socially conscious era, but America also became a part of it at the same time.

JK: If you look today, compared to twenty years ago, if you are not doing some kind of cause marketing in your business, I don't know how you're surviving. I think our company is in a unique space because we are that cross between entertainment and a large charity wanting to do something. The entertainment connection propels us on a national stage and we can have very high-level partnerships with mayors, with the president, with whomever that might be, we can have very high-level relationships, which ultimately means that we can get more done.

FH: When companies come to you, what do they bring? Do they bring a cause; do they bring a direction to it?

JK: Sometimes. With the AHA and the CPR campaign [in 2011], the AHA came in with a goal to train people with hands-only CPR. It wanted a corporate sponsor that could help build its visibility, but it had never before had a corporate sponsor donate money to propel the initiative on a national basis. The AHA had a message: "You don't need to know mouth to mouth, just call 911 and push hard and fast to the tune of 'Stayin' Alive' [by the Bee Gees]." The organization wanted to deliver that message more broadly, and that's where our company's [CK&D's] creative juices come in. The AHA discovered "Stayin' Alive" but weren't using it. We negotiated a deep discount to get the song--they were looking at \$100,000 we were looking at \$2,500. So a big, big, difference, but that's because we know how to negotiate. We created the John Travolta modern white suit takeoff. We cast everything like a movie--and we knew Ken Jeong had four movies coming out and he was a doctor, and was also able to deliver something very funny. We enlisted a *Saturday Night Live* writer for [a] more creative [script]. And then we helped the AHA outline what it needed to communicate to get money to propel the campaign.

SM: That's incredible. You're like a Swiss army knife.

JK: Yeah, fun stuff. It's very strategic. We made the CPR video in two days, and we had two million people looking at it. And it was very shareable and popular; as a result, the AHA received a \$4 million gift to propel that initiative and create a mobile disco truck that went around the country and then they secured an additional \$8 million gift to continue that effort to teach people hands-only CPR. But when

they gave us the subject, "hands-only CPR," we had to think, "Do people really care? How can we make it interesting?"

EH: Have you seen any changes, especially in the last five years, particularly with youth involvement with social media?

JK: It's hard to measure, but I think it's clear that on social media things are more shareable, even if they are targeted to an older audience, and a lot of our health issues are by nature of age (you get heart disease or Alzheimer's later). So sometimes the strategy is to go to the children to get to the parents.

EH: In addition to the work you can distribute via the internet, how does CK&D use more traditional media methods, such as public-service announcements or activist-inspired documentaries, in cause marketing campaigns?

JK: We are at the level where we talk to CEOs to get them what they want. We partnered Easter Seals with the Glenn Campbell documentary coming out; as a result, they've gotten major donors who did not know that the Easter Seals were in the caregiving space. So if people see the film and want to give their money because caregiving matters to them, they will give it to Easter Seals. That's really our end game. The Easter Seals could have used any documentary but everyone knows who Campbell is. We, as a company, have to see the right opportunities and understand how they connect.

EH: How has the culture of philanthropy changed specifically in LA, the receptiveness of individuals & studios?

JK: Honestly I think people are more thoughtful in general about how important that component of their persona is to their own careers. There is more of a strategy in general. If you look at all the talent agencies, ten years ago they didn't have foundations, today they all do. Really the purpose isn't to raise money or give a lot of money away, it's really to consult, it's almost like a service within their agencies to consult celebrities on what [could be] their causes, based on their interests. Someone might have a parent with Alzheimer's, so Alzheimer's becomes her interest. Someone might have a mother or father with heart disease, so that becomes his interest. But the foundation helps consult and identify the right charitable causes that would be keeping with the celebrity's branding. I think the Hollywood community as a whole [is invested in this process] by the mere fact that the community is made up of storytellers and has always been doing branding.

EH: So Hollywood media makers are more concerned with incorporating social justice issues?

JK: Yeah, sometimes storytelling has no agenda, but everyone has an agenda to entertain, but if you have a story to tell, your agenda is that you want people to feel compassionate, for someone who is locked up who shouldn't be locked up, or whatever the case may be.

SM: I was thinking about it in terms of all of us having something we care about, and thinking if only I could do something, I could change this, but celebrities can.

JK: Well everybody can.

SM: But to a larger extent.

EH: Not everyone has a million Twitter followers. But not everyone with a million Twitter followers is

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obligated to try to change the world, either.

JK: One of the things that is a misperception from the public is that these celebrities [do not] have "real jobs"... If actors choose to support a cause or not support a cause, it really is a matter of their choice, and it is not for anybody else really to be judging why they do or don't do something.

SM: How much has cause marketing changed with social media as a primary communication delivery?

JK: It's expanded our thinking of where we get our eyeballs. For me it's always the same thing: how do we get eyeballs? If we get eyeballs we can get people to care about our initiative or issue and hopefully that translates into more people giving, it's kind of inevitable. If you [the public] don't know who we are, how will you know to support us? But if you do know who we are, and like what we are doing, of course you're going to support. So [social media] expanded ways to get eyeballs to our causes and to me it's not one or the other [type of marketing], it's how do you use that [social media] too?

SM: How have you had to adapt to creative challenges posed by the wave of different marketing platforms?

JK: Strategically, social media forces us to create new kinds of content. Online, I don't know what the number is, but something like 100 hours of video are posted to YouTube every minute. How can one two-minute video garner two million views in two days with so much other content? You have to be a lot smarter and a lot more irreverent to get the level of share hold and so sometimes it is hard for clients to understand our tactics. The AHA didn't want the Push Hard and Fast Girls [scantily-clad female helpers] in the Ken Jeong video but you know what, they bring eyeballs, as much as I hate to admit it. We have to push a little bit more with our clients, and a lot of our charities have a difficult time with that. But these challenges give us more to think about.

EH: How do you bring around a charity that might have concerns over social media or video content?

JK: You just try your hardest to convince them that you're right. And sometimes beg for forgiveness afterwards. We kind of did the Ken Jeong video on the sly; I'm not going to lie. The AHA didn't want it and didn't know who he was and literally when the whole program was done, the timing was off; we had to go back and sell it to their management. And we asked, "Is there another actor who is a medical doctor? Who else are we going to get?" You have to bring the charity on and build trust that you know what you're doing. If a charity doesn't know who [the celebrity is], the charity thinks the celebrity isn't relevant, which isn't true.

SM: Is this negotiation part of the job too, then?

JK: That's once again our skillset—the AHA didn't know Jeong was coming out with four blockbuster movies that were going to hit at the same time as the video. If someone starts to type up Ken Jeong [on Google] at the same time, guess what pops up? That video. It's helping charities see the relevance of timing. And everyone wants Julia Roberts. Guess what? There's only one of her, and you are not going to get her. So we see the rising star who is relevant and who is a good choice for this project at this time.

EH: How tied into pop culture do you and your team find that you have to be in order to stay on top?

JK: Very. We read magazines, watch television, we have a list of every TV show we know coming inside and out. You got to know that stuff. And we know beyond that. Who is writing, head writing, producing, you

got to know that stuff.

SM: Do you think part of your pop culture acumen is the LA-ness of it all? How much does the city impact your business?

JK: For our purposes, we have to be here. In our business, our entry point for our clients is that they want some connection to the entertainment industry. Can you do cause marketing and not have this? Sure. Pop culture gets our results. So for us, we have to be here, that's our point of differentiation.

SM: Do you also battle with the stigma of the LA-ness of your line of work that the charitable drive is not genuine?

JK: Yes, exactly, or [conversely] that people don't think we can do anything beyond pairing charities with celebrities. I'm bragging here but we met with Easter Seals last week, and it happened with AHA, and they said they'd been looking for a firm like us [a firm that creates entertainment-driven campaigns for charitable companies with a pop culture message] for twenty-five years. They could not find what we do—we don't guess if we can make something happen, and we have a strong sense of what is the right thing to do and how is it really going to bring results. I don't want to do anything that isn't going to have results. And everyone here is passionate about those results. Our job is, when it's appropriate, leveraging the entertainment industry. It's not everything we do. Everyone wants to be connected to Hollywood but doesn't want to admit it, so it's a very interesting balance.

EH: There's an assumption that only the powerful can help. And especially these social media online campaigns open it up for more middle class individuals to contribute. Can you talk about this era of social consciousness, and how it's changed within twenty years?

JK: It's changed significantly. What was it the Super Bowl two years ago (2012) where every ad was connected to a cause? Have you ever talked to a marketer who works at a P&G (Proctor & Gamble)? All they care about are the numbers. And they wouldn't be doing it if it weren't helping the numbers. Look at Dove, look at Tide; every consumer product is working with a cause. Look at Pink [breast cancer awareness] now—all over everything. Every major sports team. But where the sophistication has come in is that the consumers are asking, "How much are you giving?" So they know, and they decide, your product is pink, you're giving ten cents, you're not pink, you're giving nothing, and you're going to pick the pink. Which product would you pick, when there are two products on the shelf? If they have that label giving something away, I'm going to get that product over any other product, right? So consumption has changed, but consumers also do want to know the dollar amount. Consumers are getting more sophisticated in understanding how much a company is really giving.

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