

# Want to turn heads at CES? Hire a celebrity (Update)

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Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson appears at the SMS Audio booth during the International CES Wednesday, Jan. 7, 2015, in Las Vegas. (AP Photo/John Locher)

Driverless cars of the future. Every imaginable (and unimaginable) kind of smartphone case. The latest laundry technology, even. Acres of Las Vegas convention center floor packed with gadget demos and exhibitor booths. And 160,000 people milling about. So how can a company get noticed among all the noise?

"It doesn't hurt to have a Neil Young," said Pedram Abrari, executive vice president of technology for the rock legend's Pono Music startup, which aims to save music or at least what's become of it.

The celebrity touch. It's been a staple at the annual consumer electronics show known as International CES and this year is no different.

"I call myself an entrepretainer," quipped Nick Cannon, comedian and host of America's Got Talent and this year's "entertainment ambassador" for the gadget show. Cannon and retired NBA star and prolific product endorser Shaquille O' Neal appeared at a press conference for Monster, a company that primarily makes headphones and high-definition cables.

The 7-foot-1-inch O'Neal appeared briefly to pitch Monster's new waterproof floating speaker and engaged in some onstage hijinks: rubbing the head of the much shorter Monster executive who introduced him and then goading the executive to dance as he made up a beat—reminding the crowd that the speaker might be an ideal Spring Break party accessory.

Richard Ngo-Tran, Monster's marketing director, said O'Neal was first a friend of the company's leader, Noel Lee, and later lent his celebrity.

"He's a tech head," said Ngo-Tran. O'Neal offers ideas and wants to be involved in the products he pitches, even down to color swatches, and when the company asks, he willingly meets one-on-one with fans that double as retailers who might carry the product, Ngo-Tran said. "That's the thing that we love about him."

Elsewhere at CES, fans wrapped around the SMS Audio booth to get an autograph from rapper Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson who also is majority owner of the headphone company. Those in front all held smartphones and video cameras aloft to capture a glimpse. DJ Tiesto held court over

at Audiofly's event space and athletes added shine to booths of companies selling wearable fitness devices. Veteran Hollywood publicist Howard Bragman says fees paid to celebrities for promotional purposes at CES are generally in the mid-six figures and up, depending on the gadget, company and celebrity status.

It isn't always magic. Last year, Samsung debuted its curved televisions at CES on a giant stage with action filmmaker Michael Bay. Blaming the teleprompter after an awkward first few seconds on stage, Bay ultimately walked off without explanation after a Samsung executive asked him about the TVs. The onstage "meltdown" made headlines.



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This year Chevrolet hired Roem Baur, a San Francisco-based one-man blues band who auditioned on the latest season of music competition show *The Voice*, to entertain journalists at a press conference where the auto maker offered a peek at its latest Chevy Volt.

"We told him he can't play 'Mustang Sally'," joked Stuart Fowle, assistant communications manager for Chevrolet.

Baur seemed like an apt fit. His San Francisco home base has made him "friendly with all of the nerds," he said, referencing the CES crowd. And even before he was hired, Baur had rigged an old Corvette license plate from a 1970's era Stingray into a wooden box that he stomps on to mimic a kick-drum sound.

A celebrity endorsement can be "that little extra something," said Ashley Esqueda, a senior editor with technology review site CNET.com. Often they can be an enthusiastic voice to talk on the company's behalf, or at least fake the enthusiasm, and many are truly interested or invested in the technology, she said.

Take American Idol and radio personality Ryan Seacrest. He said he wasn't aiming to start a company with longtime friend and businessman Laurence Hallier but linked up when the two realized they had too many phones and wanted to combine the best of both—the iPhone's touchscreen and an attachable keyboard mounted to the bottom. If it sounds like a Blackberry fused with an iPhone, Blackberry thought so too, and sued, winning an injunction on the first design. That case is still in court. Seacrest and Hallier were back at CES with a second version, though, the Typo2.

"We started it as a way to solve our problem," he said in one of many back-to-back interviews held to pitch the product.

J.T. Ippolito, from Newport Beach, California, works for a company that manages businesses' online media presence. He also stood in line Wednesday to get a photo with 50 Cent to post on his websites. He says he appreciates the rapper's backstory and how he has parlayed his career into brand endorsements and businesses like SMS Audio.

"There's some you just know get paid to endorse it," he says of celebrities, but some, like 50 Cent, are personally invested and likely wouldn't want to ruin their own brand by being attached to a middling product.



Musician Neil Young speaks during a session at the International CES Wednesday, Jan. 7, 2015, in Las Vegas. Pedram Abrari, Pono Music's vice president, credits Young's involvement with the company's online Kickstarter campaign in raising more than \$6 million when it originally sought just \$800,000. (AP Photo/John Locher)

Melissa Zimmerman, 33, joined her husband Josh at CES for a single reason, to have rapper 50 Cent sign her green SMS Audio headphones and get a photo with the musician. "I've seen all his movies," she says. Her favorite 50 Cent song: "Candy Shop." Josh, a "moderate fan" of the rapper, says a celebrity endorsement can make a difference when weighing whether to buy something, especially if the famous person is personally related to the company. "When they put their name to something, it's really part of them."

Neil Young certainly isn't just a famous face shilling for a company. It's his company, his mission.

"I want music to make you feel. I want you to get goosebumps," he said as he slowly paced on a small stage in front of a crowd of reporters and fans Tuesday at a press conference to talk about the music player he promises will return a high-quality sound to songs.

"We have no money, so we have no marketing, only word of mouth," Young said. That's not entirely true, Young is the company's one-man marketing plan. Granted, he needed a little prompting to reveal some of the key points, that Pono Music's portable music player will go on sale Monday for \$399 in Fry's Electronics stores and independent record and audio stores.





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"I'm not concerned with having to hype it," Young said of the player. What matters is that music lovers hear it and notice the difference, he said. You may be able to recognize a song when you hear it online, "but can your soul recognize it?"

"I think we have a chance," he said.

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