

# Using Reference Groups in Green Communication

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*Abstract: In marketing practice using celebrities (especially actors/actresses, sportsmen and sportswomen and popular models) is a very typical and widely used technic. Nowadays there is a general expectation from the society that celebrities have to make contribution to the solution of social and environmental problems. It is obvious that these actions also mean remarkable part of the PR activities of stars. But using celebrities in profit-oriented green communication is costly and risky at the same time, while “up and down”-s are very typical in their reputation. I have chosen two women, an actress/TV hostess and a model/TV hostess as an example, with which I would like to turn the attention to two crucial elements: question of credibility and potential areas of using celebrities as reference group.*

*Keywords: reference group, celebrities, green marketing*

## 1 Introduction

On 31<sup>st</sup> of March on “Connect the World” on CNN I saw Ted Danson, the famous Emmy Award-winning American actor – well known as Sam Melone in Cheers - spoke about overfishing.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, he recently published a book - titled Oceana – on conservation of oceans. If somebody doesn’t know his life-story, perhaps he/she will be suspicious whether Mr. Danson is credible information source in connection with things threatening the life of oceans or not.

This motivated me to look around in our country, how we use celebrities in green communication.

From the 70’s we can experience the increasing interest of people towards environmentally friendly products. As the green segment of consumers has been

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<http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/world/2011/03/31/cotd.ted.danson.cnn?iref=allsearch>

able to indentified, firms recognized the business opportunity in selling green products. Unfortunately, at this time, due to the lack of clear regulation on green claims, companies used environmentally friendly product claims (like ozone-friendly) – even in cases when it has not been proven, or it was not true at all. As a consequence of the misleading green claims used during the last 30 years (called green washing), the role of independent certifications has increased. However, these institutions are impersonal, so they can only inform consumers but cannot form their attitude.

Usually in commercials we can find four differenet types of reference groups: experts, institutions, celebrities and everyday people.

The appearance of representatives of civil green organizations in advertisements is not typical, because for them it is vital to show their independence from business sector. Expertise and independency are the basis of their credibility. However, independent product tests made by them can have influential role in buying decisions.

As environmental claims (such as “bio”, “low energy consumption”) in connection with products are interesting for people mainly based on health or financial reasons, therefore doctors and engineers can be used effectively in green communication – but mostly as an informational source.

In marketing practice using celebrities (especially actors/actresses, sportsmen and sportswomen and popular models) is a very typical and widely used technic. Especially because products are more complex and there are numerous brands within one product category, making buying decisions needs simplification methods, such as relying on the advice or experiences of others. The other motivation is that the positive image of the celebrity can be converted as product attribute: for the majority of people being successful, attractive, unique is a positive message.

This paper is trying to highlight some important features of using celebrities as reference groups or persons in environmentally friendly communication.

## **2 Reference groups**

“Alluding to reference groups in persuasive attempts to market products and brands demonstrates the belief that reference groups expose people to behavior and lifestyles, influence self-concept development, contribute to the formation of values and attitudes and generate pressure for conformity to group norms.” (Bearden, Etzel, 1982, p.184) This citation summarizes the main motivation of experts examining different reference groups within marketing science. If we can

understand the effect of these groups better, we can use them effectively in commercials and in social marketing campaigns as well.

## 2.1. Types of reference groups

In the literature experts examine reference groups from different aspects. The most common aspects are membership, degree of influence and attractiveness of the group.

- (1) **Membership:** we don't have to be a member of a group for letting it influencing our values, attitude and behavior. However if we are members of a group, it can be formal (e.g. associations) or informal (e.g. neighbors). Moreover, positive membership can be real or virtual - based on the type of contact. The latter plays more important role as keeping contact via Internet is more and more common and cheaper.
- (2) **Degree of influence:** Primary reference groups (defined by Cooley, 1909) come with a great deal of influence—e.g., members of a fraternity, as it has few members and there is direct, personal relationship among them. In secondary reference groups there are more members, and membership is conditioned, therefore it tends to have somewhat less influence.
- (3) **Attractiveness:** We would like to be similar to the positive reference group and we want to differ from the negative reference group. According to Hawkins et al. (1986) attractiveness of a group is often more influential, than membership itself. The aspirational reference group term stands for the group with the desired values, norms and behavior, however the person is not the member of this group (yet). This group influences the purchase decisions significantly. There are two subgroups within this category: anticipated (with which a person has connection) and symbolic reference groups (no real chance for being the member of this group in the future). The other kind of group is the dissociative reference group which includes people who the person seeks to avoid or reject. According to Englis and Solomon (1995) knowledge from the dissociative group is full of stereotypes, therefore there is a great consensus on them, and not surprisingly, people can connect products less to this group.

From our point of view each aspect has important role. Although it is almost sure that an everyday people will not be the member of the group of celebrities, perhaps being environmental friendly can create the feeling of being the member of the informal group of green consumers and on this basis the star and an everyday person can be the member of the same group. The common pieces of behavior may reflect also to the similarity in their value-system. However, it can

work until only the minority of the society is green, so based on its behavior this group can be easily distinguished from other groups of the society.

It is obvious, that celebrities are typically viewed as aspirational reference group, but with symbolic features. Their significant influence on purchase decision also strengthen their usage in formulating the attitude of people toward environmentally friendly behavior.

## 2.2. Types of reference group influence

Park and Lessig (1977) identified – based on previous works - three different types of influences of reference groups: information, utilitarian and value-expressive influences.

- (1) **Information reference group influence:** Decision making needs information in appropriate quality and quantity. Although today a consumer is given too much information from advertisements and in general from several medium, but the credibility of these different sources are quite variant. Therefore consumers appreciate information given from credible sources such as reference groups.
- (2) **Utilitarian reference group influence:** "is reflected in attempts to comply with the wishes of others to achieve rewards or avoid punishments. If an individual feels that certain types of behavior will result in rewards or punishments from others and these outcomes are viewed as important, he or she will find it useful to meet the expectations of these significant others." (Park and Lessig, 1977. p. 184)
- (3) **Value-expressive reference group influence:** means the need for being psychologically associated with a group in two ways: to strengthen the self-image – in this case there is a consistency between image of the reference group and the desired self-image is necessary; the second way is when the reference group is simply attractive.

Celebrities basically can have information and value-expressive influence on others. The lack of direct, personal relationship with them prevent celebrities to have utilitarian influence on everyday people. However, among celebrities, the special, green life-style of some of them can be the base of closer friendships or the more frequent contact with each others – and like on the other areas of life, contacts, personal relationships are part of the financial wealth of a person as "personal capital".

In their study, Bearden and Etzel (1982) found significant differences in reference group influence between publicity and privately consumed products and between luxuries and necessities. According to their results, informational reference group influence has a significant role both in product and brand choices, and in general

the influences of reference group was higher in brand choices than in product choices.

However, from our point of view not only product and brand choices are vital, but general behavior norms and behavioral attitudes as well. Environmentally friendly behavior can be conscious or non-conscious (in this meaning: motivated by other reasons, such as financial or health issues or can be the part of socialization, so people get used to the behavior, this is a routine in their life, they don't examine its basis.) If fans tend to copy the style and behavior of their icon, perhaps they don't do it consequently, or in some cases they can not afford to do or buy the same thing the star does or has. Fortunately, being green sometimes means, that you cut down on your expenses, so it lets lots of ways to follow a really green star.

### **3 Some examples of using celebrities in green communication**

Famous people are usually successful ones, and it is always attractive. Success can be easily associated with talent, persistence, money, and uniqueness. Therefore they can become opinion-leaders, so they can form directly or indirectly the behavior of others.

There are different topics which can be easily supported by stars as it can be compatible with their own life-style: such as being vegetarian (as a part of their never-ending diet), or in general support healthy life-style, wearing no fur (as wearing fur-coat was the sign of their wealth, so they can protest on the way they deny to wear it- although in this change the aggressive actions of civil green groups, who pour it with paint played a significant role), and being animal-friendly. However, giving up glamorous life-style and consume less, or using public transport can be more difficult for them.

Using a celebrity may be useful to turn the attention of people to the environmental problem. A celebrity can turn the spotlight on green topics easier than an expert based on two things: first, celebrities are in the center of people interest, so people seek information on them which means fundamentally higher involvement from the side of the audience. It helps to spread over information effectively. Second, there is a chance to use the positive image and personal traits of the famous person in order to be associated with the product or service promoted. Additionally, there is an interaction between the success of the promoted environmentally friendly product and the image of the reference person.

However, we must consider the difference between profit-oriented commercials and social marketing campaigns. In connection with the latter, nowadays there is a general expectation from the society that celebrities have to make contribution to

the solution of social and environmental problems in forms of donations, charities, volunteer work etc. It is obvious that these actions are also remarkable part of the PR activities of stars. On the other hand, using celebrities in profit-oriented green communication is costly and risky at the same time, while “up and down”-s are very typical in their reputation.

Here – regarding the very limited length of this article - I would like to mention two examples – of course, without being exhaustive. I have chosen two women, an actress/TV hostess and a model/TV hostess as an example. With these cases, I would like to turn the attention to two crucial elements: question of credibility and potential areas of using celebrities as reference group.

### **3.1 Anikó Für popularizes environmentally friendly behavior**

Anikó Für is an actress, and has been also TV hostess of “Toehold green” environmentally friendly TV program from 2001. This TV program tries to show green initiatives, environmentally friendly solutions and natural worth.

She tries to hold herself up as an environmentally friendly role-model for the everyday people. As she stated: “apart from the fact that I try to live on the way to harm the environment as less as it is possible, namely I use energy efficient light bulbs, collect waste separately, I try to save water and electricity, and I attempt to buy consciously; I try to use my relative reputation to serve this most important issue.”<sup>2</sup>

The positive features of her words are: (1) she is consequent as her tasks in media and in work are not controversial, (2) she practices what she preaches and (3) her enumeration of different activities shows that there are small steps which can be done by an everyday person. Green marketing literature calls it perceived consumer effectiveness, defined by Berger and Corbin “... as an estimate of the extent to which personal consumption activities contribute to a solution to the problem” (Berger and Corbin, 1992.:80). In other words this is the extent to which the consumer believes that his/her efforts alone can make a difference.

Contrary to these positive elements, we can find some questionable part in the interview from which I have cited above. Anikó Für mentioned: “..if it rested on me, I would rather call it (*environmental protection*) people-protection, because we protect environment basically for ensuring life conditions of people”.<sup>3</sup> This is the typical anthropocentric view of environmental protection, and there can be a more green world-view, namely deep ecology and ecocentrism. From this point of view, every part of our natural environment has an intrinsic value therefore should be protected. And it is also argued that term “environment” is artificially created

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pink.hu/sztarok/egy-erdo-kozepen-volna-jo-lakni-2003542>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pink.hu/sztarok/egy-erdo-kozepen-volna-jo-lakni-2003542>

by humans as an external part of our life, but it is a false thought as we are definitely the part of it. As a consequence of this logic, people are not the owners or guardians of the world.

The main challenge for a person who would like to be - or undertakes the responsibility to be - a role-model, or an opinion leader is to be and stay credible, which means consequent behavior.

In an interview<sup>4</sup>, Anikó Für said she tried to and she wanted to stand away from this world – this statement refers to the consumption-centred, materialistic features of our century.

“Interviewer: Does your green-maniac come from this point of view?”

A.F.: No. I bring this from home, my mother was also a ‘green-maniac’. Environmentally friendly education is my mission.

.Interviewer: Actually you would be a celebrity, but you are deliberately against it.

A.F.: Definitely. To my mind, lots of people are convinced that I do something wrong, because I do not take part in certain TV programs and series.

Interviewer: Were you called but you didn’t come?

A.F.: Sure. But I don’t judge those who take part in shows like this. Simply, there are differences in our point of view. I don’t care about things like that.”<sup>5</sup>

Anikó Für also appeared – at least virtually - at “Green Point” exhibition in May, 2009 at Millenáris. The interactive exhibition popularised the environmentally friendly attitude, showing the treasures of our planet systematically. The four basic elements of the earth (water, fire, soil and air) were personified by prominent persons – Anikó personified water (her zodiac is the Fish), which meant the narration of film about the utility of water and its role in Greek mythology.<sup>6</sup>

Summarizing her role in green communication, we can say, she is a credible source of environmentally friendly thoughts. Her consciousness is partly the result of her socialization, and there is no sign of inconsistency in her life, the interviews given and her work. She completes both informational and value-expressive influences with her appearances. Her reputation and success as an actress may be borrowed by the marketing campaign of green products. However, I am sure that those firms, who would like to use her as a reference person in their campaign, beforehand have to convince her really about their greenness.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.vasarnapihirek.hu/cikk\\_8704](http://www.vasarnapihirek.hu/cikk_8704)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.vasarnapihirek.hu/cikk\\_8704](http://www.vasarnapihirek.hu/cikk_8704)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.alternativenergia.hu/zoldpont-kornyezetvedelmi-kiallitas-nyilik-a-millenarison/3893>

### 3.2 Zita Görög is everywhere

My other example is Zita Görög, who is a model having two children, and TV hostess of Trendsetter program which is a competition for new fashion designers. In my opinion, her situation is really full of challenges and contradictions as according to green activists following fashion is really a resource wasting thing, therefore basically not accepted as part of green behavior. She says, she will make effort to let these new designers know more about environmentally friendly designs. It was planned, that different exercises will be given to the candidates in relation to environmental friendliness and ethical design.<sup>7</sup> “Of course we would like to motivate gently not only the candidates but the audience also to open their mind to this new concept. In my opinion recently we can give these new thoughts only drop by drop, we should not be too overwhelming. People don’t want to leave their comfort zone.”<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly, Zita Görög also tries to dissolve this contradiction in the interview mentioned above. She says, overproduction is the biggest problem so we have to learn to cut down on our needs: “It is possible to be fashionable, but it doesn’t mean, we have to buy every day, or every week, or even in every month new clothes. We don’t have to give up vacations neither, but we should not overdo it.....But if fashion is already the part of our world, why should we not raise up those young talents, who deserve it?”<sup>9</sup>

Beside her TV appearance, she is ready to take part environmentally friendly events, such as the campaign of “Buy Nothing Day”. This is an international day for protesting against overconsumption – it has already kept in 65 countries including Hungary. The aim of the campaign is to turn the attention of people to the negative effect of their buying behavior, especially in connection with Christmas – therefore the campaign is typically take place in late November.<sup>10</sup> In 2010, the everyday people could meet Zita Görög on one of Budapest’s most crowded squares, and she stuck down their purses with a special tape made for this occasion.

Zita Görög also took part in recycling supporter campaign of Öko-Pannon PLC in 2008. Credible celebrities –a journalist, a musician, a sportsman, a reporter and a

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<sup>7</sup> In order to check it, I watched one episode from Trendsetter on 21<sup>st</sup> of April, 2011 on channel TV2, however there was no word about environmentally friendliness.

<sup>8</sup>[http://velvet.hu/celeb/hcdb/napcelebje/2010/10/07/gorog\\_zita\\_a\\_divat\\_a\\_xxi.\\_szazad\\_cirkusza/](http://velvet.hu/celeb/hcdb/napcelebje/2010/10/07/gorog_zita_a_divat_a_xxi._szazad_cirkusza/)

<sup>9</sup>[http://velvet.hu/celeb/hcdb/napcelebje/2010/10/07/gorog\\_zita\\_a\\_divat\\_a\\_xxi.\\_szazad\\_cirkusza/](http://velvet.hu/celeb/hcdb/napcelebje/2010/10/07/gorog_zita_a_divat_a_xxi._szazad_cirkusza/)

<sup>10</sup> <http://tisztajovo.hu/2010/11/24/%E2%80%9Ene-vasarolj-semmit%E2%80%9D-napi-kampany-gorog-zitaval/>

model – wore dresses made of waste – to demonstrate that garbage can be useful and reusable. Beside their photographs, on the printed advertisements each celebrities commented their own opinion or credo on importance of environmentally conscious lifestyle and its connection with their own profession, and the level of their commitment. Zita’s text emphasizes the importance of responsible behavior, not especially environmentally friendliness. “... Now I feel, that most important thing is to change on the quality of our life and I think, everybody sees and feels that world nowadays can not retain the gentleness, patience and love our children need. Years ago I gave up smoking, I drink no alcohol at all. These were my first steps. I have changed substitute activities into actions. Now I separate waste, and I think this is the minimum I can take”<sup>11</sup>

„Modellként is megválogattam a munkáimat, amennyire az ügynökeim engedték, de édesanyaként már nem befolyásolnak. Most azt érzem a legfontosabbnak, hogy változtassunk az életünk minőségén, azt gondolom, mindenki látja és érzi, hogy a Világ ebben a formájában nem őrzi már azt a finomságot, türelmet, szeretetet amire gyermekeinknek is szüksége van. Évekkel ezelőtt leszoktam a dohányzásról és alkoholt sem fogyasztok egyáltalán. Nekem ezek voltak az első lépéseim. A pótcselekvéseket tettekre váltottam. Ma már szelektíven gyűjtöm a hulladékot, és azt gondolom ez a minimum, amit megtehetek.”  
**Görög Zita modell, műsorvezető**

ruha és hajdísz – újrahasznosított papír  
 ruha díszítő csikjai – italos kartondoboz  
 nyaklánc – műanyag reklámtáska  
 kisfiú pelenkája – italos kartondoboz  
 alumíniumfólia rétege

**ÖKO-PANNON**  
 www.okopannon.hu  
 A HULLADÉK ÉRTÉK

« vissza a főoldalra

Figure 1

“Waste is value” campaign of Öko-Pannon Nonprofit PLC.

Source: [http://www.okopannon.hu/kampany/2008/gorog\\_zita.php](http://www.okopannon.hu/kampany/2008/gorog_zita.php)

As it has been proven by lots of studies, gender and number of children are in general positive correlation with environmentally friendly behavior. Women have more positive attitude toward nature (e.g. Raudsepp, 2001; Roper 1990), and families with more children correlates with greater intention to pay more for

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.okopannon.hu/kampany/2008/gorog\\_zita.php](http://www.okopannon.hu/kampany/2008/gorog_zita.php)

environmentally friendly products (e.g. Laroche et al, 2001). It seems, that being a mum changes short-term myopia to long-term view, and health issues are becoming more important.

In the “Buy Nothing Day” campaign Zita’s role was mainly informative, with her own contribution, the event got wider publicity, and her personal actions potentially attracted more people to take part in this campaign. In the “waste is value” campaign Zita appears as a role-model, her statement would like to form the values of other people as well. Letting her son taking part in the campaign sends the message that she gives the chance for the audience to look inside her private life, so it gives higher credibility to her statements.

Beside the non-profit sector, there are examples of using celebrities for popularizing green behavior or attitude from the business sector as well. Zita Görög also took part in the campaign of EDF DÉMÁSZ, which is one of the biggest actor on energy market in Hungary. Their slogan is “the future-friendly energy”<sup>12</sup>, and to spread this image to the public, they launched a PR campaign in 2010.

The PR campaign of EDF DÉMÁSZ called “Time capsule” has chosen Zita Görög and Attila Vajda (Olympic champion in canoeing) as its patrons. The time capsule itself is a statue made from pixelconcrete, and the energy collected by a solarcell on it is used for its lightning by LED. The aim of the campaign was to pay attention to environmental problems and the importance of future and long-term thinking by collecting messages to 2030. Anybody could write down or draw his/her promise, what he or she will do for protecting the environment and for sustainable development in the future. The first part of the campaign has started on 15<sup>th</sup> February and ended on 6<sup>th</sup> of May, 2010. The time capsule has been placed in Szeged, in front of the headquarters of EDF DÉMÁSZ with the almost 15000 messages – half of it sent from children, and it will be open again in May, 2030. Twenty years later the messages will be sent back to those who wrote them.<sup>13</sup>

Zita Görög believes in the power of role model more than of any explanations. Her own message was formulated like this: “I use less energy and water, I do not throw away garbage, I don’t smoke, if it is possible, I use public transport or I go on foot, I do not print out paper and if it is possible, I try to choose Hungarian products. And I message to our planet that if in 2030 our planet will be still livable and we won’t ruin it totally and there will be a chance for resumption, please take us with love and we will take care of you!”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> According to their report, in 2009 only 7% of the electricity they supply was made from renewable energy. <https://www.edfdemasz.hu/servlet/download?type=file&id=1591>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.idokapszula.com/aktualis>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.alternativenergia.hu/idokapszulaban-uzen-a-jovonek-gorog-zita-es-vajda-attila/15037>

Beyond business sector and non-profit organizations, government can use celebrities as well, to change or form the attitude of people. In March, 2009 the Ministry of Environment and Water launched its movement for helping to spread green thoughts over the whole population by appointing Environment Ambassadors. They tried to select people who can stand for sensitivity and responsibility toward environmental issues. They asked writers, musicians, actors and actresses, sportsmen, a meteorologist and Zita Görög, as a model to be the first ones in this movement.<sup>15</sup> These people are for showing that every person can do something for the environment in order to avoid potential catastrophes in the future.

### **Conclusions**

It seems that both business and non-profit sector use celebrities, popular people in green communication, but the latter area is more wide-spread.

Until now, the main motivations of these communications are to turn the attention of people to special environmental problems and to emphasize the significance of the environmentally friendly actions of one person. Celebrities occur in social marketing campaigns, because at this stage, planting green thoughts is important. On the other hand, perhaps the purchase power and the size of green consumer segment is still not big enough to be able to meet the expenses of using celebrities in marketing campaigns.

However, despite its success, there may be danger in using celebrities in green communication as well. Using celebrities can send a message to people that being green is something unique, and only rich and successful people can afford green lifestyle. Another problem is the contradictory lifestyle of celebrities and their special environmentally friendly actions. For examples, lot of stars have their own jet, although it is widely known that airplanes pollutes the air at a very high extent.

It is worth to consider, that sometimes it seems that being green serves the better image of the celebrity as well, so there is a mutual advantage from the collaboration for the environmentally friendly product or campaign.

Some people think that being green is fashionable. If celebrities can make environmentally friendly behavior more popular, it would be great, but if they make it only trendy, fashionable, it can be risky, as fashion – by definition - will be outdated soon.

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<sup>15</sup> [http://nol.hu/tud-tech/gorog\\_zita\\_es\\_fenyo\\_ivan\\_nagykovet\\_lesz](http://nol.hu/tud-tech/gorog_zita_es_fenyo_ivan_nagykovet_lesz)

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