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Susan Ashbrook shares secrets of celebrity dressing in new book

By [Booth Moore](#)

Why have we seen a dozen paparazzi photos in the past couple of weeks of celebrities wearing Current/ Elliott's leopard-print 'Stiletto' jeans? Surely it's not a coincidence that Sarah Jessica Parker, Nicky Hilton, Mandy Moore and Isla Fisher all have the same jeans. More likely it's because a publicist "seeded" them, meaning they gifted the jeans to famous fashion influencers.

Seeding is just one of the machinations of celebrity dressing explained in 'Will Work For Shoes: The Business Behind Red Carpet Product Placement,' a new book on sale Sept. 1, by former fashion publicist Susan Ashbrook.

Ashbrook, who lives in L.A., was a pioneer in the product placement game in Hollywood, founding her company Film Fashion in 1994. For 14 years, she played matchmaker between fashion companies and celebrities, engineering red carpet moments and paparazzi opportunities that helped raise brand awareness and sales at Escada, Stuart Weitzman, Lanvin and others.

'In Middle America, people still come up to me and say, 'You mean celebrities get dresses for free?'' says Ashbrook, when asked if the public knows how much money and product changes hands before Katie Holmes, Fergie and Jessica Simpson appear in US Weekly or In Touch carrying the same high-end handbag.

But the book isn't so much a memoir as it is a how-to guide for getting product on celebrities, whether they be Hollywood or hometown. 'Celebrity marketing can work for a tire store in St. Louis just as well as it can for Armani,' says Ashbrook, who moved to L.A. from Chicago to become an actress, but landed in fashion, first as director of public relations for designer Richard Tyler.

‘Even in small-town U.S.A. you have your own VIPs, whether it’s the mayor, a tennis coach or a football star. You can use examples of what the big brands do, and do it on a smaller scale,’ says Ashbrook, who sold Film Fashion to PR powerhouse Rogers & Cowan in 2008. ‘Louis Vuitton used to host these salon dinners with editors and designers. If you’re the owner of a bookstore in a small town you can host a salon dinner of your own and create a buzz for your store that way.’

Of course, Ashbrook also shares a fair amount of star-studded dish. Here’s a cheat sheet on the PR maven and her book:

Bragging rights: Dressing Kim Basinger in a pistachio-colored Escada gown for the 1998 Oscars. The dress, finished just minutes before Basinger got in her car to go, raised the profile of the brand internationally. Jump-starting bridal designer Monique Lhuillier’s career by pairing her with Britney Spears. When Spears wore a Lhuillier gown to wed Kevin Federline, even Newsweek took notice of the fashion moment.

Trade secret: Offered gift certificates to celebrities to get them to shop at maternity wear retailer A Pea in the Pod -- \$5,000 for A-listers, \$2,500 for B-listers.

Dish: Holly Robinson Peete took a free baby crib in exchange for having her nursery photographed for a weekly magazine; Sarah Jessica Parker said “no way.” Monique Lhuillier wouldn’t give Jamie Lee Curtis a gown gratis to wear to the Oscars because she didn’t feel the actress fit her demographic. Curtis bought the dress and wore it anyway.

Low point: Oscar red carpet dressing got so competitive one year that Ashbrook found herself sitting alongside another publicist in a Beverly Hills hotel lobby until 2 a.m. waiting for actress Ziyi Zhang. Both Ashbrook and her competitor were vying for the actress to wear their client’s shoes. The experience inspired the title of the book, ‘Will Work for Shoes.’

Words to live by: ‘Many bad girl celebrities get you more publicity than good girl ones’; ‘Gifting and bartering product is less expensive than paying for an ad or endorsement.’