

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



**Who are you wearing? : Author describes career in celebrity product placement**

## **MARILYN MCMAHON, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER**

Susan Ashbrook, who describes herself tongue-in-cheek as a celebrity marketing connoisseur, has written a how-to book for small business owners and entrepreneurs — “anyone who looks at celebrities and thinks, ‘I have a product. How do I get them to use it?’” There is a treasure trove of tips in her newly published “Will Work for Shoes” (Greenleaf Book Group Press, \$22.95), which she wrote while savoring life on a hilltop ranch overlooking the Lompoc Valley.

“We can even see the rockets going off at Vandenberg,” Ms. Ashbrook told the News-Press during a recent interview at the home she shares with her husband, Derek McLeish, three dogs, two cats, two cockatiels and four horses. Although she sold her business, Film Fashion, in 2008, Ms. Ashbrook still leaves the ranch to travel to Los Angeles and other parts of California and the country as a consultant, public speaker and marketing expert on building brand awareness for products. “I decided to write the book because when people asked what I did and I told them I did product placement with celebrities, they would usually say, ‘What a great idea!’ They had no idea how this was done. I thought, ‘There’s a book there,’ ” recalled Ms. Ashbrook.

She started her business from scratch after moving to Los Angeles from New York City, where she had planned to be an actress after leaving her childhood home in Arlington Heights, Ill. “I wasn’t very successful,” said the attractive blonde, who came to the West Coast because of a romance with the president of a recording company. For eight years, the couple led a glamorous life, traveling to Europe four times a year, New York City once a month and climbing mountains in Nepal. When the relationship ended amicably, Ms. Ashbrook realized she had to get a job. “Public relations sounded like fun, so I applied to The Donahue Group in Beverly Hills, a boutique agency with a small staff of five or six. I got the job because I was so persistent. I practically stalked Craig Donahue, the owner, who was a wonderful boss. I learned so much from him,” said Ms. Ashbrook. Although she didn’t realize it at the time, Ms. Ashbrook learned an important lesson that led to her success when she started her own business: Persistence pays off. One of the chapters in her book is titled “Persistence and Change.” “If a celebrity doesn’t respond to your first inquiry, keep following up. Celebrities are busy people. They may not get to your letter or email right

away,” said Ms. Ashbrook, whose first account with The Donahue Group was the city of Beverly Hills. “I did a lot of work with Rodeo Drive boutiques, restaurants, special events and fashion shows. I found I really liked fashion, which is all about change. It was very exciting,” she said. Ms. Ashbrook also learned how to write short, concise press releases to get editors’ attention about her client, a skill she stresses in her book. “Ten-page pitch letters don’t work. Be short and succinct — one page at the most,” she said.

Her work caught the attention of Joanna Dendel, fashion editor for The Los Angeles Times, a friend, who persuaded Ms. Ashbrook to leave The Donahue Group and focus on Richard Tyler, a hot new Australian designer, who had moved to Los Angeles from London, where he had apprenticed with tailors on Savile Row, famous for its traditional men’s bespoke tailoring. “He was making the most glorious tailored suits for men and women, including Mick Jagger, Julia Roberts and Anjelica Huston,” said Ms. Ashbrook. “But when I approached fashion editors about Mr. Tyler, they weren’t interested until I mentioned his famous clients.” That’s when a light bulb went on for Ms. Ashbrook. “I was sure there were other designers who needed a public relations agent for their fashions,” she said. In 1994, she quit her job with Mr. Tyler and started Film Fashion, confident that when she flew to New York and met with designers there that her business would be an immediate success. “Everyone loved the idea, but no one would sign on,” Ms. Ashbrook said. Six months later, her savings were dwindling when she got a call from Ralph Lauren’s representative asking if she could get a celebrity to wear one of the pieces in his new line of evening gowns at that year’s Academy Awards ceremonies. “I said I would try, but there was no guarantee. I wasn’t successful with the gown, but I did help get some of the men to wear Ralph Lauren tuxedos. Denzel Washington was one of them,” said Ms. Ashbrook. That was the turning point. The next time she went to New York City to meet with designers and mentioned Ralph Lauren, they paid attention.” I quickly signed up Escada from Munich and Herve Leger in Paris. I thought I was pretty hot stuff,” she said with a laugh. Her real breakthrough was helping redesign the Escada gown that actress Kim Basinger wore when she won the Oscar in 1997 for “L.A. Confidential.” “Kim wanted to wear a floral gown because she was from the South, but the stylist didn’t think it was right for the event. We had two weeks to change it. My job was to work with the seamstress. I remember renting a sewing machine. The gown was simple and timeless. It had a Grace Kelly look. Kim looked fabulous, and every year when they show Oscar winners, Kim is wearing the Escada gown,” said Ms. Ashbrook.

With her career “off and running,” she realized that product placement isn’t just about dresses — there are shoes, jewelry, handbags and other accessories. Other clients who sought her services included Harry Winston jewelers, Chopard watches and Swarovski crystal. She has also worked with some of the most famous names in

Hollywood and the music industry: Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Lopez, Sarah Jessica Parker, Halle Berry and Rihanna to name a few.

In 2008, Ms. Ashbrook sold Film Fashion to Rogers & Cowan, a prominent public relations firm in Los Angeles. “During the 14 years I owned Film Fashion, I worked with more than 7,000 celebrities and found that most of them are like you and me. They come from small towns, and in today’s world, they don’t just have an impact on the red carpet — they attend movie premieres and charity events; they are on the Internet. There are all kinds of opportunities for product placement,” she said. When considering celebrities to approach, don’t go for famous stars like Justin Timberlake, Ms. Ashbrook advises budding entrepreneurs. “Be realistic. Don’t reach for the stars. There are local VIPs in small towns — football coaches, the mayor, the high school principal. They may be local, but they can spread the word about your business.” “Stuart Weitzman, the shoe designer, came up with a clever marketing gimmick with the million dollar pair of shoes he designs to be worn at the Oscars. Every year, he picked a Cinderella to wear his creations made of precious gems,” said Ms. Ashbrook.

She thought she was retiring when she and her husband moved to Lompoc and started growing grapes on Straight West Ranch to make their own wine on the 22-acre property. “We didn’t know how much work it was,” she said with a chuckle. Their wine, El Rey, a pinot noir, is sold at bouchon in Santa Barbara. On its label is a line drawing of La Purisima Mission, which is where Ms. Ashbrook was horseback riding with a friend when the friend suggested they check out Cebada Canyon Road not far away. “When I saw how great the area was for horses, Derek and I ended up buying this place. I remember spending time riding horses on my grandmother’s farm when I was growing up in the Midwest,” said the avid horsewoman who tries to ride every day and has just become a member of the Fillies, a group of women in the area who have permission to ride on large private ranches. Her husband, an international businessman who was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, popped in at the end of the interview to say that he liked his horses “under the hood.” He races motorcycles once a month at El Mirage Dry Lake in the Mojave Desert in California and the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah once a year and holds more than 63 world records.

Asked about the title of her book, Ms. Ashbrook said it was her idea and came from an incident involving a Chinese actress and whether she was going to wear shoes by Escada or Jimmy Choo for the Oscar festivities. “It was a battle that lasted until 2 a.m., and I thought, ‘Here I am, working for shoes,’ ” she said with a smile.