

Is it Different for Celebs?



People in a high-wealth case might be fighting harder.



Public Perceptions, Endorsements and Talk at Issue in Celebrity Divorces

Celebrity divorce battles may seem meaner and messier than the divorces of average couples. But that perception may come from more intense media scrutiny, or possibly from the powerful need to protect celebrities' livelihoods and reputations, according to top celebrity divorce attorneys across the country.

It may seem that celebrities have a more difficult time during divorce because the media brings more aspects of the disputes to the public's attention, said [Laura Wasser](#) of Wasser, Cooperman and Carter in Los Angeles. She has represented [Britney Spears](#), [Stevie Wonder](#), [Angelina Jolie](#), [Nick Lachey](#), [Kiefer Sutherland](#) and [Spike Jonze](#). At one point, Wasser asked to be removed as Britney Spears attorney during her custody dispute with [Kevin Federline](#). However, Wasser does not comment on specific clients' cases.

Generally, she said, celebrities may spend more money on their divorces just because they can. But their emotions are running just as high as for any couple. "That cuts both ways. We can perceive that they are fighting harder," Wasser said. "But then, people in a high-wealth case might be fighting harder."

PUBLIC PERCEPTION IN CELEBRITY DIVORCE

But celebrities definitely behave differently as their divorces progress because they don't want their actions, past or present, to become tabloid fodder, Wasser said. This is not an issue facing the average divorcing couple. "If you are just Joe Average, the only one who is going to read it is going to be the judge," Wasser said.

And because celebrities' reputations are tied so closely to the success of their careers, divorces become a high-stakes game, Wasser said. They may threaten to reveal information about the spouse to damage his or her reputation. They may scramble to keep private information that may be damaging. "Celebrities probably behave differently because they don't want things played out and made public," Wasser said.

The battles over reputations and revealing information as a threat in the negotiations is not as salacious as it used to be, Wasser said. And the public's views on celebrities' reputations may be more grounded. "We, as the public, realize that these people are not gods, they are not superhuman, they go through their bad times like everyone else," Wasser said.

As a result of the need to protect their names and reputations, celebrities will fight harder than the average couple, said [John C. Mayoue](#), of Warner, Mayoue, Bates and Nolen, P.C. in Atlanta. Mayoue has represented Marianne Gingrich in her divorce from former House [Speaker Newt Gingrich](#); [Jane Fonda](#); and baseball star [David Justice](#).

"The most valuable asset, generally, is their good name and they will do all they can to protect and promote it," Mayoue said. Add to that the fact that they can spend more money to achieve the results that they want, and celebrity divorces seem to increase in intensity, he said. "Certainly money will solve a lot of problems, and celebrities will pay more if it means getting a desired result, quickly and without adverse publicity," Mayoue said.

CELEBRITIES GET INTENSE SCRUTINY

Celebrities deal with divorce emotionally like most people do, but they have additional, special circumstances to resolve, said Attorney Robert Kaufman, of Kaufman, Young, Spiegel, Robinson and Kenerson in Los Angeles, who has represented [Reese Witherspoon](#) and [Jennifer Anniston](#) in their divorces. Kauffman is quick to add that it is his policy never to speak to the press about the facts and circumstances of pending cases.



Public Perceptions, Endorsements and Talk at Issue in Celebrity Divorces

Thursday, May 22, 2008

By MICHELE KIMBALL



First of all, Kaufman said, celebrities have to deal with what he describes as unwarranted media scrutiny that arises during their break-ups, separations and divorces, about which the noncelebrity has little concern. That places a great deal of pressure on the celebrities as well as their lawyers, he said.

Some divorcing celebrities may try to sway public opinion by spinning their sides of marital disputes in the media, in Internet blogs, [YouTube](#) and the like. "They have ability to use press agents to spin their stories," Kaufman said. "Sometimes that results in a media blitz that, unfortunately, affects the public's perception of their case."

That intense media scrutiny can be especially difficult on their children of celebrities. Kaufman said the children's peers are often all too aware of what is happening as parents split up, especially if the split is blaring from the front of magazine covers and television programs. "The media blitz can become harmful to the children of that divorcing couple because they are celebrities and the school playground can become a savage place," Kaufman said.

If he had to choose the hardest fought area of celebrities' divorces, it would be battles over their children, Kaufman said. Celebrities have great concerns about the public's perception of their images and reputations, Kaufman said, and that is no more acute than when it comes to perceptions of parenting skills. Kaufman said trying to negotiate custody and visitation are often one of the more difficult in the divorce process.

Both parents need to be flexible about sharing time with their children, and must be considerate of each other's work schedules when one parent is on location or on tour and the other is not, he said. "If both parties are celebrities, it is even worse because of the time demands of filming on location," Kaufman said.

From his perspective, Kaufman said, there are different types of celebrities, and that translates to different divorce experiences. His client list includes high-profile celebrities in front of the camera, but also, celebrities that are know for their work behind the camera, such as writers, directors and producers.

"When all is said and done however, celebrities and non celebrities alike all have to deal with the angst of divorce and its effect on their children and finances, but with celebrities there is often an extra layer of angst," Kaufman said.

DIVIDING ASSETS INTO THE FUTURE

One thing most of them have in common is difficulty dividing assets, Kaufman said. "The detailed financial aspects of celebrity divorce are much more complex," Kaufman said.

Granted, celebrities have more money than most people, but that does not necessarily mean that they will spend more on their divorces, he said. Most celebrities have a team of financial advisors – business managers and accountants – who manage their money and evaluate every expenditure. "People without them don't have that luxury, and tend to spend more on their divorce than celebrities," Kaufman said.

When it comes time to dividing assets, Kaufman said, celebrities not only need to negotiate current earning and financial portfolios, but they also have to decide how the future will play out. "There are financial ties well beyond the breakup," Kaufman said.

A major issue in celebrity financial negotiations is if and how ex-spouses will have a share in the future financial rights of projects, such as royalties. It is a continued participation in a future stream of payments from income developed during the marriage. For example, an ex-spouse may negotiate to maintain a share in a production. That share may then extend to all sequels and spin-offs of the production.

The continued rights are not just relegated to those who develop the work, but those who direct or produce it. It can also be applied to musicians, composers and music publishers "It's a unique issue to the entertainment industry," Kaufman said.

CELEBRITY SPONSORSHIPS DROPPED

The press and the public keep a close watch on celebrity marriages. If there is a divorce or separation announcement, the public interest heats up, said Ira M. Elegant, of [Buchbinder & Elegant, P.A. in Miami](#). Elegant is currently representing [Shaquille O'Neal](#) in his divorce. Elegant said he gets calls every day to see if there are any changes or new filings in his high-profile clients' divorces.



Public Perceptions, Endorsements and Talk at Issue in Celebrity Divorces

Thursday, May 22, 2008

By MICHELE KIMBALL



When it's an average client, no one cares what is in the file, he said. But when it is someone well-known, his phone rings off the hook. "The newspapers want to know," Elegant said. "You get calls from all over the country."

The scrutiny by the press and the public is not the most disconcerting, Elegant said. Unique to the athletic celebrity community is the potential to be dropped by endorsement sponsors if the divorce gets messy, he said. "That's a very, very big problem," Elegant said. "So even if the allegations seem somewhat mild to the lawyers, the person who has the contract with the athlete, they are going to say 'Wait a minute, we do not want this person endorsing our product.'"

Whether or not the allegations are true, Elegant said, the sponsors monitor the public perception. He said that if the athlete is not perceived as a "wonderful family person," the sponsors are likely to end the contract for endorsement. Losing an endorsement becomes a great concern during his clients' divorces, Elegant said.

But it may not be a bargaining chip for the soon-to-be ex-spouse because he or she would be hurt by the loss of income, too. Adding fuel to the celebrity's negative public perception just means less money to split at the end of the marriage, he said. "If she cuts into the income stream," Elegant said, "she's going to be hurt in the end."

TACTICS IN CELEBRITY DIVORCES

Celebrities are not fighting harder than average couples – it's just the way the public perceives their divorce battles, said [Stacy Phillips](#), an attorney who handles mostly celebrities and high-net-worth clients. Her client list has included Bobby Brown, the former husband of [Whitney Houston](#); [Corina Villaraigosa](#), the estranged wife of Los Angeles [Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa](#); and Darcy LaPier, the ex-wife of [Jean-Claude Van Damme](#).

She is also the author of "[Divorce: It's All About Control - How to Win the Emotional, Psychological and Legal Wars](#)" and a managing partner of Phillips, Lerner, Lauzon & Jamra, LLP in Century City, Calif. "I absolutely do not think that celebrities fight harder," Phillips said. "That's just what you see. You don't know the other thousands and thousands of cases that are hard-fought."

However, the celebrities and wealthy clients on her roster have the same issue of concern: protecting their reputations. She said that their businesses become their personas and the measure of the power they have, so there are some tactics that are more relevant to their divorces.

First in the list: handling the media. She said she has seen many celebrities use the media to advance their goals in the divorces. They will manipulate and curry favor with the media to have a story told from their perspective. As a result, Phillips said, she often advises her clients to protect their privacy as much as possible in court documents. Hurting the celebrity spouse's reputation will not help in the end financially, she said.

Being overly frank about criticisms of the spouse could mean loss of contracts and jobs, Phillips said. "I have said to clients, you don't want to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs, so you have to be careful about what you say in a document," Phillips said. Sometimes, no matter how much she encourages discretion, celebrities will still tell all. "It's amazing. They all let it out," Phillips said. "You'd think they'd want to be a little more private."

In some cases, there will be a team strategizing how to spin what is happening during the divorce, Phillips said. She said she has had to work with publicists for both sides of a divorce who want to craft how the split will be discussed publicly. In the end, Phillips said, protecting a celebrity's reputation becomes the great issue through the divorce process. And battling public's perception, right or wrong, goes on beyond the end of the court proceedings, she said.

"Sometimes you have to combat the public persona because of whatever happens in court," Phillips said. "But if the public perception is different, you have to deal with the perception in the real world."

Michele Bush Kimball has a Ph.D. in mass communication with a specialization in media law. She has spent almost 15 years in the field of journalism, and she teaches at American University in Washington, D.C. She recently won a national research award for her work.

