

Personal paparazzi - consumerism for the conceited?

- Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz and Louis R Carlozo, Chicago Tribune
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The white SUV limo whisked 15 men from the Signature Room to La Pomme Rouge to Martini Park to Stone Lotus. Women hooted as the entourage darted between the limo and the swanky clubs. Bouncers ushered them past long lines and around velvet ropes.

And a paparazzo pursued them, her camera flashing away.

What bigshot caroused in Chicago that evening?



Travelling media. Photo: Joe Castro

Why, it's Phillip Barker and his crew.

Phillip who?

A resident of Illinois, Barker toils as an ad agency copy editor by day. But trailed by a snap-happy camera that November night, he felt like a celebrity. Inspired by a night of drinking with his friends, Barker recruited the shooter via the internet advertising site Craigslist to act as his paparazzo for his friend Jason Layman's 27th birthday celebrations.

While real stars run from paparazzi, regular people who crave a taste of the glamorous life now turn to personal paparazzi to make them feel like stars.

"We had a lot of people screaming out to us," Barker, 30, recalled of the November 10 festivities. "Lots of bars had lines down the street, but we'd go right in. ... They thought we were famous."

Barker is not alone - new businesses are springing up to serve the starry-eyed.

Based in Austin, Texas, Celeb-4-A-Day offers packages (30 minutes, four paparazzi) from \$US300 (\$A315) to the \$US2,500 (\$A2,628) MegaStar treatment (2 hours with six paparazzi, a bodyguard and publicist).

MegaStar customers get a starring role on a mock gossip magazine cover, plus a CD with the photos.

"We do enough to really give you the experience," said founder Tania Cowher, who adds that she welcomes anyone - including B-list celebrities trying to stage a comeback, or wannabes trying to

launch an entertainment career.

After all, what's Hollywood without a little acting?

As for Cowher's present clientele, the goal remains simple: to spice up birthdays, bachelor parties and the like.

Cowher hatched her idea four years ago at a commercial photography school in Santa Barbara, California, watching Entertainment Tonight. But it wasn't until November that she acted on it.

She launched her web site during a lunch break. Business started slow. Then Time magazine called and her phone has been ringing off the hook ever since.

"Everyone either growing up or as an adult sees celebrities in the movies and thinks, at least once, 'I wonder what that's like,'" said Cowher, whose clients have ranged from an eight-year-old's birthday party to a 65-year-old's wedding anniversary.

Cowher has bookings almost every weekend - a New Year's Eve gig is already lined up - and she's expanded to Los Angeles, New York and San Francisco. She plans to add Miami and Chicago, though launch dates aren't set.

Kevin Hagedorn, a dot-com real estate consultant and radio host in Austin, Texas, hired Cowher to create a surprise "media blitz" to celebrate the news that he and his wife were having a boy. He picked the company's \$US300 package, took his wife to dinner in downtown Austin, and ushered her out at a prearranged signal. Then: snap, snap, snap.

Paparazzi camera flashes blinded the couple, the shooters yelling: "Look over here! Look over here!"

Barker, who paid a freelance photographer \$US200 (\$A210) to snap photos for five hours, wanted a tag-along lens so his friends wouldn't have to worry about taking pictures. They ended up loving their spotlight night. "As 15 narcissistic gay men, we kind of ate it up," he said.

Customers savour the limelight just as much as the pics, said Reggie Waller, president of Private Paparazzi in San Diego, launched two years ago to provide affordable event photography.

Private Paparazzi charges \$US75 (\$A79) per hour per photographer, with most clients hiring one to three cameras, said client relations director Lindsay Chapin. It partners with a limo company for clients wanting the full celeb effect, and has 20 to 25 freelance photographers working events nationwide.

"People are really excited when they call," Chapin said. The company hasn't come to Chicago, though it hopes to soon.

One client who hired Private Paparazzi for his wife's 40th birthday even arranged for autograph-seeking "fans" as she left a restaurant. "It's this whole fantasy they're playing out in their mind, and they want to experience it for one night," Chapin said.

Others roll their eyes.

When Barker posted an ad on Craigslist seeking a photographer, he got about a dozen enthusiastic replies. But one angry email called him a "vain, vain (bleep)."

Indeed, some pop culture experts see personal paparazzi as consumerism for the conceited.

"Oh my God: This is celebrity culture gone awry," said Elayne Rapping, who teaches a Culture of

Celebrity course at SUNY/University at Buffalo.

"We have a national addiction: People are more interested in Lindsey Lohan and Paris Hilton rather than Iraq and the economy. And reality shows have everyone thinking that you really can be a star."

Rapping not only takes issue with personal paparazzi as a vain indulgence, but also "the ultimate democratisation of celebrity to the point where it doesn't mean a whole lot. ... People may believe they're just as entitled to be a celebrity as Meryl Streep and Bob Dylan. But they're not."

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