



Forbes.com
Stock Picking Community

JOIN THE STOCK PICKING COMMUNITY **free**

Pick your own portfolio, compete with the best performers, and learn!

GET STARTED HERE



Celebrities

The Next Breakout Stars

Tom Van Riper, 06.18.09, 1:20 PM ET

How does a celebrity make the jump from cult hero for a small group of fans to a national icon who has corporate America clamoring for endorsements?

A handful of actors, comedians and musicians may soon have the chance to find out. Take Michael Weatherly, star of the CBS Navy crime drama *NCIS*, a show that's been a ratings smash for most of its six years but whose stars haven't been heavily promoted.

As special agent Anthony DiNozzo, Weatherly has very high likability ratings among the show's fans, according to tracking from Los Angeles-based E-Poll Market Research. The problem: Not enough people know who he is. E-Poll's numbers show that 49% of viewers familiar with Weatherly say they "like him a lot," but that he's familiar to only 14% of the potential audience.

In Pictures: 10 Who Could Hit The Top

"If I were a handler, I'd work with CBS to get him on other things," says Gerry Philpott, E-Poll's chief executive. "You've got a number of reality shows and variety shows out there, enough vehicles to showcase people." Gigs on *Dancing With the Stars* or *Saturday Night Live* provide tons of potential value for a star to show off the flip side of his public personality, he notes. Nothing like a light, popular show to let a big audience see you out of character and in good humor.

Forbes looked for potential superstars who score high with audiences in likability but low in awareness. The good news for six of the top 10 is that they're on network television, still the biggest draw for raw viewing numbers and the home of awards shows and other specials that allow management to showcase their talent stable.

The six: Weatherly and Cote dePablo of *NCIS* (CBS), Hill Harper and Emily Procter of *CSI* (CBS), Yvonne Strahovski of *Chuck* (NBC) and Cobie Smulders of *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS).

What often holds back actors in ensemble shows like these are the tight grip that the network holds over publicity. Publicists are known to push one star over another, no matter who the media requests most often, notes Noreen Janney, president of Los Angeles-based Celebrity Endorsement Network, which helps marketers pick endorsers.

So the celebrity's personal publicist "needs to push that network publicist for his guy," Janney says. Meantime, plain old personal appearances and ribbon-cutting ceremonies can go a long way toward building a bridge to the broader public, she says.

Campbell Brown, the CNN news anchor who gained attention last fall by grilling a spokesman for John McCain's presidential campaign on the wisdom of selecting Sarah Palin as a running mate, has lots of potential too. News organizations generally frown at the idea of their on-air personalities dabbling in the entertainment or endorsement world. But should Brown decide to shift out of straight news, she's got the goods to make lots of money on the side.

"Becoming a commentator can bring lots of endorsements," Philpott says.

Rounding out the list is country music star Dierks Bentley, a hit with those fans who have discovered him but not yet a breakout act--witness his 14% public awareness ratings. Philpott suggests getting him on a national tour with Kenny Chesney or another well-known artist who has successfully crossed over to the mainstream pop world.

Not that every semi-star craves a bigger spotlight, necessarily. Many may be happy doing their thing for a niche audience. But for those with big likability ratings, it's nice to know the option is always there.

"There are opportunities," says Philpott. "It comes down to your personality and the people around you."

[In Pictures: 10 Who Could Hit The Top](#)