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Comic startup cashes in on star power

CHICAGO (Reuters.com) - When Barack Obama merely mentioned how much he liked his BlackBerry, the unofficial endorsement was said to be worth as much as \$50 million. While not in the same stratosphere, a small comic book startup is using caricatures of the president, First Lady Michelle Obama and other big names to drive up sales.

Blue Water Productions www.bluewaterprod.com has tapped a vein of mass appeal, capitalizing on the star power of public figures. Besides the Obamas, co-founder Darren Davis has profiled Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, Caroline Kennedy, Barbara Walters, Oprah Winfrey, George W. Bush and Lady Gaga to name a few.

"I'm not the most political person in the world," said Davis, whose unauthorized biographical comics have become the lifeblood of the fledgling Portland, Oregon-based company. Davis said Blue Water's 2009 revenues were close to \$1 million and expects that could double this year.



A comic rendering of popular musician Lady Gaga adorns the cover of a comic book published by Blue Water Productions in this undated handout photo.

"Any time you've got a small business that can tie into a celebrity, it can do phenomenal things for your brand," said Jay Jessup, a brand publicist and co-author of "Fame 101", who counts Blue Water among a clientele that includes soap opera star Jonathan Jackson (General Hospital) and noted stem-cell scientist and author Christian Drapeau.

"There are so many markets that this hits," he said. "People just curious about the subject, people collecting biography comics, political collectors, women and kids."

Blue Water's titles sell for \$3.99 in comic book stores. Davis also hawks them in non-traditional places, such as the specialty retail chain Jo-Ann Fabrics and Crafts.

The short biographies aim to provide unbiased factual accounts of their subjects' lives, replete with the ample sarcasm and stylized graphic appeal that characterize the comic genre. Even the Obamas' household pooch has his own comic tome - "Bo Obama, the White House Tails" - targeted to a younger audience.

FAME FACTOR

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Jessup said Blue Water's biographies have gained enough recognition that celebrities are actually honored to be chosen for comic rendering.

Davis said Barbara Walters proudly displayed her copy on "The View" and also called to personally thank him. In addition, his Sarah Palin comic, now in its fourth printing, found its way onto CNN's Larry King Live and Davis said his Michelle Obama book has sold more than 60,000 copies.

Despite all the hoopla, the cost of riffing on fame does have a downside: Davis conceded Blue Water has been derided as a "bottom feeder" within his comic book fraternity. Undeterred by the criticism, Davis intends to continue to hitch his wagon to the stars, noting the biographies now account for the lion's share of his profits.

Davis honed his promotional skills as a marketer for E! Entertainment and USA Network. Shifting to the comics industry - his long-time passion - he eventually represented big-name artists such as Joe Madureira, known for his work on "Uncanny X-Men" and "Battle Chasers." After several years with comic book publisher Wildstorm, which was taken over by DC Comics, Davis struck out on his own and eventually founded Blue Water in 2005.

"One thing I learned when I worked at E! is that celebrities are royal families," he said.

Celebrity tie-ins have always been important for the company. Before the biographies, Blue Water inked a deal with Star Trek legend William Shatner to produce comic spinoffs from Shatner's 1989 sci-fi novel "TekWar", with "The Tek War Chronicles." Davis also had a deal with the estate of horror-film legend Vincent Price, creating comics ahead of the 100-year anniversary of the actor's birth.

POLITICAL DECISION

During the 2008 presidential election, Davis's business partner, Jason Schultz, spotted an opening they couldn't ignore. Rival publishers, including industry behemoth Marvel Comics, had begun releasing Barack Obama-themed comic books to feed a growing demand for election memorabilia. Schultz wondered why they couldn't produce similar books focused on powerful women.

"These things took off like gangbusters," said Davis. "As soon as we announced that we had the Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin books coming out, we had CNN knocking on our door."

Even so, Blue Water is still just a niche player in a market dominated by heavyweights Marvel, a division of Disney, and DC Comics, which is owned by Time Warner. According to data from ICv2.com, a website that covers the comics industry, sales of comic books totaled \$320 million in 2008, down from \$330 million in 2007.

Biographical comics are not a new genre, but date back several generations, having covered a celebrity roster that includes Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Bob Hope and Jerry Lewis, among others, according to comics' historian John Jackson Miller, founder of the Comics Chronicles, a resource for information about the industry.

What's different about Blue Water, he said, is how tenacious the firm has been in sticking to the theme and taking advantage of media opportunities when they arise. Even so, gauging the public's appetite for celebrities is always a guessing game, said Miller.

Blue Water only had one book charting in the top 300 titles as tracked by Diamond Comic Distributors, the industry's leading supplier, for the month of January, Miller said. That compares to last October, when they had three books in the top 300.

"It's a nice little niche," he said. "If they do enough of these things, they could raise their market share considerably."