

**Move over, Max Clifford. There’s a new kid on the publicity block and he means business. Mark Piggott meets ‘the Black Max’, a sharp young pretender to the PR guru’s throne.**



Everyone’s heard of Max Clifford. The greying publicist has been as successful in self- promotion as in marketing his clients. For years his dominance of the market has gone practically unchallenged, with politicians, pop stars and pregnant women beating the well- trodden path to his Soho office. Before the general election he announced he would do whatever he could to get rid of the Tories, and Labour duly romped home.

But lately there have been signs that his empire might not be as unassailable as he previously thought. The Mandy Allwood babies fiasco will culminate next year in her revealing book and a High Court battle against him. The death of Diana has left the public with less of a taste for Akiss and tell’ scandal. The debate about privacy laws has hotted up. And now a young entrepreneur from Peckham is setting out to beat Clifford at his own game.

The name Kizzi Nkwocha may not mean a lot to you, unless you deal drugs or sell guns: for five years he was a News of the World reporter, exposing villains around the world. But with his cane, his limousine and his smart street cred, Nkwocha will soon be as recognisable as the man he aims to emulate.

But what does a publicist- or ‘media consultant’ to use Nkwocha’s preferred title- do exactly?

‘Basically he acts as the middle man between an individual, or organisation, and the newspapers. They can make you a lot more money than if you went to the papers on your own. If someone had a story they wanted going in or keeping out of the press, they came to Max. Now they are beginning to come to me. My attitude is: what message can you get across in the media? Come to me with a problem and I’ll fix it.’

Already Nkwocha has a formidable list of clients, including Allwood, who was the reason Nkwocha’s and Clifford’s paths first crossed. ‘I spent three months with her family and came to see her as a person, not just a story. I also saw the mistakes which were made and decided I could make a better job of it. The job of a publicist is to handle the press and make the client a lot of money. With hindsight, a lot of people made mistakes on that story.’ He claims, for instance, that talk of her receiving a million pounds ‘just wasn’t true’.

In the event the fee ‘agreed’ by the News of the World became more of a story than Allwood’s multiple pregnancy and the subsequent loss of her eight babies. Clifford seemed to use the case to highlight his own ability to command enormous fees for clients- a ploy which may now have backfired. Nkwocha, though, is not interested in condemnation, only competition: ‘Max is only human. In hindsight you could say he could have been wiser. There were things done that I wouldn’t do. But the important factor here is that Mandy went to Max because he was the only name there was. Now there

are two.’

With a book on her story due out next year, and the high-profile court case, Allwood remains big business. But Clifford dismisses suggestions that Nkwocha ‘stole’ her from his books. A Mandy Allwood was out of contract with us for over a year before she signed with Kizzi. That’s how I know him, from the News of the World story. But he’s a nice boy and I wish him all the luck in the world. If people start ringing him rather than me, then good luck. I only take on one in 25 people who approach me. Kizzi can have the other 24.

‘In any case, breaking stories is only 10 per cent of what I do. In 27 years in the business, I’ve represented some unfamiliar names like Frank Sinatra, Marlon Brando and the Beatles. Over the last four or five years, 300 or 400 people have approached me- I’ve never approached anyone in my life; I never have to. If you have a major story you want to break, who do you turn to?’

Perhaps they are now turning to Nkwocha. On his growing books are various celebrities seeking makeovers, and he is hoping to get the chance to turn the Conservative Party around from such PR debacles as having leader William Hague appear in a baseball cap at the Notting Hill Carnival.

‘Let’s face it, the Tories need help. And I can help them appeal to the ethnic vote like Clifford never can. Because I was a poor black kid from Peckham, black people feel they can trust me. The black press has already embraced me, started calling me ‘the Black Max’. I believe people will come to me because they see Max as establishment, whereas I’ve made it on *my* terms.’

He sees no contradiction in a working-class boy helping out the Tories. ‘The client is not there to be liked, loved or loathed. My politics are, and should be, irrelevant. The client should be bigger than I am. The trick to having a great publicist is that you don’t know they’re there.’

But of course everyone else has to know you’re there, or they won’t approach you. With his chauffeur-driven limousine, immaculate dress sense and amiable eloquence, it is sometimes hard to reconcile Nkwocha with the boy who left school at 16 and, by his own admission, ‘ran pretty wild’ with south London criminals. But at a crucial age he went to family connections in Nigeria, and spent two years working out his future.

‘I know what it’s like to be really poor. My dad used to tell me: ‘Life’s a shit sandwich- the more bread you got the less shit you eat.’ I knew then there had to be a way out. I couldn’t get a grant to go to university and mum was a single parent, and we couldn’t afford it. So I studied journalism at the London College of Printing, went to the Caribbean Times and was editor of the West London Recorder at the age of 21.’

Two years there, three years freelancing and five years at the News of the World honed Nkwocha’s instincts for a story and made him a formidable array of contacts in the business. Although he pretty much kept himself to himself, he seems to have been respected for his integrity. When I ask him what he’d do with photographers who had pictures of Diana in the crash that killed her, he says he’d have them arrested.

He left the NoW earlier this year but a former colleague felt he would get plenty of work through the paper: ‘It’s always been much easier for reporters to go through Max. He rings us first because we’re the biggest and we go to his offices to meet the client. And because the fee is agreed higher up (at editor level) we as reporters don’t have to worry about that side of things. But if Kizzi comes to us, we won’t see him as a publicist- we’ll see him as an ex- colleague, as a journalist.’

Clifford seems unconcerned that Nkwocha may start eating into his empire, relying on his name to generate lucrative business. He cites the messy example of Piers Merchant’s nemesis, Anne Cox: ‘She’s one very confused young woman. She approached me as long ago as April but I said I was too busy. In any case, only a fraction of my business comes from ‘kiss and tell’ type stories. If I never sold another story, 90 per cent of my business would carry on.’

Nkwocha agrees that there’s a new attitude towards the media. ‘This is the beginning of a new era in media consultancy. The public mood is changing on ‘kiss and tell’ type stories. They’re less tolerant of any kind of press intrusion. But celebrities are like captains at sea- without that sea they wouldn’t be

captains.’

It is a curious phrase, reminiscent of Cantona’s throwing sardines to the seagulls. But during a photo-shoot Nkwocha holds himself with the poised confidence that only a poor kid made good can pull off. He might not be about to take over the reins but he could certainly be jumping on the wagon (he never drinks, as it happens).

I put it to Max that he might not be around forever. He finds it amusing: ‘Thanks a lot! I think I’ve got a few years left in me yet. Kizzi has to work himself into a position where he’s known and trusted.. But it’s a wonderful opportunity for a young guy.’

‘I hope Max keeps doing what he’s doing for years to come,’ Nkwocha responds. ‘Maybe we can inspire others to do the same. He paved the way and showed it could be done. I’ve learnt a lot from watching him. And I’ve been making notes on how it could be done better.’

On the surface, then, the two seem to share the ‘big enough for both of us’ philosophy. But you get the feeling there is a lot more to the relationship than either dares admit. Not that Nkwocha loses much sleep over upsetting people. As a former News of the World reporter, he admits he made a lot of contacts- and a lot of enemies.

‘I’d rather you didn’t say where my offices are,’ he tells me. ‘There are a lot of disgruntled people out there. Drug dealers, murderers, gun sellers- people whose lives I’ve turned upside down.’ Suffice to say in a job where image is everything, the address of Nkwocha and Associates sounds somewhat upmarket compared to Clifford’s Soho one. Will the PR guru be one of those out to get him? Nkwocha doesn’t seem concerned: ‘I should think he’ll welcome the competition. For years he’s had things all to himself, and he inspired me to go into the business.’

Ends

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# Kizzi and tell



*Photo by Ian Gavan for the Guardian*

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is this the new Max Clifford? Meet the new kid on the kiss 'n' tell block



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