BOB VILA SUBJECT OF FRAUDULENT LICENSING SCHEME

PR Firms and Speaker Bureau Websites Engaging in Unauthorized Licensing Deals

New York, NY – August 3, 2016 – Bob Vila, TV’s first reality star, and widely known as the father of home improvement media, recently became the subject of an unauthorized endorsement scheme. Employees at www.BobVila.com discovered the fraud when a home improvement show producer approached them asking for an endorsement deal similar to a Bob Vila endorsement that the producer had seen at several Brilliant Event Planning (“BEP”) home improvement expos in the Chicago area. Since at least 2015, BEP had been claiming that Mr. Vila was affiliated with its home improvement expos without authorization for such use by Mr. Vila or his company, Vila Media, LLC, which operates www.BobVila.com. BEP had been using Mr. Vila’s name and photographs in advertisements across multiple media in connection with its expos, and had even responded to customer complaints about Mr. Vila’s absence from events by falsely stating that Mr. Vila was late, or that he had failed to appear at the event.

Mr. Vila, who takes both his personal honesty and his reputation with fans very seriously, was incensed that people might have thought he had intentionally failed to appear at the BEP expos. So, Vila Media sent BEP a demand letter and complaint to cease and desist using Mr. Vila’s name and photographs in association with BEP’s home improvement expos. BEP responded to the demand letter and complaint explaining that it had paid a substantial amount for the use of Mr. Vila’s endorsement through a Chicago-area public relations firm. Apparently, Robert Smith, the manager of the public relations firm and associated websites (www.robertsmithpublicrelations.com, www.robertsmithpr.info), had offered BEP a license for endorsements by Mr. Vila including sponsored Twitter announcements, Pinterest marketing, Facebook advertisements, and press releases for local and online media outlets. Mr. Smith had misrepresented to BEP that he had the right to license out Mr. Vila’s trademarks, name, image, and likeness in connection with the sponsorship of various events, products, and services. However, Mr. Smith had never entered into an agreement that granted him such rights, and had instead been fraudulently licensing Mr. Vila’s world-renown name, likeness, and reputation as a home renovation and repair expert.

After investigating the issue, Vila Media employees became aware of multiple agencies, including so-called “speaker bureau” websites, falsely listing Mr. Vila among a wide variety of other celebrity clients as available to speak, or endorse conferences and events, without Mr. Vila’s knowledge or authorization. While Mr. Smith represents an extreme case, many “speaker bureau” typically offer celebrity endorsements, appearances and speaking services using stock photos of a wide variety of celebrities. When they get a “hit,” by someone who wants to license a celebrity’s name and likeness rights, they turn around and attempt to license the rights from the celebrity’s representatives, offering them a cut of the cash. By the look of it, Mr. Smith seems to have failed to even attempt to pay Bob Vila for the use of his name and likeness. But even when such speaker bureaus are attempting to pay, their initial use, marketing the celebrities’ names and likenesses on their sites and passing themselves off as legitimate representatives, could be seen as a deceptive business practice, an unauthorized use, or even fraud. And inevitably, once there is a willing buyer, the temptation is there to pocket the money. Furthermore, since the rights might be sold for far less than the celebrities themselves would demand, the practice could misinform the celebrities’ fans and consumers, and seriously affect the reputation and licensing capabilities of the celebrities.

Mr. Vila prides himself on his integrity, and never misses a gig, so Vila Media pursued legal action against Robert Smith in Chicago federal court for his unauthorized licensing scheme. Mr. Vila hopes to alert local, state and federal trade agencies about the practice, as well as other celebrities to diligently police their brands by taking action against businesses like Robert Smith’s, as well as speaker bureau websites who might also be violating their rights.