

THE FUTURE OF AGENCIES

These Agencies Are Welcoming Fyre Fest Fraudster Billy McFarland Home From Prison

He has won over partners for PYRT, his next Bahamas-based project




McFarland's new business idea combines hospitality and virtual reality. Adweek; Netflix, Billy McFarland



By Emmy Liederman

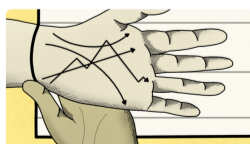
JANUARY 13, 2023

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After serving four years in prison for promising a luxury island experience and delivering tents and cold cheese sandwiches in a Sandals parking lot, Billy McFarland is convinced he can rehabilitate his reputation by building another business on the same island where he is still a wanted man.

McFarland is the architect of the **notorious Fyre Festival**, which was organized by his talent booking company Fyre and relied on **social media marketing from models** like Bella Hadid and Kendall Jenner to lure wealthy millennials. The fraudster has launched a full-fledged apology tour, with McFarland saying he's ready to make a dent in the \$26 million owed to investors, partners and attendees. Three marketing agencies have decided that even the most notorious of swindlers deserves a second chance.

While some shops see his new business as an intriguing challenge, Reputation Management Consultants chairman Eric Schiffer dubbed it a "lotto ticket to potentially hell."



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Tying into the redemption arc McFarland is crafting for himself is a new venture called PYRT. Pronounced "pirate" the idea is to send creators

back to a boutique hotel in the Bahamas and ask

and virtual reality technology.

Despite Bahamas Deputy Prime Minister Chester Cooper labeling him a fugitive, McFarland claims he still has "really close friends and supporters" on the island and is hoping this fanbase will grow if he's able to pay back Fyre Fest workers.

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JUST IN: Fyre Festival founder Billy McFarland is considered a fugitive in The Bahamas, according to a statement by Deputy Prime Minister Chester Cooper. He stated that the Government of The Bahamas will not endorse or approve any event in The Bahamas associated with him.

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"The business is about showing people they can do what they didn't think was possible," McFarland told Adweek, positioning himself as a charmingly ambitious entrepreneur instead of a seasoned con artist. "That is my mantra for life, which has led me to all the good and bad that has happened."

Instead of only targeting the elite like he did with Fyre Fest, McFarland is presenting his ventures as philanthropic by including the people who didn't have thousands of dollars to be scammed out of in the first place. PYRT, which McFarland launched with his longtime friend Mike Falb, has won over branding agency Slaps, tech-focused agency Unconfined and full-service agency NOX.

The shops said their incentives for taking on the project include McFarland's commitment to restitution and collaboration, as well as upfront payments and their own excitement about the business idea.

"Billy is surrounding himself with people who are more likely to tell him 'no,'" said Unconfined founder and creative director Alejandro Corpus, alluding to McFarland's unrealistic timeline when trying to execute Fyre Fest. "We're not here to be yes men for him. There is a lot of scrutiny under what he does and who he is, so we're protecting ourselves by explaining to him that these things take time."

However, at least two of McFarland's new business associates allege he's already falling back into bad habits. In December, The Daily Beast **reported** that McFarland had scammed PYRT investors John Taylor, who he met in prison, and Taylor's business partner Eric Bratcher out of \$640,000. McFarland

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told Adweek the two never invested in PYRT, and he

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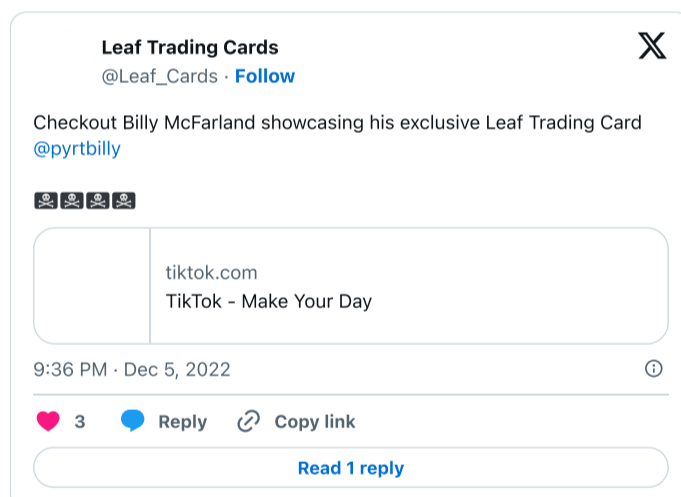
Banking on a comeback story

When PYRT was only a half-baked idea, Falb was in charge of scouting out agency partners and strategically withheld his business partner's identity until right before intake meetings.

Despite this foot-in-the-door strategy, McFarland claims that "people are way more positive than I was expecting," citing support for both his professional brand and his personal redemption tour from sympathetic agency partners.

"I put myself in his shoes when I was 25, and he made a lot of errors and surrounded himself with the wrong people," said Corpus, adding that things would have turned out differently if McFarland had worked with an "experienced agency like Unconfined that has a reputation of delivering on things. We are setting ourselves apart by being a company that can rebrand and get a successful product out there."

After initially agreeing to an interview, NOX co-founder and chief creative officer Matthew Ligotti declined Adweek's request, explaining that he wants his shop to remain "behind the scenes as the project is progressing." McFarland admits that not everyone is eager to associate with him—he claims PYRT is funded by the social media content he commissions for brands behind closed doors, in addition to Cameo revenue, an in-progress documentary with Ample Entertainment and Freemantle, and an exclusive line of Leaf Trading Cards.



"It's probably transactional," said McFarland, adding that he is "good at making content that gets a lot of attention," a trait he says is attractive to newer businesses. "People's desire to succeed overlooks a lot of my mistakes in the past."

McFarland added that brands are "limiting my exposure" by keeping their relationships with him private. He wouldn't divulge much about his clients, but mentioned that a "Grammy Award-winning artist" and job recruitment platform Bounty Hunter World are paying him to handle their social media marketing.

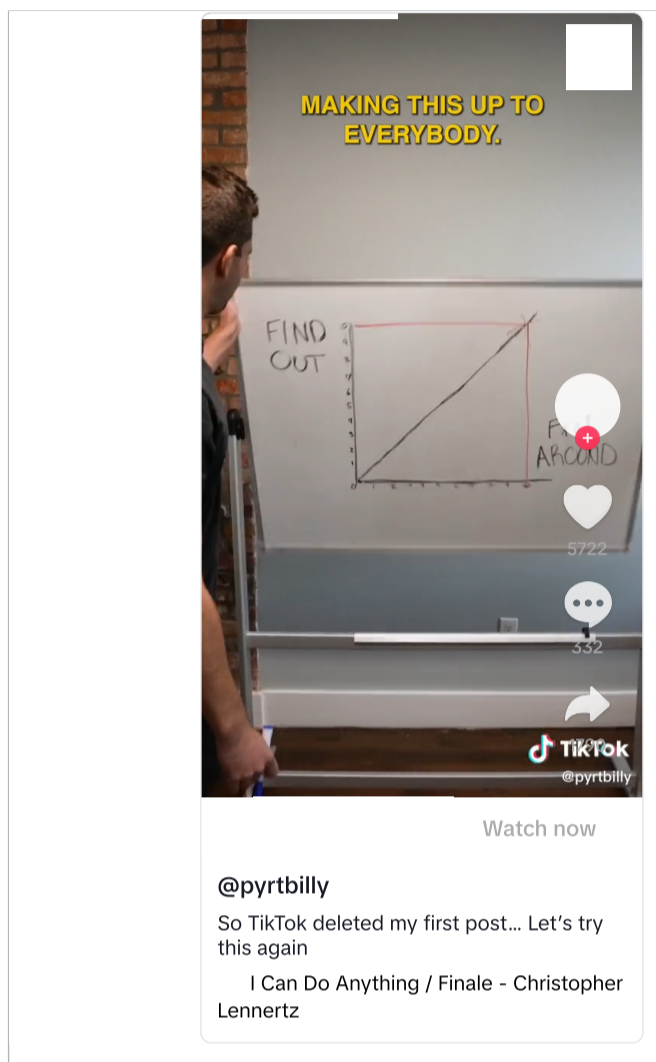
In addition to the financial risk involved with befriending a white collar felon, Schiffer—an entrepreneur, author and CNN contributor who has been repairing the damaged reputations of high-profile celebrities and brands since 2007—said the decision is accompanied by "an air of desperation." He added that before an agency takes on a new client, its leaders need to ask themselves whether



the majority of their staff is comfortable with the

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"All press is not good press for an agency," said Jennifer Risi, founder and president of marketing and communications agency The Sway Effect. "You are the company you keep, and you need to make sure you work with brands that are likeminded in values and mission."



Citing a 'content revolution'

McFarland has noticed a mindset shift in the business world after serving more than 3 years of his 6-year sentence, released to house arrest in March 2022. In an effort to distance themselves from corporate America and attract a younger audience, marketers are less precious about their image and more eager to take risks, he said.

Corpus, who has been most public of the three agency leaders about his relationship with PYRT, said other clients find the fact that the brand is run by McFarland "amusing more than anything."

"People who are most scared to get involved have the most to hide," said McFarland, adding that the brands that work with controversial partners seem the most genuine. "The content revolution of the last five years has made a lot of this possible."

Slaps, a branding agency focused on projects that appeal to Gen Z and streetwear culture, is drawn to clients with a "strong story" and desire to do more than just build revenue.

"He said his intention was to pay back the people he wronged while connecting the digital and physical worlds," said founder and creative director Sébastien Vandecasteele. "We're taking a leap of faith, but if he said he was just launching the company to rebuild his reputation, our values wouldn't have been aligned."

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Despite his enthusiasm, Vandecasteele wants to

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website. Corpus said taking risks and "seeing how they play out" is part of the agency business, but Schiffer added that associating with McFarland to any degree at this point comes with high risk.

"There's a potential that Billy has corrected his business ethics, wants to really provide value and has a system that can deliver on that," he said. "But without validation, agencies would be taking a giant gamble that could cause them to end up in the courtroom if they're wrong."

Despite his time federal prison over that fraudulent island event, McFarland is as ready as ever to put on a show.

"There's a couple things I have to do in life, and executing some sort of festival is certainly one of them," McFarland said. "It needs to be done at some point in the near future."



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