

# tyra

## UNEXPECTED

### SMART BUT NOT CHEAP, TYRA BANKS SWEARS SHE'S JUST AN ORDINARY LADY

BY ADRIENNE P. SAMUELS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEITH MAJOR

Tyra Banks doesn't like to spend money.

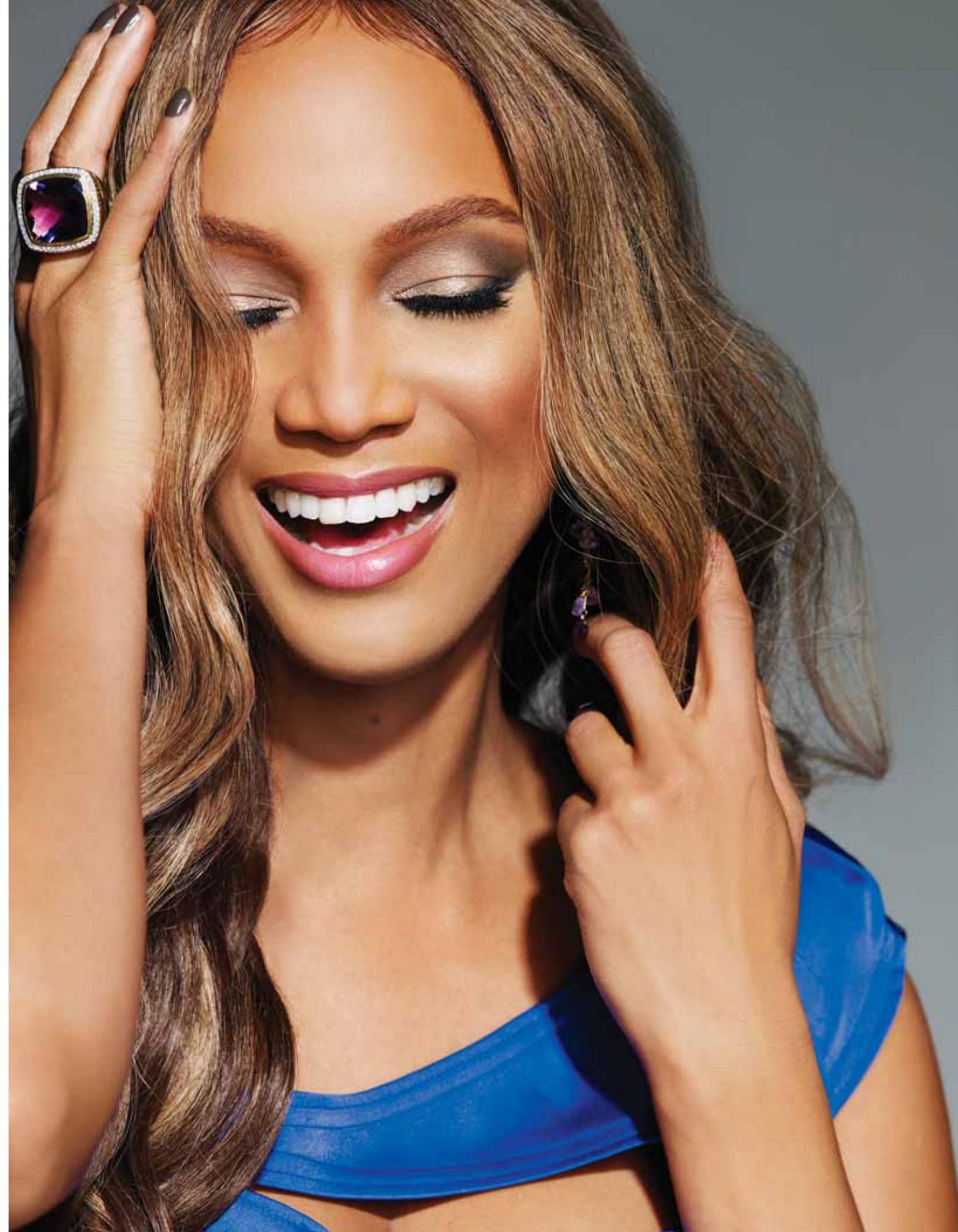
Or, at least, not a lot of it. Or, at least, not frivolously.

There is, however, always an exception to the rule. Like that time when she bought 15 pairs of shoes at the Union Square DSW in New York City. The original plan was to buy one pair of Keds to wear around the house, but, like most women, she walked out carrying bags filled with heels, boots and flats.

"I was in there for a hour and a half," she says, sipping on a cup of coffee at New York's Empire Diner. "I did the flats, the slides, I did the heels because I was like, 'these prices are crazy amazing.'"

It's clear she can afford to shop at Prada or Christian Louboutin or Dolce & Gabbana. And she does—or someone who knows her does, as shown by the brownish Prada bag she carried with her, haphazardly placing it on the aluminum chair next to her.

Watching Tyra at work, even observing her swirl a very small spoonful of sugar



GOLD DROP EARRING, ANA BEIGN. PURPLE SATIN DRESS, TADASHI COLLECTION. RING, DAVID YURMAN.



EARINGS: CAROLE TANENBAUM VINTAGE COLLECTION; BLACK DRESS: FOLEY & CORINNA; CURRY THIN BRACELET: LORRAINE SCHWARTZ; GOLD BRACELET: CAROLE TANENBAUM VINTAGE COLLECTION; GOLD MESH CUFF: LORRAINE SCHWARTZ; STYLIST: VANIECE PIER-THOMAS; ASSISTANT: TINA PHANI; SEAMSTRESS: CLAUDIA DIAZ; MAKEUP: VALENTE FRAZIER; HAIR: YUSSEFF SWITH; MANICURIST: DIDA; PRODUCED BY: HARRIETTE COLE AND DUDLEY M. BROOKS; PRODUCTION SUPPORT: ELAINE WELTEROTH AND CAROLYN COLEMAN

into her coffee, is to look at a woman who combines power and restraint. She might go all out on her TV shows, proving to viewers how “normal” she is by revealing her cellulite or her weave or her Inglewood, Calif., upbringing. But, more than that, this beautiful, green-eyed, 5-foot-10-inch, highly intelligent, clearly motivated supermodel businesswoman is fascinating because she’s always trying to save a buck.

“I am all about value,” says Tyra, 34, before slipping out of her ultra-proper English and affecting a more homegirl rhythm of speech. “For instance, I’m decorating a new apartment in New York right now, and I have a meeting with the designer and I’m going to tell him, ‘I don’t care how much money they say I make in a year. It could be more, it could be less. But you don’t need to be looking at that number and spending my money as if it is yours.’”

She saves money in other ways: by staying with her mom when she’s in Los Angeles; by making presents for her senior staffers; and, for her New York offices, choosing to paint the walls rather than change the carpeting because, she says, new paint is more affordable than new carpeting.

This frugalista lifestyle dissipates when it comes to other people’s money. Tyra doesn’t want her employees—or the people who serve her in restaurants—in the poorhouse. She’s a huge tipper, paying almost 30 percent if the bill is low, as it is on this day in the diner. She also gives Christmas bonuses to every employee. And this year she will forgo her annual out-of-country holiday trip so she can pocket the cash.

“I gotta take care of my people,” she says, shrugging. “Hotel prices are at a peak. Because of what’s going on with the economy I’ve decided not to take that vacation. So I was like, I’ll just chill. I’m doing a ‘stay-cation.’ Staying in the States.”

Such examples of thrift are surprising coming from a woman who is No. 68 on the Forbes 2008 list of the world’s most powerful celebrities, and who just bought her dad a house and is reported to have earned about \$28 million last year.

Furthermore, she’s broken racial barriers in modeling, has three hit TV shows with another one (planned with funnyman Ashton Kutcher) on the way and is co-producing made-for-DVD movies, based on The New York Times best-selling *The Clique* novels, for the ’tween girl set. Next year, she plans to boost her market share by selling products or services—she hasn’t decided what they will be—that give “attainable beauty” to the average Jane.

Working this hard and saving money is the Tyra way of doing things, says her best friend, Kenya Barris, who collaborated with her to bring *America’s Next Top Model* to life. For instance, he says, Tyra was making \$70,000 to \$80,000 a year while in high school, but she refused to buy an “it” car.

“Any one of us would’ve gotten a Cherokee, but she kept that Nissan Sentra well into our college years,” says Barris, who

first met Tyra because, in kindergarten, they were seated alphabetically. “She drove it literally until the wheels fell off. The thing she is impressed with is getting a deal on something. She gets a kick out of being frugal.”

Perhaps that frugality is what she has in common with other moguls like Bill Gates or Oprah Winfrey—folks famous for being rich without flaunting it. Every publication from Newsweek to The New York Times Magazine has placed her solidly on this mogul list. Yet she shrinks from the title, saying she’s not quite there. Perhaps 10 years from now, she says, her empire will be complete and she’ll be mature enough to handle moguldom. For the moment, though, she’s only a mogul-in-training.

“Don’t get me wrong,” she says, adjusting the black-and-white bandana holding down her wavy locks. “Ego-wise, when I see the cover of the magazines and they say that [I’m a mogul] I’m like oh, ‘that looks popping and it looks hot, but it ain’t true.’ Oprah’s been doing this for 30 years. Mogul? That’s like Martha Stewart. That’s like going public. Mogul? Not yet.”

**NOT YOUR AVERAGE LADY**

Tyra Banks goes to extraordinary lengths to show just how ordinary she is.

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—Tyra Banks

She prefers shopping for housewares at Crate & Barrel and noshing at The Cheesecake Factory.

She gains and loses weight. She points out that her forehead is, in fact, big and that as a super-skinny, super-tall seventh-grader, she looked “alienesque.” Of course, she filled out as she grew up, and as her famous bikini cover of Sports Illustrated has illustrated, the rest is history.

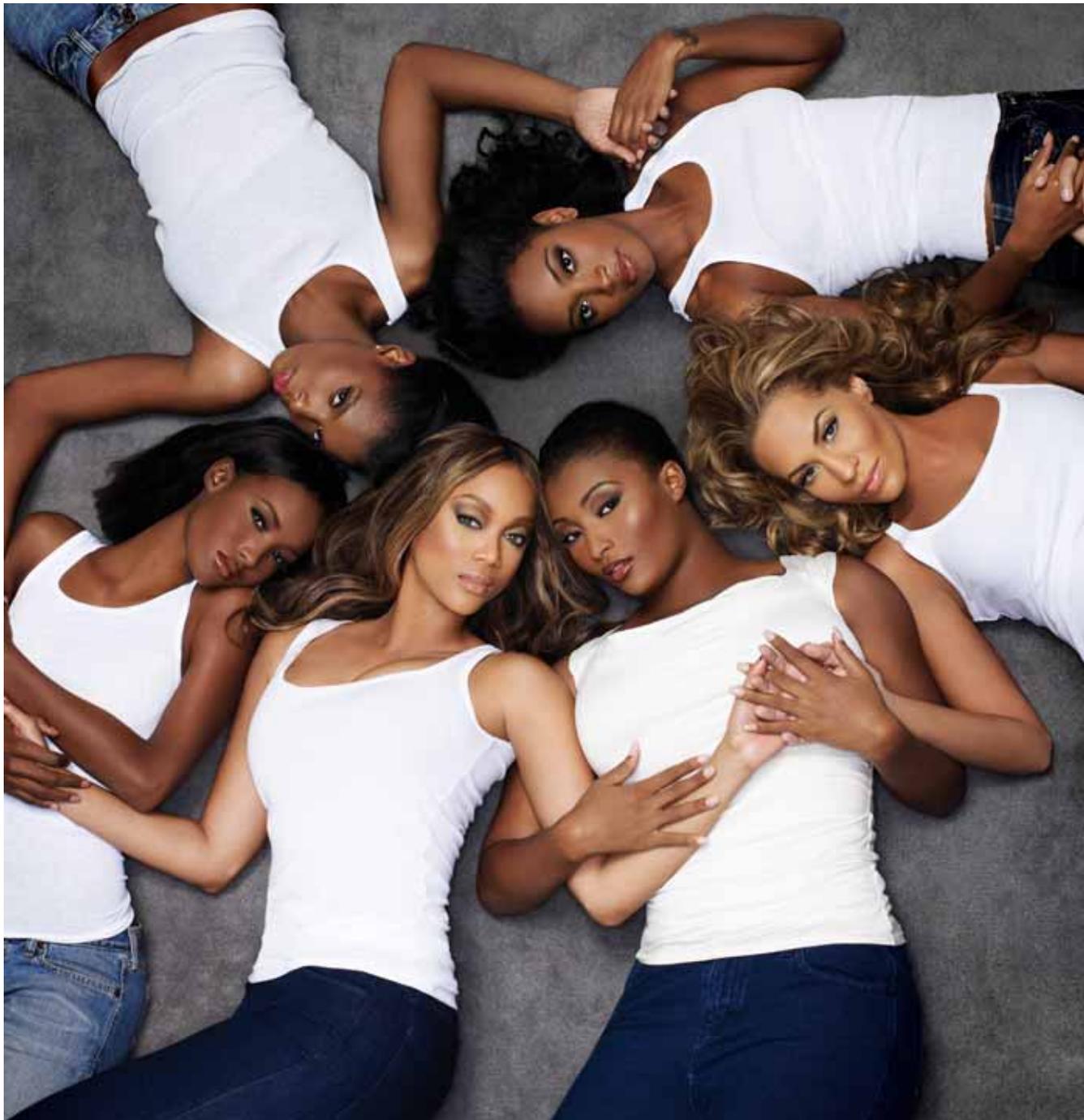
This morning, among the decidedly normal people

eating their bagels and chives at the diner, Tyra is now trying to prove that she is awkward.

Yeah right. To prove her point, she swings one long, slender leg off the floor and perches it near the top of the aluminum table, not too far from her coffee cup. She peels back a black legging to show off a rather spectacular bruise on her calf. She’s pretty agile. She’s wearing flats.

“I still bang into things,” she explains, excitedly, her voice a singsong lilt of highs and lows. “I got this one while analyzing my *Top Model* girls... There were, like, 20 finalists, and I’m backing up trying to take a picture of the girls, and I tripped on the little coffee table. Bang! This thing hurt so bad, but then I fell and came up quickly. And I was like see, ‘I fell and I made it fierce. I’m teaching you a lesson because y’all have no idea how much pain I am in.’”

She walked it off for about a year before seeing a doctor about it. Her doctor told her she had a stress fracture. Not to worry, it healed itself.



**A MODEL GATHERING** | Tyra (c.) is joined by five former *America's Next Top Model* participants, (clockwise from Tyra) Fatima Siad, Marvita Washington, Bre Scullark, Dominique Reighard and Toccara Jones. Through the show, Tyra is trying to use her influence to change people's concept of beauty, particularly concerning dark skin.

These things happen to Tyra a lot. A bruise here, an upset stomach there, a worldwide financial crisis that could impact her investments—but she is a master at not letting it bother her. Most times, she sees providence in those problems and finds a way to cash in on them. That, apparently, is her God-given talent.

Take, for example, the instance last year when a paparazzo took an unflattering picture of Tyra in a one-piece swimsuit while she was vacationing. Once the picture was published, she was publicly chastised for being what Black America would call

“thick.” White America, however, thought it was fat. Some tabloids even called her “Tyra pork chop.” She got angry, but then got even by filming an entire episode of *The Tyra Banks Show* wearing that same swimsuit and calling for all women to have body confidence, no matter their look.

She isn't perfect, she often says during our morning chat. But by being candid, by showing how she looks in that suit, by sometimes featuring nontraditional-looking girls and by creating a Tyra-world where beauty is within everyone's reach, she's hoping to force a

HAIR, YUSSEFF SMYTH; MAKEUP, VALENTE FRAZIER; ASSISTANT, LYNETTE BROOM.

change in America's view of what's pretty and what's not.

To better prove this point, she wanted to be photographed with her *Top Models* of different hues and sizes. Plus, with her newest reality show *Stylista*, she's pushing for more than diversity in looks. In this addictive, *Devil-Wears-Prada*-esque series, where you never see her in front of the camera, she's entertaining the masses but also wants to expose viewers to the diversity of jobs and opportunities in the fashion world. So what if you're not 5-foot-9 and therefore aren't the top pick as a runway model? You can still be a photographer or a writer or an editor for a fashion magazine. You could also be behind the camera, like so many of the Black staffers who help produce Tyra's talk show every day.

She's even an ordinary boss, says John Redmann, executive producer of *The Tyra Banks Show*.

"You don't have to kiss her ass and tell her, 'Oh, my God, you are so amazing,'" says Redmann, who has worked with Tyra for four seasons. "You can talk to her like a producer. There's no intimidation factor with her on that level. She values other people's opinions."

But not about her private life—Tyra is mum on who she's dating now, though she has said she's interested in having kids. She loves the idea of companionship but isn't in a rush to the altar. She dates regular guys, albeit tall ones. And when she does go out, she tries her best to not always be the center of attention.

For instance, in the fall of 2006 she was dating a rather good-looking, rather tall, noncelebrity man whom she accompanied to a high-society wedding between a businessman and a burgeoning actress in Miami. It was her second wedding trip with the "regular guy" companion. The other wedding was a few days earlier, in Atlanta. As she walked into the reception hall in Miami, held at the prestigious Vizcaya Gardens, she didn't enter as "fierce, super Tyra!" She walked in as regular, friendly, demure Tyra. Even her outfit and shoes were modest, ensuring

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—Tyra Banks

that the day belonged to the blushing bride.

Tyra has been connected to New York banker John Utendahl and has, in the past, been romantically linked with former basketball star Chris Webber and filmmaker John Singleton. She now meets datable, noncelebrity guys the way other women do.

"It's the hook up!" she says, cheerfully. "One thing I *can*

# 6 Ways Tyra saves money & time

- Invest in items that appreciate in value, such as houses.
- When redecorating, paint the walls rather than change carpet. Paint is usually cheaper.
- Compare rates before staying at a hotel. Or stay with parents or friends when traveling.
- Occasionally make presents instead of always buying gifts.
- Make lists. Having a plan helps get things done.
- Stay away from PDAs. Take notes on paper instead.

say is I try not to date people who are famous because one celebrity plus another celebrity equals five... The paparazzi will just start mixing my name with theirs. I find it fascinating looking at other celebs dating each other and I'm like, 'Look how cool they look!' But it's not a personal interest of mine. I get set up by friends."

## BUILDING AN EMPIRE

Usher has a cologne. Martha Stewart has home goods. The Olsen twins have jewelry, makeup and clothing.

But Tyra?

She isn't ready to put her face on a product just yet. Though she's gotten offers, she has turned down Tyra perfumes, Tyra lipsticks, Tyra pillows and Tyra comforters.

"I don't just want to throw my name on stuff like that," she says. "Oh, my God, I've had the opportunity. And I could have retired off of doing that type of stuff. I just feel that the marketplace for celebrities throwing their names on things is oversaturated."

So one of the future roles of Bankable Enterprises, which oversees Tyra's expanding businesses, is to find, manufacture and distribute Tyra's vision of beauty and womanly self-worth.

"One of my passions is to refine or open up this narrow thing of what people call beauty," she says, before heading out to film her talk show. "To use my high-fashion background to expand what people say beautiful is."

Tyra's also concerned about Black America's fixation on skin tone and the idea that lighter skin equals better beauty. The issue hit home while hanging out with her friend and former Miss USA Kenya Moore, who is darker than Tyra and no less

lovely. Moore's long hair was always dismissed as a weave, says Tyra, while Tyra's hair was heralded as long and lovely and real. But the opposite was true. Anyone who watches Tyra's shows knows she constantly reminds viewers that she wears a weave.

She has tired of Black America's fixation on her light eyes and skin color—a weird juxtaposition to the high-fashion industry, which has seemed to highlight darker-skinned models like Alek Wek.

“I noticed as my success happened, I became a part of those groups of women who were light-skinned and heralded for the physical,” she says, pausing to be sure she says the right thing on this sensitive topic. “I hope you can write this not so crazy... I hope you can. If a woman was light-skinned, it didn't matter about her attractiveness. She might not be that attractive, but she was considered higher on the scale. I won't say names but in my own family certain people were heralded for being lighter who [were not] the most beautiful.”



AWARD-WINNING STYLIST | Tyra Banks expresses her satisfaction after winning this year's award for Outstanding Talk Show/Informative during the *Daytime Emmy Awards* show in Los Angeles.

## 5 Secrets to get on Tyra's good side

- Expensive gifts don't impress her. Try something homemade, like a picture of you looking “fierce” or “smiling with your eyes.”
- If you see her getting interviewed and you want an autograph, don't just rudely interrupt. Wait.
- Don't ask her for autographs at a wedding or a funeral—it's disrespectful.
- Acknowledge the beauty in unusual features, like large eyes and buzz-cut hair.
- Recognize the beauty in all skin tones—dark to light. And stop saying things like “You're pretty to be so dark.”

So, in true Tyra fashion, she dedicated one episode of her talk show to the issue of skin color, prompted in part by an essay that appeared last year in *EBONY* magazine.

“Why are White people in the fashion industry in Europe saying this [dark skin] is beautiful, but my own community is not saying that this is beautiful,” she asks. “It became my passion to show this beauty to these young girls. And I used the power that I have, which is casting girls on *Top Model*.”

That power is spreading, says friend and producer Ken Mok, who executive produces *Top Model* and *Stylista*. Both shows air on The CW network.

“She's an incredibly ambitious person who has a very, very good big-picture view,” says Mok, who has worked with Banks for five years now. “Tyra's the kind of person who, growing up, said, ‘I don't want to work at the candy store, I wanna *own* the candy store.’ That's the kind of mind-set she has. That kind of world view, with the smarts that she has, and the hard work ethic that she has—it's no surprise that Tyra is where she's at.”

And she's in a good place. She's centered and grateful. She's learning and growing. She's also very much in control without acting like a control freak. To her, the future is clear and distinct as she shifts from being in front of the camera to being behind it.

“I have really big aspirations,” says Tyra. “My stylist always jokes, ‘When is it enough?’”

She's not exactly sure of the answer, nor can she predict that she will singlehandedly re-create the beauty industry. But she is sure that in 10 years, the title of mogul will definitely fit.

And what will that look like to Tyra?

“I think I'll have an empire.” □