

Tune In Tonight

L.A. Story: An Hour In The Dark Between Barbara and Diane

In the Spring of 1988, I had just gotten the position to National Sales Manager for an NBC station in California. On this particular day, I was making what is called a “Market Trip” to Los Angeles. What this entails, is hourly meetings with major advertising agency clients to build relationships and showcase our station, as they evaluate the market prior to purchasing an ad schedule. You are usually granted a few minutes to tell why the advertiser should spend more with you than your competitors. For example, If you can move your share of an ad schedule budget that you receive from 30% to 35%, it will be quite significant and well worth the trip. The four key markets for me to visit ad agencies routinely were Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Chicago. If you watched Jon Hamm as Don Draper in “Madmen,” that was the world you walked into.

The opening question posed by the advertiser was usually something like, “So, what’s new in your market, and at the station?” The wrong answer is, “Nothing or Not Much.” You need to be prepared to show excitement about your station and relay quick key selling points, highlighting activity and events with which the advertiser may want to be associated. Frankly, this is what the ad buyer does all day and you will lose your audience in the first 30 seconds if you are not ready and engaging. You wait in the lobby for awhile and then, “It’s Showtime.”

A typical day may have a schedule of breakfast with P&G, 9am with Chevrolet, 10am with McDonalds, 11am with Pizza Hut and so on. The Sales team based in L.A. would schedule the appointments and then shuttle me between calls. Lunch was typically reserved for a top client they wanted to impress and would be at the most trendy L.A. restaurant that both the Sales Rep. and the Buyer wanted to try. They referred to those in my position as Expense Account Millionaires.

Their choice of restaurant was always on my expense budget, so there was nothing they thought was too expensive. It was not uncommon, even in those days, for a lunch in L.A. to cost between \$200-\$300 for 3 or 4 people, with a meal the size of what an appetizer would be back in Kansas City. Both lunch and dinner would prove to be interesting on this particular day, as I would learn that these skilled Ad Buyers and Sales Reps were also professional and experienced “Star Gazers,” and I was along for the ride.

I always stayed in L.A. at the Century Plaza Hotel. I was to wait out front at a specifically scheduled time that morning for my Sales Rep to pick me up. On this day, the schedule was for Robin Yablok to pick me up in front of the hotel at 8:30am and go to our first 9am appointment. The L.A. MMT Sales team was great to work with, and they knew when they picked me up to

have a cassette cued to play Randy Newman's "I Love L.A.," It always put us in the right upbeat frame of mind. I still love that song.

On this day, however, things did not go as planned. I saw that Robin had parked her car, and she said, "Get back in, we're going to a different meeting, She had gotten a tip that the ABC Affiliates meeting was going on in the hotel and she had a plan to crash this private gathering.

"I don't want to get in trouble and we have a schedule to keep," I protested. I was new in the job and didn't want to lose it on my first trip. But Robin insisted emphatically, "I've rescheduled our meeting, nobody will know, but we don't want to miss this." I was not comfortable with her plan. I worked for ABC's competitor —an NBC station. You don't just walk in off the street and into a private ABC Network TV meeting. However, this didn't seem to be Robin's first high-level meeting crash adventure, and I followed her as instructed.

"You're in a suit and tie; we look the part. Act like you belong here, follow me and don't say anything," she said as we walked through the lobby and up a flight of stairs to the second floor hotel meeting room.

As we walked up the stairs, I noticed Tim McCarver, Baseball Hall of Fame member, as a broadcaster, run past us frantically, putting on his jacket. He obviously appeared to be late. Waiting for him at the top of the stairs were fellow broadcasters, Hall of Fame pitcher Jim Palmer alongside the legendary Al Michaels. "*Do you believe in Miracles? Yes.*" They were the broadcast team for ABC Monday Night Baseball at the time. The meeting was about to start.

We followed them to the conference room door, and it was then that we merged with Good Morning America's Hosts Joan Lunden and Charlie Gibson, who we politely let walk in front of us. There were two security guards on both sides of the doorway. Nobody had badges, passes or anything that would be part of a common security check nowadays. Prior to 9/11, if you were dressed right and looked and acted like you belonged, and walked in with the ABC Morning Team, you just walked right in. So we did.

The small hotel meeting room would hold approximately 100 people comfortably, but I'm sure fire codes were broken as twice that many were crammed together. The lights dimmed as we walked in and there were no seats left. We stood at the back, right inside the door. We were shoulder to shoulder with others in the back of the room. In the darkened room, on a lit stage were ABC President, Brandon Stoddard, and ABC President In-Waiting, Bob Iger, at the podium. Through the darkness, the stage was the only thing you could see, other than the seated silhouettes. Iger and Stoddard introduced ABC Evening Anchor, Peter Jennings, to applause; as he would lead the synchronized meeting question-and-answer presentation to come. I still had no idea what the planned program was and who the guests were to be.

It was 1988, an election year, in the heyday of broadcast television. No expense or power would be spared by the Networks, as they would roll out the red carpet for their station affiliates, hosting such private events to impress the station management and impress themselves. This event most assuredly would not and could not even be attempted today. The meeting was to flex the ABC muscle and demonstrated the power a Network had to even attempt what was in store for us.

Peter Jennings introduced his guests, “Please welcome to our stage, from the Democratic Party and running for President, Governor Michael Dukakis; the Reverend Jesse Jackson, Senator Al Gore, Senator Paul Simon, Senator Gary Hart and House Representative from Missouri, Dick Gephardt. Now, for the Republican Party, please welcome Senator George H.W. Bush, Kansas Senator Bob Dole, Christian Broadcasting Founder, Pat Robertson, House Representative and NFL Great, Jack Kemp, and Secretary of State, Alexander Haig.”

It was at this time that 4 more people came into the room late, and crowded around us from the lone door in the back, likely from their own private meeting. What was already a crowded dark gathering, became a very uncomfortable Close-Encounters-of-the-ABC-Meeting kind. We were squeezed and pushed against each other in the dark, so each of use could see the events on stage.

The question-and-answer session was not necessarily memorable, but that was never the point. ABC’s intent was to impress more than inform. However, I will never forget this room full of household names, more than I could recognize then, or attempt to recall all these years later.

It wasn’t until the event ended, and the lights came up that we all looked to see who it was pressed against each of us from all sides. My jaw dropped when I looked to my right and there up against me was a smiling Barbara Walters and a smiling Hugh Downs beside her—Hosts of 20/20 in 1988. Then I turned to see who was up against me on my left, to see a politely smiling, tall and stunning Diane Sawyer, and beside her, President of ABC News, Roone Arledge. They had come in late and also crowded in around where I stood.

With this presentation now over, a break for the ABC Affiliate Meeting was announced, so Robin and I met back up and walked out to leave, overwhelmed with what we had just witnessed, knowing this was a remarkable life moment to savor.

Lunch that day was equally memorable. The trendy L.A. restaurants picked by the ad buyers typically were not very large. This particular restaurant had church pew bench seating on one side with small tables only inches apart, close enough that you could barely avoid touching the people next to you. Too close for my comfort level. However, I was stunned when two men came

in and were seated next to us —it was Steve Martin who sat on the bench seat next to me on my right.

I was having lunch with some ad buyer, whose name and account I don't even remember. We were there to discuss business and get to know each other. I'm sorry, but *The Jerk* is right next to us with a man who appeared to be his agent. Their conversation included discussing current and upcoming projects. This Wild and Crazy Guy had just completed *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* in 1988, and released *Parenthood* in 1989. Martin was at the peak of his career, releasing at least a movie or two every year. The buyer and I over the next hour, struggled to keep on point and we both were often quiet, more interested in listening in to the conversation taking place next to us. I don't remember her name, and she wouldn't remember mine, but we both remember having lunch and eavesdropping for an hour on Steve Martin.

That night, after a full day of Sales calls, the team took me out to the Hollywood Improv Comedy Club to get to know each other better. It was a slow weeknight and we were there early. The Comedy Club is also a small venue. There were only 2 rows of seats. We were in the 2nd row, as there were reserved signs on the seats in front of us. I'd be surprised if there weren't some now well-known comedians scheduled, but what I remember, is the room coming to a complete stop when then Heavyweight Champion, Mike Tyson walked in with his new bride, Robin Givens and bodyguards. Does Mike Tyson really need bodyguards?

Every eye in the room was on them as they entered. She politely acknowledged me and smiled as she sat down in their reserved seats, in front of me with her new husband on her left. She seems very nice, I thought. Then I looked to my left at Mike Tyson, and he had turned completely around in his chair to give me the most intense snarling glare, a glare that you could feel hit you like a left hook. He is intense and scary. Who would suspect that?

I always thought Tyson was a likable character, blessed with unequalled physical skill. However, my advice to anyone who meets him is, don't even acknowledge whatever woman is with him. Even if she politely smiles to acknowledge you. Tyson and Givens divorced the following year, symbolically on Valentine's Day.

My last memory from that night is leaving the comedy club and having to step around Tyson's red Ferrari parked on the sidewalk just inches from the front door. When you're the World Heavyweight Champion, you park wherever you want. Who wants to tell Mike Tyson to move his car? Not me. Not now or ever.

There would be many other unexpected encounters in the future, but never a day packed with highlights like this day in the Spring of 1988. Thank you, Robin Yablok for instructing me to tag

along and keep quiet. I would have never had an experience and memories like this, without you displaying such awareness, determination and tenacity.

Another night in L.A. Team Manager, Jason Kleinhein, took me to a Dodgers Vs. Cubs game. Jason had season tickets and we are both baseball fans, and he had seats low on the right field line. Late in the game a foul ground ball came down the line, and I knew I could easily lean over the rail and pick up the slow-moving ball. As I leaned over the rail to get the ball, I did not realize I was actually leaning on a gate rail to the field. That is until the gate opened and I fell, face planting on the field as the ball rolled by. I expected Jason and the fans around us to laugh at me, and they didn't disappoint; but, from the ground, I then noticed the Dodgers Right Fielder had his hands on his knees, and he was also laughing at me quite loudly. I sheepishly got back to my seat, where Jason reminded me that the Cubs had the game showing nationally on WGN-TV that night. Thankfully, no one has ever told me they had recognized me and my blunder on national TV. L.A. trips were always fun and with great weather. "It never rains in Southern California."

I concluded visiting and working in the major markets was better than actually living in them. That was true in the 1990s, but it is even more so at this time. My position required me to spend 2 or 3 days a month in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and also a week twice a year in New York and Chicago. If you scheduled your trips around weekends and vacation days you can extend your time and Linda and Travis could frequently join me for some convenient family trips.

When we moved to Wichita for 9 years in the 90s, the trips to San Francisco would continue. Working for Wichita ABC affiliate KAKE-TV, which was owned at the time by the San Francisco Chronicle Company. They required quarterly reports in person, a presentation to the board on how the station was performing. So 4 times a year I'd go to San Francisco and do the quarterly song and dance on the station progress. But once that was done, if Linda could join me we could enjoy San Francisco, Napa, Sonoma or drive to Lake Tahoe.

We found a favorite boutique winery V. Satuii in Napa, and especially enjoyed their Autumn Harvest Ball. However the most exotic trip we did in San Francisco included a helicopter tour of Downtown San Francisco and then we flew north underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, which I believe is no longer allowed. After flying under the bridge, we then flew across the San Francisco Bay to land at a winery where a picnic lunch and a wine tasting was waiting. That was one of our more exotic ventures.

New York and Chicago business trips were exciting and exhausting. For the most part, the agencies are located in the same area and you walk between appointments. They would always tell you, "Bring your tennis shoes and roller skates." The one thing I learned the first year, which

should have been a no brainer, is, if you make trips to New York and Chicago for business twice a year, don't go in the winter or summer. If you can choose the month you go, why wouldn't you choose spring and fall. With the exception of seeing the Radio City Christmas Spectacular and the Rockettes, long walks to meet with clients, or attending a Broadway Show or visiting Central Park were much more enjoyable when the weather is comfortable. Hello. And don't wear new shoes if you don't want blisters.

All of these cities had great things to offer during the 1990s, but now with some level of demise both in the cities and in myself, I'm glad I experienced those things years ago. The daily schedule of meeting advertisers hourly could be a grind, but the chance to work in and experience those cities was exhilarating.

When working for KAKE, the ABC Affiliate meetings were unlike any other business meetings. Held at the Walt Disney World Resort, I would attend meetings, but Linda, Travis and one of his friends could walk a few feet from the hotel to and enjoy Disneyland, Epcot Center and ESPN's Wide World of Sports. At an ABC dinner one night in 1997, Michael Bolton sang "Go The Distance," from the movie Hercules which had just been released. I still love that song. ABC spared no expense.

We got to see the country due to job relocations, corporate meetings, and in addition, because of incentive travel which we offered our clients for their increased advertising budgets, we got to see the world. We took client trips to Switzerland, Alaska, Hawaii, Banff Canada, Caribbean Cruises and more. These trips were a great break from the routine work days, and not only were the costs covered, since we were taking clients, no vacation days needed to be used. Some would say offering trips was unfairly influencing client advertising decisions. That's true. But, they did work, although the station would get locked into a pattern, where clients say, "Where are you taking me this year."