

Tune-In

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

In the Spring of 1988, I had just gotten the position of National Sales Manager for a NBC station in California. On this day, I was making what is called a "Market Trip" to Los Angeles. What this entails is hourly meetings with major advertising agencies clients to build a relationship and showcase your station as they evaluate the market for an ad schedule. You are granted a few minutes to showcase your station and show why the advertiser should spend more with you than your competitors. If you can move your share of an ad schedule budget that you receive from 30% to 35%, it would be significant and well worth the trip. The 4 key markets for me to routinely visit Ad Agencies in were Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Chicago. If you watched the TV Series "*Madmen*," That was a good representation of the world and era you were walking into.

The opening questioned 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 excited about your station and relay quick key points highlighting activity and events 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 prepared and engaging. You wait in the lobby till your name is called and then, "It's Showtime."

A typical day may have a schedule of breakfast with P&G, 9am with Chevrolet, 10a with McDonalds, 11a with Pizza Hut and so on. The Sales team based in L.A. schedule the appointments and then would shuttle you 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 the Sales Rep. and the Buyer wanted to try. They referred to those in my position as Expense Account Millionaires.

The choice of which restaurant for lunch was always on my expense budget, so there was nothing they thought was too expensive. It was not uncommon, even in that day for a lunch in L.A. to cost between \$200-\$300 for 3 or 4 people, with a meal the size of an appetizer back in Kansas City. Both lunch and dinner would prove to be especially 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. But we'll get to that after what happened that morning.

I stayed in L.A. most often at the Century Plaza Hotel. I was to wait out front at a coordinated time 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 8:30a and to go on our first appointment. The L.A. 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 mood as we drove through the palm tree lined streets of Los Angeles. I still love the song.

On this day however, things did not go as planned. I saw that Robin had parked the car and as she hurried up to me anxiously said, "Get back in, we're going to a different meeting." She gotten a tip that the ABC Affiliates meeting was going on in the hotel and she wanted to crash the meeting. I protested saying, "I don't want to get in trouble and we have a schedule to keep." Robin responded, "I've rescheduled our meeting, nobody will know, but we don't want to miss this, trust me"

I was not comfortable with the plan. I worked for ABC's competitor, an NBC station. You don't just walk in off the street and into a private Network TV meeting. However, this didn't seem to be Robin's first high level meeting crash adventure. "Your in a suit and tie, we look the part, act

like you belong here, just 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. 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 just about to start, so we followed them to the meeting room door, and it was then that we merged with *Good Morning America* hosts Joan Lunden and Charlie Gibson, who we let walk in front of us. There were two security guards on both sides of the doorway, but no badges, passes or what would be a common security check nowadays. Prior to 9/11, if you were dressed right and looked the part, then just walk right in. So we did.

The hotel meeting room would hold approximately 100 people comfortably, but I'm sure fire codes were broken as seemingly twice that many were crammed together in this banquet room. The lights dimmed as we walked in and there were no seats left. We stood at the back right inside the door, but later I noticed Robin had found a seat, presumably with the one who gave her the tip about the meeting.

I was shoulder to shoulder with others with our backs against the back wall. Through the dark room on a lit stage were ABC President, Brandon Stoddard and ABC President In-Waiting, Bob Iger at the podium on stage. Through the darkness, the stage was the only thing you could see in the room other than silhouettes of those sitting anxiously in their seats. The two men welcomed the attendees and then introduced ABC Evening Anchor, Peter Jennings, to applause, and he would lead the exclusive guests in the question and answer presentation to come. I had no idea what the plan and who the guests were to be.

It was 1988, an election year, and it was the heyday of broadcast television. No expense was spared by the Networks at that time, as they would roll out the red carpet for their station affiliates, hosting such private events to impress the station management and themselves. This event most assuredly would not and could not even be attempted today.

Peter Jennings introduced his guests, "Please welcome to our stage, first from the Democratic Party, 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 more people came into the room from the lone door in the back of the room. What was already a crowded darkened gathering on the back wall, became an uncomfortably *Close Encounter* of the ABC Meeting kind.

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

It wasn't until the event ended, and the lights came up that you could look around and see who you were squeezed between on all sides. My jaw dropped when I looked to my right and there 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 against me on my left, to see a polite and

stunning Diane Sawyer, and beside her Boone Arledge. They had come in late and also crowded in around the back wall door.

With this presentation over, a break for the ABC Affiliate Meeting was announced, so Robin and I met back up, overwhelmed with what we had just witnessed and walked, like we belong with the star studded audience.

Lunch that day was equally memorable. Whatever new Hollywood area restaurant was trending would be the chosen lunch location by the Ad Buyer. These restaurants typically would not be very large with maximum capacity. This particular restaurant had 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, with Steve Martin seated on the bench seat next to me on my right.

I was having lunch with some Ad Buyer, who I don't remember, now or then. We were there to discuss business and get to know each other. I was suppose to be engaging, but I'm sorry, The Jerk, Steve Martin 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 struggled to keep on point and we both were often quiet, more interested in listening in to any eavesdrop tidbits of the conversation next to us that we could hear.

That night, after a full day of calls, the Sales team took me out to the Hollywood Improv Comedy Club that evening as we were still getting to know each other. It was a mid-week slow night and we were there early. The Comedy Club is also not a very big room. We were in the back 2nd row, as there was a reserved signs on the row 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 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 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 his head completely around to give me the most intense glare, a glare that you could feel hit you like a left hook.

I always thought Tyson was a likable character, blessed with unequalled physical skill. But my advice to anyone who meets him, don't even acknowledge a woman with Tyson, even if she nodded and smiled as she sat in front of you. Tyson and Givens divorced the following year, symbolically on Valentines 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 feet from the front door. When you're World Heavyweight Champion, you park wherever you want. Who wants to tell Mike Tyson to move his car? Not me.

There would be many other memorable unexpected encounters in the future, but never a day packed with highlights like this day in the Spring of 1988. Thank you Robin, I would never had the experience without you instructing me to say nothing and displaying such awareness, determination and tenacity.

Another night in L.A., Team Manager, Jason Kleinhein, took me to a Dodger Vs. Cubs game. Jason had season tickets on the right field line. Late in the game a foul ball came down the

line, and I knew I could easily lean over the rail and pick up the slow-moving ball. So I leaned over the rail, not realizing I was actually leaning on the gate rail to the field. That is until the gate opened and I face planet, landing on the field as the ball rolled by. I expected Jason and the fans around us to be laughing at me, and they didn't disappoint; but from the ground, I noticed the Dodger Right Fielder had his hands on his knees laughing out loud at me too. I sheepishly got back to my seat, where Jason reminded me that the Cubs have the game showing tonight nationally on WGN-TV. Thankfully, no one ever told me that they had seen this blunder on national TV. L.A. trip were always fun and seemingly with perfect weather any time of the year.

I concluded that visiting and working in major cities was better than actually living in them. That was true in the 1990s, but it is even more so now. My position required me to spend 2 or 3 days a month in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and a week twice a year in New York and Chicago. If I scheduled my trips around the weekend and use vacation days you got a better airfare rate for the company and I could have Linda and our son Travis frequently join me some family time in these large metropolitan cities.

When we moved to Wichita for 9 years in the 1990s, trip to San Francisco actually increased. Working for Wichita ABC affiliate KAKE-TV, which was owned at the time by the San Francisco Chronicle. They required quarterly performance reports in person to the Board of Directors. So 4 times a year I had to prepare a quarterly song and dance presentation on station progress. But once that meeting was done, if Linda could join me, we could enjoy San Francisco, Napa, Sonoma or drive to Lake Tahoe.

We discovered a favorite boutique winery V. Saluki in Napa, and especially enjoyed their Autumn Harvest Ball. The most exotic trip we did in San Francisco included a helicopter tour of San Francisco which then flew under the Golden Gate Bridge and then across the San Francisco Bay to land at a winery where a private picnic lunch and wine tasting awaited. That was one of our most exciting ventures in our lives.

New York and Chicago trips were exhaustingly exciting. For the most part, the advertising agencies are located in the same area, so you walk between the appointments. You were always told, "Bring your tennis shoes and roller skates." I learned on my first trip, never wear new shoes and schedule your trip in the Spring and Fall as the Winter cold and humid Summer heat were harsh.

We did schedule on trip with Linda and Travis at Christmas, however, to take in the Radio City Christmas Spectacular and Broadway shows. Spring and Autumn were always the best time to enjoy the city and Central Park.

All of the big cities had great things to offer during the 1990s, but now with some level of demise in both the cities and myself, I'm glad I experienced those things earlier in my life. The rapid fire business meetings on the hour could be a grind, but the opportunity to work and enjoy these cities was exhilarating.

When working at KAKE-TV, the ABC affiliate were unlike any other business meetings, as they were held at the Walt Disney World Resort. While I attended meetings, Linda and Travis and a friend he brought, were free to walk into Disney World, Epcot Center and ESPN Wide World of Sports. At the ABC dinner one night they had Michael Bolton perform, "*Go The Distance*," from the movie *Hercules*, which was about to be released. I still love that song, as ABC spared no expense.

We got to see the country due to job relocations and corporate meetings, but it was incentive travel which we offered our clients for their increased advertising budgets on our station, that

allowed us 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 were required to be used. Some may say that offering client trips to influence additional ad spending was bribery. That may be true, but they did work, although the station would get locked into a pattern, where clients would say, "Where are you going to take me this year."