Profile

Jim Caldwell

DRTV’s Renaissance Man
DRTV MARKETING

COVER STORY

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E ntertainer ... producer ... writer ... director ... coach. No matter what hat Jim Caldwell is wearing, one trait prevails: he’s a genuine people person. Or, as Robert Vito, president of Lawman Armor Corp. in Berwyn, Pa. says: “a real man of the people.”

“Jim really wants to get out there into the audience—he wants to see people’s responses,” says Vito, who’s company manufactures the unBRAKEable AutoLock. “For our infomercial, [Caldwell] placed an ad in the paper, asking people to call him if they had ever had their car stolen. As a result, our infomercial’s audience was comprised of people who had their cars stolen.”

As president of Future Thunder Productions Inc. in Sherman Oaks, Calif., Caldwell took it a step further, according to Vito, and sent out samples of the auto locks to the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). “When we showed up on the set there were LAPD members there who had actually used the product,” Vito recalls. “They liked the product, and that reality really came through in the infomercial.”

The man behind the infomercials

Born in Akron, Ohio, in 1950, Caldwell was the son of a financial executive and a stay-at-home mom. He’s the youngest of three sons who “moved a lot” as children. “I always say I was a corporate brat, not an army brat,” says Caldwell, who has lived in 11 states. As a 13 year old, his family even moved to South Korea at one point, when his father was sent there to do consulting work. “It was in 1964, during the peak of the Normalization Treaty being discussed between Japan and South Korea,” Caldwell explains. “It was a very interesting time for a young impressionable boy eager to soak in the experience—including riots, social unrest, the reality of poverty and a totally different culture. We were there for 10 months and it really gave me a perspective of America.”

Most recently, Caldwell makes his home in Los Angeles, though all of that moving may have a lot to do with his outgoing personality and highly polished people skills. He explains: “Moving a lot exposed me to many strangers and the get acquainted process. It also taught me plenty about getting along,
fitting in and not making waves until I got the lay of the land. I learned how to observe and match the situation, tone of voice or level of excitement that I was confronted with."

Also, Caldwell says that as the youngest member of the family he had to learn to assert himself. "I became know as ‘Foreman Jim’ in my family,” he says, adding that at that point he became—and still is—a student of the communication process. “Clarity of communication is a precious commodity,” says Caldwell.

According to Caldwell, music was his family’s bond. In fact, when his mother discovered that her sons could carry a tune at ages 5, 6 and 8, she surprised their dad one day when he returned from a business trip. "My brothers and I serenaded him with a three-part harmony rendition of the old standard When You Wore a Tulip,” recalls Caldwell. "Having a rich background in music, my dad was in hog heaven, and proceeded to teach us about 20 songs over the span of several years—all in barbershop harmony."

The brothers went on to perform in and win talent shows, and still sing a few numbers when they get together these days. In fact, Caldwell recently compiled all their old recordings onto CDs and gave them to his two brothers. “I probably should call Time Life and do the ‘Caldwell Brothers Greatest Hits,’” quips Caldwell. “I’ll have to call Tim Hawthorne and get on that.”

In addition to being well-adapted to change and able to carry a tune, Caldwell also has striking good looks and is a performer by nature. Combining the two he broke into television commercials. In the fall of 1981 he got the call that validated his goals: A talk show on the ABC affiliate in Boston wanted him to audition for their show, which aired right after Good Morning America. The station reviewed his taped audition, then called him up to Boston to audition in person. “The same day over lunch they offered me the job on the GoodDay! show,” says Caldwell. “So, from a standing start—knowing nothing about the business—four and a half years after setting the goal to get a talk show, I was in the sixth largest market in the country five days a week, live on the ABC affiliate, interviewing every variety of celebrity and author that came through town.”

A year later, Caldwell was hosting PM Magazine in New York, five days a week in prime time, and had William Morris as an agent. At the time, Leeza Gibbons and Rob Weller were hosting cross-town on Two on the Town. Part of Caldwell’s job description was to produce two stories per month, so he learned production while on the air in New York. From there, he went on to the game show Tic Tac Dough (Matt Lauer took his spot on PM Magazine), then to HBO Entertainment News, the Ace Award winning Top Card and then to infomercials.

Jumping into DRTV

Caldwell’s first brush with the DR business—which didn’t have a name back then—was in 1985 when Tony Hoffman was hosting the two-hour Everybody’s Money Matters live on Life-time, five nights a week. “I was blown away by the fact that such a show could exist,” Caldwell recalls. “I even bought Joe Land’s Program Yourself for Success! audio package of 12 tapes for a mere $350 plus good old shipping and handling.”

Intrigued by the fact that it was possi-
ble to spend so much time talking about one product, explaining it, showing it and selling it, Caldwell was hooked. Then he heard about an opportunity to host some infomercials in the same studio from which Tony Hoffman was broadcasting; with Terry Thompson directing. He did four shows called The Money Tree featuring various business opportunities. They didn’t work, but his co-host, Pirie Jones introduced Caldwell to his future wife, Donna Cherry.

A year later, Caldwell was asked to be a host for a few more shows and learned of Kevin Harrington, co-owner of the Family Guide Network. “I watched how they were produced and realized that I could do as well or better,” says Caldwell, adding that Harrington’s partner asked him to produce a four-hour live national video teleconference that was launching a new business. “I did it, and the next thing you know I was brought in-house to executive produce all of the infomercials Kevin was fielding through an organized boiler room operation that solicited inventors.” Caldwell found himself in good company. Sam Catanese was there, shoulder-to-shoulder with Caldwell and Harrington, as they helped pioneer the infomercial industry. Then along came Tim Harrington, who started there right out of school.

“We were cutting our teeth in this fresh frontier that didn’t even have much of a name yet,” explains Caldwell. “Kevin called it ‘sellivision.’” Immerged in this new format called “infomercials,” they pumped 35 shows through the company in six months with a budget of only $750,000. “I was hiring outside producers who had never done infomercials to execute shows that were mostly bad ideas and underfunded, but we didn’t know that yet,” says Caldwell. “Carl Daikeler got his feet wet there, Collette Liantonio produced her first infomercials there, and perhaps most importantly, Kevin established kitchen gadgets as a money machine during those days.”

It was around that time that the phrase “the product is king” was coined. Hooked on producing infomercials, Caldwell says he quickly realized that finding a good product was the name of the game. He struck out on his own in the fall of 1988 while he was the host of Top Card at TNN.

**Future Thunder is born**

Founded in 1989, Future Thunder Productions started out as Caldwell’s means for developing and producing infomercials that would drive national and international awareness engines, which would create and drive brands in the global marketplace. “It sure sounded good at the time,” laughs Caldwell. “And I intended to do it myself with no overhead. I worked out of my home in Manhattan and paid myself nothing.”

While the overhead may have been low, Caldwell says he did shell out a few bucks in order to travel and meet the other pioneers of infomercial production. He met, negotiated with and produced infomercials in conjunction with Ira Smolev at Synchronal and Quantum/National Media (now E4L). He hit his first home run with Kevin Harrington at National Media with the Flying Lure, which went on to be a serious franchise for five years—with five domestic and three international infomercials. “I produced that first show for $65,000 in 60 days,” says Caldwell. “We sold over $100 million of that product. I made nothing on the production, but I bet on the backend and won.”

**Doing it his way**

He’s a true people person, but Caldwell has also proven his individualism in business. For example, unlike most production firms, he chooses to work from home, and keep a skeleton staff. “I’ve made the quality of life decision to not...
create a lot of overhead with employees,” says Caldwell. “We’re small, and very nimble. Half the time I pick up the phone when someone calls.”

The value in this strategy, according to Caldwell, is that when you “hire Future Thunder, you own my brain and experience for the term of the deal, whether I am just talent or responsible for the entire campaign.”

Currently, Caldwell has one employee—his “right hand man,” Brad Witt. “He’s an excellent utility player, from being a computer whiz to an excellent editor with great command of our Avid 1000 with its Pinnacle and Ice Board. He keeps the books, answers the phones, and does whatever it takes to support my efforts. With my home office he is very patient when my son Carson walks in and asks for help with his Pokémon CD game.”

For the rest of the work, Caldwell relies on his virtual company. “I pull together my freelance team for every project,” he says. “Once finished, I let them go until next time. This strategy makes for less fretting when things are ‘in between’ active production.”

Lawman Armor’s Robert Vito, a Penn State University professor, is one Future Thunder business partner who also preaches the value of the “virtual organization” to his students, and uses the concept at his firm as well. “By having a virtual organization, Jim is more nimble and able to go in and find the best people for each project instead of saying, ‘I need to take this project because I have to support a staff of 100 people,’” Vito explains.

The day Vito’s infomercial was filmed, for instance, there were more than 100 people on the set between the crew and the audience. “We signed a contract on Sept. 1, and within 60 days the infomercial was done, edited and out to the stations,” Vito continues. “We were on the air by Thanksgiving, as promised.”

Moving on up
Future Thunder is considered one of the leading boutique infomercial marketing companies in the world, with strategic alliances established for all marketing distribution channels. According to Caldwell, his infomercials have generated sales in excess of $800 million worldwide for such brands as The Flying Lure, Dura-lube, Dura-Shine, The Ionic Toothbrush, iMALL, Fantom Lightning, Fantom Cyclone XT, and The Roto Zip Spiral Saw. “We’ve executive produced, produced, written or hosted over 85 infomercials for virtually all product infomercial categories,” he adds.

From consulting on product merits and packaging, to marketing strategies, to all aspects of executing a production, Caldwell says his firm does it all. “There’s nothing we can’t do,” he says, adding that along the way he’s collaborated with all of the big players in the industry, including Tri-Star, Media Group, Quantum, National Media, hawthorne direct and Guthy-Renker.

Coming off of a banner year in 1999, when the Fantom Cyclone XT and Roto Zip I garnered awards from the Electronic Retail Association, including Infomercial of the Year, Caldwell has kept up the momentum with the introduction of Lawman Armor Corp.’s unBRAKEable AutoLock, plus two fol-
low-up infomercials for Roto Zip—introducing the Rebel and the Roto Zip Power Tool System.

Robert Kopras, CEO of Roto Zip Tool Corp., Cross Plains, Wis., says Caldwell is “simply the best thing that could have happened” for his company. After reviewing several tapes from potential product hosts, Kopras and his son Jason picked Caldwell because they say he “fit the format that they had in mind.”

“After reviewing his past projects, I decided that I really liked their work,” recalls Kopras. “We went out to dinner with him to evaluate whether we wanted him to host the show. In retrospect, I realize that he was kind of interviewing us at the same time because he didn’t want to get involved with a project that wasn’t of interest to him. As it happens, it turned out to be a good match all the way around.”

According to Kopras, it’s Caldwell’s “one man show” strategy that impressed him the most. “The right product is important, but producing a show that’s ‘real’—and not just a bunch of actors—is important,” he says, adding that with Roto Zip selling well, his only hang up now is how to keep enough product on the shelves. “Jim is a very good entertainer, and an excellent person. That’s hard to fake—and it shines through on screen.”

Polished techniques
Throughout his years in the entertainment industry, Caldwell has managed to polish a few techniques that help him advance. As executive creative director, he says he can usually see just how a show should look fairly quickly after getting acquainted with the product. “I do my best to inculcate my key production team with my vision and then make sure we stay on track,” he adds. “I’m also very big on creating the show in post, unless there is a highly-scripted, tight show flow that is dictated by the product demo itself.”

When it comes to picking products, Caldwell says he only works with products that are demonstrably superior, and that can stand up to scrutiny. “It must deliver a proprietary list of benefits that the competition is hard-pressed to duplicate, let alone exceed,” he adds.

According to a fellow on-camera host and producer, Anthony Sullivan, Caldwell’s easygoing style in front of the camera is another valuable trait in the DRTV world. He refers to Caldwell as an “everyman, with no pretensions,” and a facilitator of ideas and concepts through real, unscripted testimonials and on-camera stand-ups that provide glue and a flow for the viewer to follow along. “Jim always tries to emotionally engage the viewer through the kind of insightful story telling that you might find on any mainstream magazine shows like NBC’s Dateline or CBS’s Sunday Morning,” Sullivan adds.

Another of Caldwell’s colleagues, Tim Hawthorne of Hawthorne direct, says Caldwell is “one of the best in the business at magazine-style story telling. “He comes out of that mold,” says Hawthorne. “He knows how to tell a very engaging story while pulling you toward a product—he’s great at it.”

Industry insights
As a prominent industry player—and one who’s been around just about since the concept of DRTV was born—Caldwell has some keen insights on current and future DRTV trends. Unlike the early days, he says the industry has become more studied, and certainly less seat of the pants. It’s also gotten smarter, more selective and filled with specialists. Along the way, he says, media rates have crept up steadily, and the “whole mantra of driving retail has finally sunk in.” At the same time, media funding deals are great for new entrants with product ideas. “They weren’t always there,” he says.

And there’s been change within the

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One day, Caldwell picked up a book called How to get to the Top Fast!

“I had read many a self-help book in my day and couldn’t understand why it was in a very staid business library,” Caldwell recalls. “I was intrigued. I skimmed the table of contents, picked out the chapter called ‘Ask Yourself Three Questions.’

The questions were:
• What do you like to do the most?
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POWER PROFILE: JIM CALDWELL

FROM MAITRE D’ TO TV HOST

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DRTV companies themselves. Those that have hung in there and stuck with their standards and integrity for a decade or more have prevailed as the leaders. Many of those that did not, simply disappeared. “Some of the companies that were huge and full of themselves are gone,” Caldwell comments. “The ones that stuck around for 10 to 15 years are obviously players.”

Going a bit deeper, Caldwell says the Electronic Retailing Association could do more to help its members. “The organization needs to mine the gold in its own backyard more,” he explains. “For example, in addition to seeking and catering to new members (specifically dot-com companies) and possibly reducing the emphasis on the DRTV core, it should be systematically pulling groups together for informal brainstorming sessions, led by people like me who know how to keep people on track in a meeting.”

Caldwell’s reasoning is simple. If you were to actually get to know the 30 or 40 people in the DRTV business who have been around the block several times, then harness their abilities better, it could literally turbocharge the industry’s power in the marketplace. “There is so much business coming down the pike at all of us,” he explains. “It could either be an ugly head-on collision, or we could help each other jump on for the wild ride.”

Future outlooks

Looking ahead, Caldwell hopes to test-launch a line of greeting cards this year called SkyWriters. It’s his own product, and he says the paper airplane he used as a prop in his first audition tape 18 years ago is the key ingredient. “I’ve helped a lot of other companies build brand equity, and it’s time I took everything I know and apply it to something that I will own completely and have fun doing.”

In addition to creating his own product and taking it to market, Caldwell says he will also concentrate on constant reinvention and adaptation in his business. He explains: “All of us who love what we do must give input and help our industry deal with the massive sea of change that is upon us. There is so much work available that new strategic alliances must be formed to handle all of it.”

The inventor of the Roto Zip Spiral Saw, Bob Kopras, and Jim Caldwell on the set of the product’s infomercial, which won the ERA’s 1999 Infomercial of the Year Award.