

Hetzer Redux

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Some of you may recall a paper I read a little over two years ago, telling the amazing tale of Procter & Gamble's first and last venture into the circus business.

I was an ambitious young Brand Manager at that time, and I fell under the siren spell of a consummate showman and impresario, J. T. "Call Me Jim" Hetzer who sold us on the unlikely idea of P&G sponsoring a combined circus and ice show - good clean, wholesome, family entertainment - which would tour the U.S. with admission by P&G box tops. This proved to be an amazing adventure both for P&G and for me, as the sponsor of the venture. The show was a brilliant artistic success, but a business fiasco of the first magnitude, and the Company's dealings with J.T. "Call Me Jim" came to a screeching halt.

In a lesser company, my career would have come to a screeching halt too, but P&G is made of more principled stuff. The management had backed the concept and they stood behind me when it flopped. I was, however, moved to another line of work with considerably reduced spending authority, and it was generally felt that I was safely out of harm's way. My parting with Hetzer had not been pleasant: while a lovely man in many ways, and brilliantly entrepreneurial, he had proved unreliable - if not irresponsible - on financial matters, and there was much residual rancor at the Soapworks.

So I was amazed when, three years later, my phone rang and it was J.T. "Call Me Jim" all over again. We spoke as though there had never been a cross word between us. Hetzer was personally such a circus - so much larger than life - so much fun - that it would have been a dreadful mistake not to listen to what he had to say on any subject. We exchanged a few pleasantries and then he came to the point.

"Gib," he boomed in his ringmaster voice, "there is a vanishing art in North America!"

"What art is that, Jim?" I responded.

"The illusionists. They are all but gone!" he replied. "Now Gib, you know what an illusionist is?"

"Well, some sort of sleight-of-hand magician, isn't he?"

"Absolutely not! An illusionist is a man with the power to transform one object into another before your very eyes. Now, I have in my office today one of the last of the world's great illusionists, Count Frederick von Rumkorpff. Count Frederick has performed on five continents, and before the crowned heads of Europe. His illusions have dazzled tens of thousands. He is an

amazing illusionist: probably the best left in the world.

Now Gib, I notice there is a new flavor of your Duncan Hines cake mix appearing in our supermarkets over here in West Virginia - Banana Supreme. Count Frederick, before your very eyes, can transform a box of Duncan Hines Banana Supreme cake mix into a **wild, raging gorilla!** Just think, Gib, of the marketing possibilities!"

And that easily, J. T. "Call Me Jim" Hetzer's siren song had captivated me all over again: caught me up in his wildly colorful promises of the larger than life.

"Jim," I said, "I think our Duncan Hines people would very much like to see that. I know I would. When can you and Count Frederick be here?"

"The day after tomorrow," said Jim. "Now Gib, I want you to get me one of them long skinny conference rooms like you got all over that building, and we'll need two, three hours to get set up in it. Let's say two o'clock on Thursday afternoon?"

Of course I agreed, and raced off to get the Duncan Hines group on board. It proved to be a very easy proposition to sell. First thing on Thursday morning I reserved a long, thin conference room (the only kind we had), and particularly chose one immediately opposite the eighth floor receptionist's desk, a vantage point from which she could keep a sharp eye on things. This was a woman whose humdrum life was spent dealing with representatives from commercial art studios and advertising agencies. I spoke to her sternly: "There will be some strange men who will probably be bringing some unusual boxes, equipment and containers into this room during the morning. I want you to be absolutely certain that they do not sneak in one single wild raging gorilla - nor any box large enough to contain one. And keep a sharp eye out for a gorilla costume. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly clear, Mr. Carey" she replied, with her eyes wide as saucers. This was new territory for her. Her job had just gotten a lot more interesting.

My reunion with Hetzer went smoothly, considering the hard words we had in the aftermath of the circus. He was still well over six feet tall, about 250lbs, nattily attired in a pinch-waisted Italian blue suit, with wavy white hair, gold on both wrists, on every finger and most teeth, and a voice that had been shaped by years in the center ring. Count Frederick, on the other hand proved to be something of a disappointment, at least on first meeting. I had expected someone with a central European accent, a mustache, perhaps in a tail coat, and a mysterious sense of the dramatic. But he seemed an unremarkable little man, and all business. He and Hetzer moved into the conference room, toting a number of theatrical looking black packing cases (none of them gorilla-sized) and went to work.

At two o'clock, word was sent out that the wild raging gorilla was ready for viewing. The entire Duncan Hines group and I were gathered outside the conference room, aflame with anticipation for the grand illusion, and taking bets on whether it was really going to happen.

And then it became apparent that this thing had to be managed in a very carefully prescribed way. Only one person at a time was allowed into the conference room: as the founder of the feast, so to speak, I claimed the first viewing. Upon entering the room I found it was plunged almost entirely into darkness: there was a single chair at the head of the long conference table. At the far end of the table there was a box of Duncan Hines Banana Supreme cake mix. It was lit from above by the kind of focused ceiling lamp one sometimes sees over bridge tables. Everything else was darkness. I was instructed to take the seat of honor. A little apprehensively, I did. I wanted this thing to work, but doubt gnawed at my vitals.

And then, all of a sudden, with no warning, the box of cake mix vanished and in its place there was - sure enough - something very like a wild, raging gorilla! At the first instant of viewing, it was distinctly startling, and I involuntarily pushed back my chair just a bit: and as I did so, the gorilla disappeared. Count Frederick instantly repositioned my chair, and there was the gorilla back again... waving his arms at me, beating his chest, baring his teeth and snarling. And then he changed back into a box of cake mix: It was a pretty good illusion! In fact, it was amazing.

One by one, the Duncan Mines group took their turn in the dark room. And they were all impressed, too... despite the obvious limitations that (1) the illusion only worked for one carefully positioned viewer at a time, and (2) it required a pitch black environment. We all agreed that it was a genuinely startling illusion, but that the limitations of light, positioning, and solo viewing pretty much ruled out any possibility of using it commercially. It was too bad. Sadly, we bade J. T. "Call Me Jim" and Count Frederick farewell, asking them to get back to us if they solved the practical limitations of the illusion. They never did. But the experience did inspire a pretty awful television commercial for Banana Supreme featuring a wild raging gorilla tamed by the cake mix.

There was yet one last contact with J. T. "Call Me Jim" still to come. A year later he called looking for backing for what may actually have been a pretty good idea. Circuses were being killed, he told me, by the costs of moving them by truck or train from one market to another. But he had a vision of putting an entire circus, with animals, quarters for the cast, and performing rings, all on four river barges and playing major heartland markets (virtually all of them on navigable waterways) at a fraction of the cost of transporting a circus by any other

means. Sadly but firmly, I told him that P&G had zero interest in further involvement with the circus world.

Today, I look back on my exploits with Hetzer as some of the most colorful adventures of my life. Despite P&G's image of being stuffy, rigid and humdrum, name another Fortune 500 company where an enterprising young manager can be so deeply involved with a circus, an ice show, a wild raging gorilla, and charlatans of every description? Hetzer was too big a man to be denied. I have no regrets.