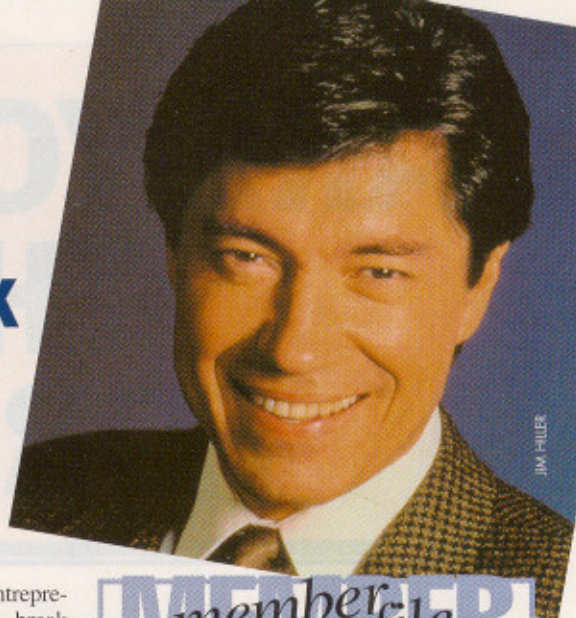


LAUGHING all the way to the bank

The many lives and
careers of Ross Shafer

By T. Foster Jones



JIM FULLER

Entrepreneurs are typically defined by their ability to visualize new possibilities and roll with the punches when those possibilities don't work out—their ability to reinvent themselves.

For instance, the first thing Costco member Ross Shafer did after graduating from college was slide into women's lingerie.

Well, not literally into women's lingerie. More like into selling it.

But his job choice sent a clear signal: This future six-time Emmy Award winner, stand-up comedian, game- and talk-show host, motivational speaker and former owner of the world's only stereo and pet shop would not be following a traditional career path.

Shafer, whose credits include authoring *Nobody Moved Your Cheese! How to Ignore the "Experts" and Trust Your Gut* (Trafford Publishing, 2003) and mounting a campaign to change Washington state's official song to "Louie, Louie," says it was partly the feeling that he was a bit of an outsider that drove him.

"I think it was because I didn't fit in," says Shafer, 50, who grew up in Washington and currently resides in Southern California with his wife and two sons. "I had trouble finding anything that I was passionate about or that made me happy."

To be sure, there were indications that

beneath the calm exterior lurked an entrepreneur and entertainer yearning to break free. As a child, his ability to force milk out of his nose or fit an entire deck of cards in his mouth earned Shafer points with his schoolmates. A brief stint as a mall public announcer instilled dreams of Johnny Carson-like fame.

And Shafer's entrepreneurial zeal was clearly made manifest with his postgraduation creation of the "combination pet and stereo store" business niche.

"My business partner and I realized that a conventional stereo store didn't get year-round traffic," says Shafer, "so we began selling pets and pet supplies."

A huge novelty that garnered much publicity and brought in lots of traffic but little money, the venture soon folded, but the dots were beginning to connect between Shafer's talents for publicity, marketing and comedy, and his ability to repeatedly reincarnate his career.

Goaded by a friend, he tried out for a stand-up comedy competition.

"I was marginally witty," he says. Witty enough to win the 1983 Showtime Comedy Laugh-Off, which led to four years as host, actor and writer of *Almost Live*, Seattle's seminal late-night comedy show, which led to six Emmys and his own radio program.

Shafer's exposure on TV developed into, as he writes on his Web site (

An "anti-self-help" book, *Nobody Moved Your Cheese!* skewers today's self-help gurus.

Five shortcuts to customer loyalty

1. Don't hire unlikable people. Nobody will give money to people they don't like.
2. Outsmart your customers. Make sure your staff has more answers than your customers have questions. People are loyal to expertise.
3. Pay attention to what your customers really want. Mike Diamond Plumbing advertises, "Our plumbers will not only fix the problem but will be there on time and smell good."
4. Dump your strict return policies. Don't make customers think that buying from you is a risk. If the customer isn't satisfied, give his or her money back and try spinning it into a bigger sale.
5. Blow your customers away! "Good" customer service just isn't good enough anymore. Start amazing people with how far you are willing to go to keep their business. Good word of mouth will clog your door with customers.—Ross Shafer

member profile

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Comment about Costco: "I love Costco! Costco is my one-stop Christmas, birthday, anniversary, wedding and Valentine's Day shopping hub. I just wish you guys sold tombstones!"

shafer.com), "a disturbing and almost profitable pattern" of stints as host for game shows such as *Match Game* and *Love Me, Love Me Not*.

During this time Shafer the entrepreneur discovered another way for Shafer the comedian to fulfill his passion for writing, comedy and a regular paycheck.

"My line of work means I'm on the road a lot and in constant contact with people in the service industry," he says. "And I was amazed at how bad service was."

From this, *Many Happy Returns: A Program on Customer Service*, an employee training video, was born. The success of the video prompted the production of several training films filled with basic service messages laced with gentle humor, and attracted the attention of corporations.

Which is how Ross Shafer, marketing graduate cum failed stereo/pet store owner cum stand-up comic cum sometimes game-show host has become Ross Shafer, stand-up comedic motivational business speaker.

"As it turns out, it's not just one thing that makes me happy," says Shafer. "It's performing, writing, producing little films. Because I'm able to wear a lot of hats, I can maintain my interest and my passion."

And there's always that lingerie job to fall back on.