

How to Go From A Dead End Job to Network Talk Show Host

Or...How a Stereo and Pet shop changed my life!

By Ross Shafer

Why in the world would I, an overweight, scraggly-bearded Pet Shop manager think I had the qualifications to compete (as a late night talk show host) against David Letterman and Johnny Carson? I just figured no dream was too far away. Here is how it happened.

After college, I cashed in my meager savings account, teamed up with a friend, and instantly became the manager and co-owner of *Sounds OK*, "America's only Stereo and Pet Shop ." A Stereo and Pet Shop? Yup, the nation's first and only. Located in the tiny Washington State town of Puyallup; 35 miles south of Seattle. My pride of being a young entrepreneur was muddied by the reality of working more than 70 hours a week for \$200 hundred bucks, take home. Not that I needed more than that. There wasn't much to do in Puyallup, Washington. Puyallup was a Mayberry-esque berg of 8,000 people that would swell to 100,000 every September when it played host to the Western Washington State Fair. In fact, one of my first nightclub jokes was, "How many of you knew that Puyallup is the Indian word for Scone?" The fair would soon take a back seat to the most newsworthy event we'd ever seen.

A Volcano Got My Attention

On the morning of May 18, 1980, my neighbors and me stood on the roofs of our homes and witnessed a gigantic mushroom cloud fill the

sky. Exactly like the ones you've seen in movies. We were convinced that we were going to be victims of a full-on nuclear holocaust. Instinctively, we scrambled down from our ladders for one last beer. We learned *later* that day that Mt. St Helens had blown her stack. Actually, the explosion made sense. But *not* because the mountain was a suspect. Sixty miles south of us (in the direction of the cloud) was home to two Nuclear Power Plants (WPPS) that had been widely criticized for overspending, bad management, and occasional "accidents." It was only a matter of time until...you know. We switched on the local news for confirmation. The broadcasters were clueless. One station looked to their weatherman for an explanation. Not accustomed to top billing, he stammered, "We are getting reports of an unspecified weather condition." Believe me, if you ever do see a life-sized mushroom cloud you won't mistake it for a cold front.

At 9:00 o'clock that morning, we watched the entire horizon blacken with what we assumed was radioactive fallout. It came in the form of floating ash. Ash that was quietly drifting down like anthracite snow; piling feather-light flakes six inches deep on the hood of my tan cargo van. I thought to myself, "Jeez, if this is it...my life has peaked as the manager of a small town Pet Store!"

My prayers were embarrassingly cliché. "God, if I ever get out of this alive I swear I am going to do something different with my life." He answered my prayers by simply blowing 1,300 feet off the top of a

mountain and not evaporating my home state. I looked skyward and vowed to make good on my personal promise.

Animals & their owners drove me crazy

OK, let me get back to the stereo and pet debacle that led up to *That Day*.

Me and my buddy, Bill Jones, loved electronics. So we rented a small retail space and started selling a few high-end stereo systems. You know the kind. The ones too loud for apartments. Like most start-ups, we barely squeaked by. The gear sold well during Christmas and Graduation but our little store was a ghost town from January to June. We desperately needed a Plan "B." One twelve pack of Budweiser later, we landed on the pet shop brainstorm. Hmm, pets aren't seasonal. And we figured what better "draw" than cute little puppies and kittens? We could anchor them in the rear of the store so that our customers would have to walk by the stereo gear, on the way to see the critters. The same basic strategy grocery stores employ with milk and eggs.

The advertising campaigns wrote themselves. "If you want woofers and tweeters, this is the place."

The promotional hook of, "America's ONLY Stereo and Pet Shop" was certain to make us one of the nation's most popular roadside attractions. We weren't that wrong. Gimmicks like our "Pet Fashion Show" and "Hamster Drag Races" drove tons of traffic through our door.

But, they came to look at the animals and buy Monkey Chow; not to purchase speakers. Consequently, the pet store got bigger while the listening rooms grew silent. Not our master plan but, in retail, you go with what sells, right? Yeah, but it wasn't as much fun as you'd think. Now, I love pets as much as you do. But, standing daily guard over a store full of barking, whining, scratching creatures made a guy like me a whack job. The dung maintenance alone extinguished my spirit to live. And, pets are disturbing on another level. Cuddly lower food chain animals tend to EAT each other. That's right. Eat, as in chew and swallow.

We had a talking parrot who pecked our one legged Cockatiel to death during a Labor Dale sale.

We had an eight-foot boa constrictor that slithered out of his cage and into the aviary where he devoured seven parakeets - in full view of our customers - before three of us grown men could wrestle him out of the window!

Oh, and there was the time I invited a local third grade class to visit and watch baby hamsters being born. The kids gathered at the big display case as the chubby, fuzzy Mommy hamster waddled right up the glass cage and popped out six bald babies; right on cue. Giggles, Oooohs. Awwws. Then, the Daddy hamster came over and ATE the newborns! Screams. Crying. Fast thinking. I tried to convince the kids that the Daddy hamster washes the babies after they are born and that he will spit them out later when they are clean. I may go to hell for that lie alone.

It didn't take us long to realize it was hard to make a profit when your inventory is in a constant state of Natural Selection.

Not surprisingly, the day before Mt. St. Helens blew, I myself, erupted. For 30 minutes, I tried to "net" a specific spotted Goldfish for a regular (and quite finicky) customer. Not an easy task when you consider this two-inch freckled carp was in a tank with at least 500 pals. I attempted dip after dip. But, each time I raised the net, the customer insisted I had snagged the wrong one. I finally snapped. I grabbed what I remember to be a Tuna net and drug it through the entire tank - scooping up at least 60 goldfish. Then, I shouted at the elderly man, "Trust me. The one you want is in there! The rest are on me!"

Man, what had I done with my life? I hated going to work and I was getting seriously depressed. All day long, I would watch the clock tick by until it struck 9pm. Then, I would lock the door on another day and stumble home for one more microwavable meal. I prayed for Sunday (my day off) where I would hook up with friends and wash down too much pizza with too much beer. I was pegging the dial on the bathroom scale and I hid my identity behind a shaggy beard and shoulder length hair. I avoided mirrors because I resembled a bloated bear. The highlight of my weeknights was collapsing into my garage-sale-Lazy Boy recliner to watch Johnny Carson on *The Tonight Show*. I'd forget my day, marvel at the celebrities he'd interview, and howl when he did impressions in funny costumes. In my mind, Johnny Carson had the coolest job in the world.

Combined with my recent Mt. St. Helens epiphany, I was determined to quit this mess and get Johnny's job. Six years later I would be in direct competition with Johnny Carson when I got the job to host the FOX LATE SHOW; a nightly talk/comedy show that aired every night at 11:30pm. I was shocked to get a handwritten letter from Johnny congratulating me. It said, "I heard Rupert Murdoch (who owned FOX) may buy NBC. If that's the case I'll see you at the Christmas party."

What dreams do YOU have that seems too far away? A better question is, Why not Make *YOUR* dreams happen; starting today?

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

-Do you ever feel trapped by your current position and income level; unable to quit?

-Have you stayed in this job too long; fearful to look for other work?

-Have you talked to your friends who were deliriously happy and motivated because they were, "finally doing what they've always wanted to do?"

-Have you made your loved ones unhappy because you are unhappy with your job?

-Have you fantasized about your dream job but didn't know how to go about getting it? Or, you don't have the energy to go after it?