

Notes from an Outstanding Day at Image

By Texas Frank

My symptoms were typical of the condition. Young, well educated, several months arrived in New York from a collegiate turn in the liberal Midwest, I hungered for a job, a paycheck.

In my fevered mind, the need for fulfilling work was falling to the fear of unemployment.

I found myself back at the offices of Image Advertising Inc., patiently waiting for my “Day of Observation”.

I considered the pertinent questions: How could I live with myself, having to tell people that I was in advertising? Can I go into this as a subversive? Do I have the wherewithal? Can I really bring a place down? Or would I simply sell out, doing a job to the best of my ability because that’s the way you’re supposed to do things? Still, at a promised 48 grand a year, selling out might well be an option. I sat still, musing on that figure. 48 thousand dollars is no small carrot. Again, I had the standard symptoms. I even held back the desire to openly mock the man with the thick cologne and thin earring, Michael, the man who interviewed me last week wearing an orange day-glo sweatshirt under a black corduroy sportcoat.

At this point, it is important to mention Def Leppard, whose music shook the floor from the next room, the room that I recognized from my interview as the nightclub that plays the hits at three in the afternoon. I wondered what kind of meeting could be had over 300 decibels of “Pour Some Sugar on Me.”

Finally, the music stopped, and a dozen youthful folk streamed out of the “conferenceroom.” It occurred to me that Def Leppard had never released a live album, that the whoops and cheers I heard were the sum of the ungraceful enthusiasm of the employees of

Image Advertising. But at least they seemed to have enthusiasm, excitement. Was I to be one of them? I could do

worse than to work for a place that had me enjoying hair metal with a bunch of people my age, couldn’t I?

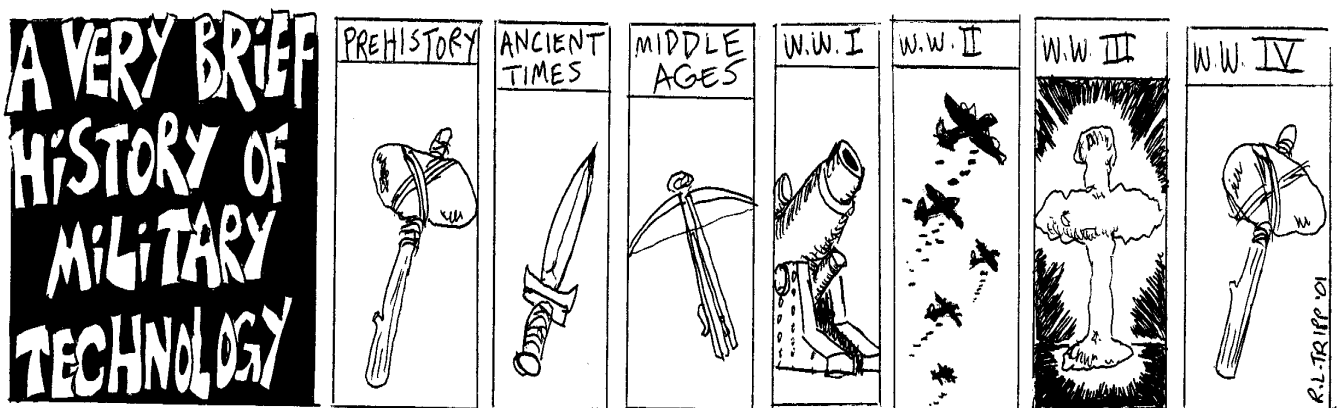
Michael, voice riding on a wave of cologne, called me in, shook my hand overly hard, and stared into my face with the warmth of a rutting buffalo. Standing in the room was a lanky man, whose thinness and height accented the rectangularity of his head. The two-inch long horn-shaped earring did nothing to help in his matter. Steve smiled a sly, toothy smile, and introduced himself as my mentor for the day. They excused me to speak in private.

Taking advantage of my aimlessness, I peeked inside the Def Leppard room and saw the marker board—charts, graphs, dollar signs. It had been a sales meeting, befitting the room’s décor of posters bearing great waves and golf courses and captions of SUCCESS and CHALLENGE. I winced, but thought of the carrot, the carrot.

Outside, I met Jenny, a cherubic girl recently transplanted from small town Pennsylvania. She greeted me with a handshake involving twisting, interlocked thumbs and snapping fingers—too intricate for someone you’ve just met. When I managed to follow the dance of pudgy hands, she congratulated my coolness, wondering aloud why none of these other New Yorkers could get it. No one responded to her. Jenny liked my hair, and told me as much. She thought it, like my handshaking ability, “very cool.” I thanked her, politely. “Are you coming out with Steve today?” I told her yes.

“Oh, awesome. He’s very cool.” Then, after a pause, “The best.” Have you been here long, Jenny? “No. I’m new.” What do we do here? “Steve will tell you. He’s the best. Very cool.”

Dave, a South African man who’d spent the last seven years traveling the globe, joined us at the door. He, like I, was on his “Day of Observation.” So, Dave, do you know what we’re doing? “Na, man, they havun’t told me shitt. But the munny sounds viry nice.”



The day was a jewel in the crown of a gorgeous fall, and I didn't mind being outside, though I did begin to wonder what we were doing outside. Steve took us several blocks before explaining that Image Advertising worked with various glamour accounts as a grassroots marketer. Somewhere along the line, he let loose with the phrase "Direct marketing," which sounds, at first, innocuously corporate and meaningless.

Quick. What do a hot dog cart pusher, the beer man at a ballpark, someone selling designer knock-off watches out of their coat, and a crack dealer have in common? They're all direct marketers.

Today, I would observe Steve and Jenny work for the Lexi Salon account. "It's cool," Steve told me, privately. "This is the greatest job in the world. All you do is talk to beautiful women all day." I could get down with that, right? I fought myself to accept this asinine thought. Carrot, carrot... I kept walking.

Steve made insincere small talk. "Where are you from? What did you do? Cool, cool."

Jenny led us by several feet, her enthusiasm bringing her out of earshot on the busy Midtown streets, ready to represent The Best Salon in the City.

After five more blocks and the requisite civilities, Dave grew suspicious of the job and began to press for specific answers. "Well," Steve started, "What we do is place ourselves out here, at strategic points, and represent our clients directly to the beautiful women of Midtown."

"You like talking to beautiful women, don't you?" Dave, affecting his good humor and heterosexuality, nodded. "Good. And you like to make money, right?" Another nod.

"Cool. Cool. You'll do great."

Dave pressed harder, but Steve had bounded into the lead. Jenny heard his questioning and turned, still smiling a smile that began to look less and less a product of enthusiasm and more and more one of simpleness. "Relax," she said. "Just watch Steve. He's the man."

The best. Very cool."

We stopped walking at the corner of 49th street and Park Avenue, the heart of Midtown Manhattan, among some of the most expensive real estate in the world. This, I thought, is where the businesses trap the businessmen. This is where money flows like the rivers that once fed civilizations. This is where I might end up working in a despicable industry for my pile of gold. Looking up at the sky here is an entirely different experience from doing so anywhere else.

In other places, looking up, you might see pure sky, blue or black or grey, and sense the majesty of space, sense your place in a world blessed with the divinity of mountains. Or you might see grand human achievement: buildings, monuments, and sense the majesty of toil and suffering and history, sense your place in a world blessed and cursed with the divinity of human ability and effort. Here, you look up, and you see beautiful affronts of sensibility, arrogant, poking at the belly of the sky, and sense the majesty of metaphor, sense your small place in a hideous, enticing universe of money and the loss of soul.

This is the carrot.

Steve spoke, in a way that suggested a love of Tom Cruise: "Here we are. This is the deal."

All day long, we are going to select beautiful women, and we are going to get them to come to our client, Lexi Salon. What we offer them is a three hundred dollar value: hair cuts, shampoos, nails, feet, massage. All for sixty bucks. One by one, you're going to see us get rejected, but that's cool, 'cause we only want women who really want take care of themselves. Really, they sell themselves on the service, because they like being beautiful.

We just have to tell them that. That's all we do. We are very excited, because this is exciting. Alright? Jenny, ready? Alright. Who's giving me money?" He turned around and faced his audience, a never-ending stream of men and women on their way to lunch, to work, to shop, to live in New York. He reached for his breath mints.

Dave and I stood several feet away, trying to look like passers-by who had simply stopped to wait for dates and friends, an act that grows transparent after a few minutes. We watched Steve and Jenny flag women down and produce their salon menus to turning backs and deaf ears. After a few tries, Steve took a break and came to us.

"Ok. There are five steps to what we do: 1) The Intro, 2) The Short Story, 3) The Display, 4) The Close, and 5) The Rehash, and just remember, the Rehash is the Cash. The better at this you are, the more money you'll make. You get a cut of every sale. See..." He stopped for a moment, lost in involuntary cheer, and began again, "the beauty of all of this is... there's a logic to it. A plan. That's what you learn at Image. You learn the five steps."

You learn the plan, the logic, y'know? That's the beauty. There's no stupid bullshit—you just learn the steps and you make money. I love it!" He turned again, eyes wide,



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California Department of Corrections

waving his hand in a sassy, outreached, come-hither motion to a beautiful woman in leather, and approached her. "HI...I'd like to invite you to my salon..."

Jenny was not having a good first ten minutes of it, being blown off by no less than three women so far. She saw that I saw this, and told me, "Most of these people are bitches. But hey, that's cool. That's when you just have to be like, 'Ok, baby, have a nice day!' y'know? You can't be desperate or pathetic." I recalled her handshake and I saw a need in this woman to show herself full of brass.

Steve's woman in leather had by now crossed the street, and he came back, asking me, "So. Do you remember the five steps?" I recited them perfectly, and Steve smiled a big brotherly smile. "You'll be great."

Dave was tiring of this, and wanted some more answers. "Whut about whin it gits cowl?" "Well, we're hot!" Steve snapped. "When you get as focused as I do, you won't mind the cold. I'm pumped, baby! I mean, you just think of the money you make, the women you talk to, and you just get so into it, you block out everything else. You just get in the zone, baby." Later, I asked Steve how much he made and when he started. Being a Manager Trainee, he makes \$25 per sale, and he started three and a half months ago. That puts him on the street since July. I wondered, to myself, how many cold days there'd been since July.

He popped another Tic-Tac and waved down some more women. Five feet away, Jenny spied a middle-aged woman coming down the sidewalk. She tried her line, squinting her eyes in mock interest and twirling her thin hair. "Excuse me, where did you get your hair cut?" The

woman could smell the acting and brought her cigarette up to chest level in defense. "In Staten Island."

"Oh, really? I... 'cause I—really like it—and I was wondering if you'd like to try a full body salon..."

In stride, the woman waved her burning cigarette in Jenny's face and continued walking, away.

She tried again not long after this—a pair of women this time—and stopped them long enough to get to Step Three before I stopped paying attention.

More and more, my thoughts drifted to the source of the gorgeous lunchtruck aroma. Dave too, apparently, as he turned to me and marveled, "It smells loike the puhfect curry mix, dunit?" It did, and I eyed greedily the styrofoam boxes of curry chicken and rice that kept making their way away from the cart.

Soon, the scent, the good, wholesome, soulful scent, had taken its toll on the South African Traveler. "Aw, fuk this. This is fukin stchewpid. I make more munny waiting tables, and I dun't hafta feel like some fukin arse on the stchreet. I'm going ta git me some lunch. Good luck witchaself."

Steve watched his deserter waltz away like so many beautiful women and approached me for damage control. "See? It's not for everyone. You're still with it, right?" I nodded, feigning enthusiasm. "Good. Just keep watching. We're just getting warmed up."

He turned his back to eye the pedestrians, and I went over to the lunch truck for some chicken and rice. Extra hot sauce, please. Thanks. I considered whether or not this was rude, to stand here on a street corner and eat while

Steve and Jenny worked. I dug my fork in.

I ate leisurely, realizing that once this box was empty, all I would have left is watching “Harassing for Dollars.” I saw Jenny produce some credit card slips, and her pair of women followed suit with shiny Platinum Cards. Once they crossed the block, she squealed with excitement. Seeing that Steve was busy in the middle of Step Three himself, she approached me with her shine. “I just made two sales!” I smiled approvingly, mouth full of chicken gristle. “I get ten dollars a sale!” I wanted desperately to spit out the unappealing bite, but out of respect for this woman, I swallowed instead. I maintained my approving smile.

Congratulations. That’s twenty bucks in what, a half hour? She nodded, happily. Just think, that’s forty dollars an hour. That’s 80,000 a year. You’re on pace to make eighty thousand dollars this year.

Her mouth dropped. She had not thought of it this way before. Her face turned a shade pinker, and she turned around, ready to flag another pair of women down, but not before turning to face me again. Perhaps she wanted to say something nice to me, after I’d helped her put her incredible fortune in perspective. “You know, that smells so good,” she said, pointing at the source of my gristle. You hungry? You want some? I offered her the fork.

“No thanks. I can’t eat meat right now,” she declined, still bright from her sale, and turned back around. I thought about what her last sentence meant and kept eating. I frowned, realizing that I was the one that she had shared her special moment with, a moment that was validation for the passage of her youth.

As I wondered whether or not it was apparent to the people on the street that I was here in cahoots with this man and this woman who were relentlessly bothering them for money, a short, fat, bald man holding a map and wearing a fanny pack asked me for directions to Saint Patrick’s Cathedral. I tried, but could offer him no advice. He started to walk back to his friends when I saw Steve waving his fingers over the list of salon services as a blonde listened intently. I called for the man to come back. You know, I can’t tell you where it is, but you see that guy over there, in the blue shirt? Talking to the blonde woman? He’s from around here. Go ask him. Still, the man returned to his friends, presumably uncomfortable with the idea of interrupting a man’s business. I waved to him, nodded my head, gave him a thumbs-up. It’s cool, I gestured, almost demanding. At the urging of his party, I saw him tap Steve on the shoulder.

This was no beautiful woman who liked to take care of herself, and Steve was predictably, visibly annoyed. He brushed the man off coldly, and when he turned back to his prospective sale, the woman herself had begun to direct the man and his party. Seconds later, she herself walked away without having treated herself to \$300 worth of salon services for only \$59.95.

Finished with my lunch, I now sought another way to

amuse myself. I decided to make some phone calls. Three minutes into a conversation with a friend that included two minutes of incredulous laughter, he began to chastise me. “What the hell are you still doing there? Francis! You have two degrees! You speak three languages! Leave right now, for Christ’s sake.”

Steve had made a sale, and Jenny ran over to me to tell me. “Look at The Man! Cash in hand. Cash.” He came over, counting his twenty five dollars, a king surveying his riches. I smiled admiringly. Wow. It’s a good day. “Oh, my friend, it’s always a good day.” He thought for a half second. “It’s an outstanding day.” He was amped by his sale, and began dancing back into the thick of the foot traffic. “Alright. Who’s giving me money?” I heard him say to himself. It’s just another outstanding day at Image.

Jenny tried again, with her stock approach. “Excuse me,” she began, stepping directly in a woman’s path and again twirling her thin hair, “where did you get your hair cut?” The woman sidestepped her and continued down the block with Jenny in tow. “Because I want to recommend my salon...” I saw her follow the woman for fifteen feet before she reached out and tugged at her sleeves, ignored the whole way until the tug produced a sharp, violent snap of the woman’s arm. Then, remembering her sass, Jenny produced a dismissive “I didn’t want to talk to you anyway” wave. She walked the twenty feet back to the corner too coolly, too slowly, with more attitude than is natural in her stride.

A weathered man with a ragged blanket—a glaring anomaly in the midtown streets—came and sat on the sidewalk, closer to the curb and to the speeding traffic than the Image representatives. After a moment, he produced an old cardboard sign, beat up from use, which read, simply: “Please help. Homeless / HIV +” He stared at his feet, and didn’t look up when Steve stepped over him to ask another woman for money.

This was enough. I felt my symptoms clearing. I paled my face and let my eyelids droop, affecting a face of misery. When the woman walked away, I called to Steve and explained that I didn’t feel well. I clutched my stomach for dramatic effect. “The food!?” he exclaimed. I don’t know. Maybe. I feel like hell. Is there a bathroom around here? He directed me to a pizzeria and I went. I came back and told him that I’d vomited. He told me to call the office to schedule another Day of Observation. I nodded. “You really need to see rush hour, and how we do business then.

This is nothing right here,” he beamed. By the time I left, a half-hour after Jenny’s triumphant sale, she had not made another one. That put her down to twenty dollars an hour, or 40,000 a year. As I entered the subway, still clutching my stomach, I looked to see another woman walk away from her. 40,000 and dropping.

Have you ever seen a moldy parsnip? It looks kind of like a carrot.