

Careers in the Entertainment Industry Richard Ross ('83), Disney Channel

I've been here 17 times, started when I was 28 working at Nickelodeon in New York. The alumni network is the closest thing to family. I come back every year to give advice. I know there's a lot of pressure to prove yourself to the bank, the government, and your parents. Finding something that makes you happy is the bottom line to having a career you thoroughly enjoy. If you're interested in entertainment, there are more opportunities than ever. Do your homework—you have tremendous resources online, in magazines—to be able to impress people with your breadth of knowledge.

I was an IR major (Russian/Soviet studies) and English. I graduated in '83. When I came out, I came out in a recession where the economy looked pretty bad. Companies weren't hiring, and so I decided to go to law school. I did well enough on LSAT's and had a pretty good GPA. If I could do it again, I wouldn't go back to law school because it was a lot of money, and I wanted to enter the workforce. Unless you want to be a lawyer, I wouldn't go to law school. I graduated from Fordham University, and I will be the graduation speaker this year. I was lucky because I got a mailroom job at a big talent agency through a family contact.

I was lucky that I got to meet great people and network throughout college and law school. You never know who you're meeting and how they're going to affect your life. A smile and a welcome is probably the best career tool you have. LA is where the business was and where the entertainment industry is centered. There were millions of people who were like me. At Disney channel, preschool and tween ages were new audiences we appealed to. Twenty years later, I have had experience with many industries.

The making:

It's the people who actually do the making. It could be organizing, writing, creative ideas, storytelling. It's never too early to start. You can download scripts, story structure. If you're interested in being a writer, it's never too early to give it a whack. Writing scripts for TV shows now or original scripts are ways people get jobs. If you fit into producing and directing, do theater. It's a way to get experience to understand the dynamics of casting, producing, financing. If you're on the music side, writing and producing, it's something I wouldn't wait to explore. Look at it now. Demo tapes matter.

Marketing:

At the end of the day, it's not so much understanding marketing, it's understanding the human psyche. It transfers to other areas such as music. It helps us understand the product and the audience we're selling to. Selling in a 30-second bit is a skill set. If you have the short-form storytelling ability is a creative and marketable skill. Today, online is an extraordinary media. If you look at the newspaper ads, it just looks so tired.

Facilitation: Financing

Finance is an incredible skill set. We have an area of operations for people technically inclined. We now program 21 different windows. It's a way to get it out the door. It's an

area we couldn't live without. Strategic planning is a huge area in every area of our companies. They create plans for the future; put a lot of information together and make it cohesive.

5 tips: HATCH

H- Homework. There are a tremendous amount of assets. Names are in every publication and online.

A- Active. People are more apt to spend time, connect, communicate. Actively seek out your job.

T- Talk. Talk to each other, network, learn from other people, develop your own listening skills

C- Community. If you have a personal website, that's where you live. You need to be where you want to get a job. Entertainment is an industry where you have to seek out the job yourself. Just because you live in Dallas, Denver, Minneapolis doesn't mean you won't find a job. The industry will still be smaller. New York, LA, Miami are the cities where the entertainment industry is big.

H- Hone. If you are interested in something, start figuring out what it is. The sooner you get to that "epiphany," the closer you will be to secure a job. Why are you interested in this? There needs to be an answer that is neither vague nor generalized. You need to have an origin story, that moment or experience that made you want to be in the entertainment industry. You have to be able to say "This is why I'm here. I want to do this." It will make the interview or meeting so much better.

Questions:

How do you suggest moving into the independent film scene? LA or New York?

The problem with the independent movie scene is it's everywhere. It doesn't matter where you are, but the important part is finding that story. The partnerships are invaluable. It's having a piece of work people will react to. It doesn't matter where you are.

I'm interested in marketing. Do you suggest starting in-house marketing or an ad agency?

Your job is to get a job. If you're interested in marketing, places with more freedom gives you more opportunity. If you hate your boss, the opportunity sucks. You won't be able to learn from him.

Did the training program at [mailroom agency?] help you?

The experience was incredible. My valuable skill was typing. I was requested by all these other agents because I could type dictation. I met many agents from different areas of the entertainment industry. I learned the power of talent, how competitive it was, how the system worked. Break you down, build you up. It's a way for you to learn.

I'm interested in production and development for movies. Would you recommend working for studio or talent agency?

You have to go where there's work.

Film school, yes or no?

Yes if you want to be a filmmaker. Brands matter (USC, NYU)

I'm interested in marketing research. Is there a higher demand for national or international research?

We're still very US-centric. Our strategy is to test here first and then test in other parts of the world. Consumer testing is a smaller business. You have to be able to understand the dynamics of culture.

Could you elaborate more on how you see new media fitting into the future and what kind of jobs it will create?

I think it will create more storytelling. What we're seeing is short-form stories told in different ways. Is there a new way to tell that story outside of those 3 minutes downloaded onto your computer? The biggest business growing is gaming. Casual gaming is not only for boys now. Girls are looking for different things in gaming. You can be innovative in a process you think is done. (Wii)

What has been the worst moment in your career and how do you handle the superficial part?

I don't like going out to dinner for work. I find that the conversation talking about doing is just not that thrilling. I like things fast-paced and being active.

I'm interested in casting. Within casting, is there general casting or project-to-project?

There are casting agents or 1-2 people working together. There's a nuance in art.

I'm interested in animation. I'm in Wharton and will probably move on to Wall Street. If you're not already on that path, how do you change paths?

There's tremendous assets online about learning animation. Online assets are available. Dig in and do not get discouraged.

Sports/entertainment management- is law school necessary?

Sports management is largely about financial management. Financial management is much more valuable than law school. Athletes have a shorter career span.

How do you find an agent for writing?

Agencies all take on unsolicited documents.

Application process- advice?

The best way to get into the industry is by being someone's assistant. You have to have a sense of people. Talk to the assistants. Ask if you can check in once a month.

Environmental themes in television?

We know we have a problem, but we need to figure out solutions.

Advertising/Sales- what kind of skills are employers looking for?

The best sales people understand personal relationships, understanding your products and how to sell them. It's like a charisma-fest. They're fearless. You go in there and you don't stop.

When looking for an internship, are there any pitfalls to avoid?

Look at your resumes. Get to the point. What did you do? What did you try? Describe, don't just list. Don't assume that people know. Be explicative if you can.

Development and programming for TV- reader?

Reader is great. You read something and synopsise what you see. Give your point of view. You're looking for readability for your audience.

Facilitation- what do consultants do and how does that fit into the entertainment industry?

I'm a big fan of consultants. Gym teachers who were athletes are credible. How do you know what I should do if you haven't experienced it for yourself? Build your own career.

To what degree is research-based production involved in Disney playhouse?

It's an increasing but not burgeoning industry. It's vitally important, but not a big part.

How do you go about finding mentors and cultivating relationships?

You know pretty quickly whether or not that relationship is there. A mentor is there for good times and bad times. Mentors listen and help you understand what you can do and what you can do better. It's not different from relationships. It's a two-way street.

Do you have any recommendations for getting involved with cause-related part of the entertainment industry?

Be involved with agencies who have clients with a lot of money.