

# **OUTRAGEOUS MARKETING**

**THE STORY OF  
THE ONION  
AND HOW TO  
BUILD A  
POWERFUL  
BRAND WITH  
NO MARKETING  
BUDGET**

**SCOTT DIKKERS, FOUNDER OF THEONION.COM**

**BONUS CHAPTER**  
**SCOTT DIKKERS' BIG BOOK OF FAILURES**

In chapter 17, I joked about my failures being able to fill another book, *Scott Dikkers' Big Book of Failures*. I didn't go into them because the details are a little tangential to the main *Onion* narrative. In lieu of that book, I offer it a bonus chapter.

Sometimes in life you have to make big mistakes in order to learn. I've fallen flat on my face professionally many times. Sometimes I learn important lessons. Other times I repeat the same mistakes again. By recounting some of those experiences, I see the lessons more clearly. I hope you can, too. I'll be glad if I can help you avoid similar mistakes.

First, let me define "failure" as I'm using it here. I said before that failure is a great teacher; there is no failure, only results. But in this chapter, "failure" is when I don't achieve my goals. Professional failure, which is the type of failure I'll focus on (specifically my movie career), is when I invest a lot of time or money in a creative project that's intended to reach a big audience, but it neither makes money nor reaches a wide audience.

Many of the movie-based ventures in my early youth failed, but I was riding the rocket ship, fueled by the dumb confidence of youth. I loved what I did, so I was already a success. From a philosophical

standpoint, that's important to acknowledge.

During the two years I spent working at McDonald's for minimum wage in Madison, Wisconsin, straight out of high school, I continued to make super-8 movies with my friend Keith. And I experienced a hint of success during this period.

Before the Internet, the only way to get short films seen was at film festivals. I made a silent short called *The Vandal* starring Keith, about a guy who buys a can of spray paint and looks for the perfect wall to mark with his graffiti. When he finally finds it, he sprays furiously, to ominous and bombastic music, but we don't see his message until the very end. His message: "poop." I sent this film—the original film (I had no copy)—to the Ann Arbor International Film Festival, a large and respectable Midwestern festival at the time. I didn't think to go to the festival, but they screened my movie and it won some kind of award. They sent me a T-shirt in the mail afterwards. Unfortunately, they also sent me a letter explaining that there had been a projector malfunction during the screening of my film in which my film was shredded as it spooled out the back of the projector. The letter was attached to a brown paper sack that contained the remnants of my original film, torn to shreds.

My other success, or what I saw as success, was with the Madison Police department. They produced their own public-service announcements on local TV for their Crime Stoppers initiative (with McGruff the Crime Dog who was going to "(chomp) take a bit outta crime"). They shot little re-enactments of local crimes, and then asked viewers to call in with any tips that could lead to the apprehension of the suspects. The re-enactments were unimaginatively shot. They weren't dramatic like crime footage should be. So, I visited the police department and volunteered to shoot them. I brought Keith with me because I felt he legitimized me, being a real film student at the UW–Madison, whereas I was a high-school dropout who worked at McDonald's.

The sergeant in charge of shooting the commercials said they needed to shoot a commercial that very day. He put us right to work, giving us

the details about the crime, and sending us out to the crime scene with a video crew. The location was a butcher shop. The criminals had made off with several pounds of meat. I directed the commercial, with Keith and I playing the two thieves. It was aired on local TV, and everyone I worked with at McDonald's saw the commercial and razzed me afterwards for being a meat thief.

With these two promising early successes under my belt, I decided I should go to USC film school in Los Angeles, the finest film school in the world.

My plan was simple. I moved back to Ellsworth, WI, to live with my mother and attend the University of Wisconsin–River Falls, which was free to me as a state resident. Enrollment at the college was low in the mid-80s, so even though I had flunked out of high school, all I had to do was pass a reading/writing competency test and they would admit me. I passed, and worked hard in class. I got straight A's. Beyond that, I got a great education—I liked learning about history!

After less than a year at River Falls, I transferred to the University of Bridgeport, in Connecticut, which had a film school of its own. This was an expensive private school, but because I was poor and had good grades as a transfer student, they didn't take my high-school transcripts into account, and they provided scholarships and grants that largely paid my way. After less than a year at Bridgeport, I was accepted into USC. Thanks to my mother's continued poverty and my continued good grades, they gave me enough scholarships and grants that I only had to take out about five thousand dollars in loans.

All the while, I continued to write comic strips and try to sell them, making my first sale (to the *LA Downtown News*) after I moved to Los Angeles.

I had more great history classes at USC. I only took one film class (a film theory class). The professor was interested in art, but I was interested in entertainment. I wasn't impressed.

At my first opportunity, I went to a student film festival on campus. There, I was even less impressed. The movies had spectacular produc-

tion value, like they'd had big budgets. They looked much better than my movies. It appeared the school was very good at teaching students how to operate cameras and microphones. Also, the school had an arrangement with the Screen Actors Guild, allowing students access to professional actors. I recognized some of the actors in the student films from TV and movies. But the movies themselves were awful. The stories were no good. It seemed these students had nothing to say. I felt like the movies I was making, like *Bird Man*, *Electron Man* and *The Vandal*—and certainly some of Keith's movies I worked on—were better.

I decided to drop out of USC and move back to Madison. I found a girlfriend in California, Krista Stockebrand, and she came back to the Midwest with me. I made another friend out West, too, a film major named Chris Chan Lee.

I gave up on making movies and focused on the immediate concern of making enough money to live. I worked as a temp and did other odd jobs. I found my job at public radio, sold "Jim's Journal," and was then on track to succeed in print comedy.

My movie career was shelved, but my intention was always to come back to it some day.

In 1995, after producing *The Comedy Castaways*, I got the urge to make a feature film. I had just promoted Ben to be the *Onion* editor, so I knew I could step back and be assured the paper would be in competent hands.

I took several weeks off *The Onion* to write the screenplay. I wanted to make a fun movie, like the silly superhero action movies Keith and I made in high school. The movie was *Spaceman*, a story about a boy kidnapped by aliens who crash lands on Earth 20 years later trained as a ceremonial combatant.

This was my first screenplay, so I asked several friends to read it and give me notes, including Archie Gips, Michael Hirsch (who had left *The Onion* and was working as a copywriter in Chicago), and a friend of Michael's named David Gilbert who had written for Martin Scors-

ese. David was a huge help. He understood dramatic story structure. I cast him in the film as a mob accountant who almost gets killed by Spaceman.

I set a target date to start shooting. I had planned to shoot on super-8, using only non-paid actors, but much like at *The Onion*, and as the “Find the best people” principle of Outrageous Marketing stipulates, people around me saw how obsessively I was working on this project, and they joined my effort. Chris Chan Lee was the first. He volunteered to be my director of photography. He had graduated from USC’s film school, so he knew how to make a film look good. He insisted we shoot on 16mm instead of super-8. That way, he explained, we could blow it up to 35mm in the event the movie did well at festivals and sold to a distributor. Julie Cohen, a professional actress who worked on Radio Pirates sketches with Jay and me, volunteered to be the casting director. She set up auditions and helped me find good theater actors in Chicago. Another was Todd Hunter, an attorney who ran for mayor of Madison in 1995. While he was campaigning, we drove down to Chicago together so he could read the part of Spaceman as we were casting other characters. Todd was a trained actor from a family of actors. He was the son of Jeffrey Hunter (who played Captain Christopher Pike in the original *Star Trek* pilot, which was later worked into the episode “The Menagerie.”) Tall and movie-star handsome, like his father, he’d been on some episodic TV in the 80s.

To finance *Spaceman*, I did the same thing I’d done with *The Onion*; I put in everything I had. I’d been saving for retirement, putting away a little bit of money every month with a financial planner. I went to him and said I needed all the money to fund my movie. He started to explain my options, which accounts I could take money out of and which accounts I couldn’t. I said, “No, you don’t understand, I want *all* the money.” I didn’t know anything about early withdrawal penalties from retirement accounts, and I didn’t care. I took every penny. It amounted to about \$20,000.

I worked incessantly during pre-production, making props, final-

izing the script, and doing everything myself. I had learned valuable lessons about delegating at *The Onion*, and I delegated when people volunteered, but I did a terrible job finding help when it could have saved me time and allowed me to get some sleep. I slept no more than three or four hours a night for over a month, spending 20 hours a day getting location permits, hiring people, typing up actor contracts—there seemed to be no end to the little administrative tasks that simply had to get done. The scope of the project had gotten out of hand. The first day of shooting approached like a speeding locomotive.

Once shooting began, in October, the locomotive turned into a Borg cube; I was either going to join, or be obliterated. Each day was packed with three or four locations and several set-ups in order to conserve money and resources. I rarely got the shots I wanted. I didn't have enough people to help. Chris was a one-man camera crew setting up all the lights.

My lead actor, David Ghilardi, had a combative style on set that I didn't know how to deal with. He talked back and yelled at me. I wasn't experienced enough to know that this is something actors (and non-actors) sometimes do. He was, wittingly or unwittingly, trying to bring out my dominance. He needed it in order to feel secure, to know his director was strong. I was too weak from stress and lack of sleep to be what he needed most of the time, and I was stunned by his behavior. He berated me in front of everyone else. I felt like I was being bullied on my own set. Eventually, I found my inner Dom and managed to keep him reigned in, and he delivered a wonderful performance that carried the film.

We shot a few interiors in apartments and at the capitol building in Madison. Brian Stack from *The Comedy Castaways* played one of the bad guys, an FBI agent who was trying to find and dissect Space-man. While Brian, David, and others waited in a local lawmaker's office where we were shooting, I spent hours in an alley off the capital square trying to destroy a wooden baseball bat, which we needed as a prop. In the scene, Brian examines the bloodstained broken bat, won-

dering how Spaceman used it to kill one of his agents. Destroying a wooden bat without any tools is incredibly difficult, I found. I smashed it against the pavement over and over, but only just hurt my hands. I screamed and cried like a madman.

Eventually, it cracked. I did as well.

After about a month, I ran out of money and time and had to shut down the production. Chris had to go back to LA. The actors disbanded. I had a few scenes in the can, but most of the more complicated action shots were skipped to save money or because I didn't have the props or locations I needed. We had only shot about half the movie.

This is where the story of most independent films ends.

Krista, my wife by then, left me because I never saw her or paid any attention to her. I could hardly blame her.

I withdrew, delirious from stress, disappointment, and the collapse of my support pillars. Kicked out of my apartment, I crashed on people's couches for a few months. The experience of interacting with others was strange for me during this time; I felt like they weren't seeing the real me, the me who'd been driven insane. They treated me like a normal person. I felt I needed to do something drastic to my appearance so they would look at me and say, "Whoa! What happened to you?" So, I shaved off all my hair. It was a small gesture (my hair had been receding for a while), but it did the trick.

Michael was in a similar situation. He started losing his hair in his early 20s. He'd been wearing a hairpiece for years. No one knew he had lost his hair; it was a big secret. I always gave him grief about his hairpiece and I encouraged him to do what I'd done. He refused.

Using two VHS machines, I spliced together a trailer for the movie using the footage I had. I put some music and sound effects on it, which I'd compiled thanks to my work on radio sketches.

I showed the trailer to Michael. He was impressed, and thought he could use it to raise another \$20,000 to finish the film. He knew some people with money, stockbrokers who worked on the Chicago Board of Trade. He also volunteered to help produce the film. He thought we

might be able to sell it to a distributor.

"We'll never sell this movie," I said. "We'll be lucky if we even finish it."

"I think we could."

"You really think we can finish *and* sell Spaceman?"

"Most definitely."

"Okay, then promise me something."

"What?"

"If we ever sell it, you lose your hairpiece and shave your head."

"Okay. Deal."

After almost half a year, we got to work putting the production back together. I got in touch with the cast, hoping they'd still be available. David was ready and willing to jump back in. The lead actress, Deborah King, told me in a rather cavalier way that she had cut off all her hair and dyed it pink.

Michael came through with one investor, and then another.

I held more auditions and cast new people for roles that either hadn't been cast yet or had been given to actors who were no longer available or interested.

I rewrote some scenes to make them better, applying what I'd learned shooting the first half of the movie.

Shooting began in the spring. It was a bigger shoot than the first round. We had mostly done simple interiors before; now, we were running around the streets of Chicago firing guns, getting some really fun footage. Deborah solved her hair issue by washing out the dye and then using hair extensions. It somehow worked.

Looking at the movie now, I'm still crushingly embarrassed by how many compromises I had to make due to budget. The action sequences in particular are amateurish. The editor, Peter Etzweiler, did his best with it, but we didn't have enough time to get better coverage. Chris, however, did an amazing job giving the movie a fun and colorful look, despite the low budget and 16mm. The saving grace of the movie, and ultimately the most important thing, is that the story worked.

*Spaceman* sold to an independent distributor for \$5,000, a fraction of the budget, and nowhere close to paying for itself. The film is largely forgotten now. However, Michael does look better without his hair-piece.

A few Hollywood producers were impressed enough by the movie to approach me with offers to direct some studio features. It helped that, along with *Spaceman*, I'd made two short films afterwards that won awards at festivals (*The Astounding World of the Future* and *The Kill*).

I was offered *The Onion Movie*, which I turned down. Another movie I turned down was a babysitter-as-spy comedy that ultimately became *The Pacifier*. In that case, I didn't think the script (by Thomas Lennon) was ready. Jackie Chan was attached, and I was tremendously excited about working with him, but the studio wanted to start shooting in two weeks. I knew the script would have been impossible to shoot so soon. It read like a first draft. Apparently, they couldn't find anyone else to agree to direct it either, and the project stalled. The script was reworked, Jackie Chan fell out, but then Vin Diesel picked it up. Jackie must have had a jones to be in a babysitter-as-spy movie one way or another, because he ended up making *The Spy Next Door*, a project almost identical to *The Pacifier*.

For me, the big one that got away was *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. I felt a connection to the project because not only had I loved the original radio-drama series, but also Douglas Adams had written me a fan letter at *The Onion*. I met with the studio and it seemed to go well. I would have loved to direct the movie, and started coming up with ideas about my approach immediately after the meeting. One idea I had was to hire Terry Gilliam as the production designer. However, I didn't follow up with the producer aggressively enough, and I lost the project.

My next feature, *Bad Meat*, was another attempt to make an independent film and somehow win the independent film lottery (which entails being accepted into the Sundance Film Festival and then getting sold to a major distributor, an outcome that only a tiny fraction

of independent films enjoy).

*Bad Meat* was a script I wrote with Michael, an attempt to make a new kind of silly gross-out movie. It was about two rust-belt losers in a desolate town who kidnap a congressman for ransom.

I shot it after I left *The Onion* in 2000.

A more traditional low-budget independent film production, *Bad Meat* wasn't the scrappy mess *Spaceman* was. Michael was back on as producer, and he raised several hundred thousand dollars, which allowed us to pay all the actors, provide craft services, rent 35mm cameras and equipment, and staff the production with a full crew, including an experienced assistant director, line producer, and other crewmembers that would have been impossible luxuries on *Spaceman*.

I even got a star for the movie, Chevy Chase. He would play the congressman. However, the character dies early, and his body is terribly abused for much of the rest of movie. So, a body double, the amazing Kal Abu-Shalback, happily sustained countless indignities and bodily injuries as he was dropped, dragged and slammed. His back and legs were covered in rope burns and carpet burns, and his head got bonked so many times I was surprised he got through production without a serious concussion.

Chevy didn't have the box-office cache he once had, but his being attached to the movie was instrumental in getting us financing, locations, and other tangible and intangible benefits that come from shooting a movie that people perceive as "legitimate."

Although we shot on the industrial south side of Chicago in the brutal cold of November in a series of factory neighborhoods, landfills, trailer parks, and abandoned police stations that had become crack houses, and the hours and workload were no less punishing than *Spaceman*, the *Bad Meat* shoot was one of the most magical experiences of my life. I loved the cast and crew. Peter, my high-school radio-comedy cohort, was the on-set sound recordist. He and I commuted to and from the set every day. My brother Alan created special effects and was on location for the whole shoot. We shot our interiors on constructed

sets in a large warehouse that housed the whole company. It was like a giant co-ed dorm. The leads, Chevy, Billie Worley, Lance Barber and Melissa Fosse-Dunne, were lovely people who worked hard and also brought warmth and positive energy to the set. Billie especially was like the goodwill ambassador of the film. I've since heard all the stories about how Chevy is hard to work with, especially on *Community* and when he hosted *SNL*. I'm baffled by those stories. He was a dream on *Bad Meat*. He was gracious to me and the rest of the cast. He took time out to talk to fans who showed up. He never ran out of ideas, and always performed at the top of his game, even doing pratfalls for me.

I remember especially a few nights filming from dusk till dawn at the landfill, a place that smelled bad, was almost impassible with thick mud on the ground when it rained, and generally very cold. The sense of camaraderie was like nothing I'd ever felt. Lance's character, Buddy, lived in the landfill, sleeping next to a little campfire like a hobo. We all kept warm by the fire while cameras were setting up. Billie and I would run alongside railway cars that passed through and jump on them. Ben Bailey, who would go on to become the host of *Cash Cab*, was a fun guy who kept things light playing an FBI agent. Partly, I was delirious from exhaustion, but the experience was pure joy to me.

I completed all the postproduction in my recording studio in Brooklyn where Peter and I recorded *The Weekly Radio Address*. I worked on the music at Elegant Too's studio in Manhattan, and completed the final picture editing at Final Frame, also in Manhattan. Everything was done at a relaxed pace with no crazy deadline looming over us.

The trouble began with *Bad Meat* when it was finished. First, when we debuted it at the US Comedy Arts Festival in Aspen, the *Comedy Castaways* sound curse came back to haunt me. During the screening, the sound was distorted and barely audible due to some malfunction in the transfer.

Nevertheless, Michael and I found an experienced production rep to help us sell the film, and we made a deal with a company called Arts Alliance America. Like with *Spaceman*, we didn't make nearly enough

money to pay back any of the investors (myself included). The film sold for \$35,000, but the company paid us only half what they owed, and then skipped town and changed their name to avoid paying the rest.

The movie was distributed on DVD, Amazon, and Netflix, but the crooks who distribute it share none of the royalties with me or the investors or the cast and crew of the movie. It's some comfort to me that the movie is pretty obscure, so at least they're not making a fortune.

More than a decade went by after the "sale." But the trouble continued.

A lawyer from SAG-AFTRA got in touch with me and claimed the limited liability company that produced the film owed them several hundred thousand dollars for actors' shares of royalties. I directed the lawyer to the thieves at Arts Alliance America, but she kept calling me, threatening to sue.

I retained an attorney who worked in the independent film arena. Apparently, this is a SAG-AFTRA cottage industry. They find independent filmmakers they can accuse of forgetting to sign certain agreements when they sell their films, and then try to get them to settle by going through a bogus arbitration process in which SAG-AFTRA-appointed lawyers decide—surprise!—that these starving-artist filmmakers owe SAG-AFTRA hundreds of thousands of dollars. There are several stories in the independent film world of these SAG-AFTRA shakedowns.

It's sick.

Bottom-feeding SAG-AFTRA lawyers aside, why did my movie ventures largely fail?

For starters, I was new at moviemaking. One of the principles of Outrageous Marketing is that you should do it a lot and get good at it, and it's important to do it with no budget. All of these projects cost too much money. The first thing I should have done was produce them as cheaply as possible. I should have made the movies with the resources I had at my disposal, not invested in any upgrades to professional actors or cameras. I should have shot *Spaceman* on super-8, with my friends

as the stars. I should have learned this lesson after *Spaceman*, but I didn't; I did the same thing with *Bad Meat*.

Secondly, I neglected the quantity-for-quality principle. Only by producing a ton of movies could I have hoped to produce a winner and achieve any success. We always hear the stories of successful filmmakers who make one short film, or get one movie into Sundance, and then get hired on a feature, and then have a glorious career. But they're the exception. There are thousands who never break out of the festival circuit. And it's too expensive a hobby to keep up. By making each one of my movies prohibitively expensive to produce, I made quantity impossible.

I read Robert Rodriguez's excellent book, *Rebel Without a Crew*, too late. His early career is a great example of Outrageous Marketing applied to a career as a movie director.

Lastly, I misunderstood the concept of genre when it comes to movies. I didn't realize how important genre was. In both *Spaceman* and *Bad Meat*, I was trying to invent never-before-seen genres of movies. This is not how the movie business works. Only established genres that have existing audiences will work. I was trying to be original, but if you're too original, people won't understand you. Had I more obsessively made movies and learned from my audience what works, I would have figured this out sooner.

As much as I loved the idea of making movies—I dreamed about doing it professionally ever since I discovered Steven Spielberg—I realized after making several movies that I dislike the actual process of filmmaking. It requires a certain personality, a certain amount of extroverted qualities that I don't possess. I worked on myself and learned a lot of these skills, like how to win people over and how to manage teams, but to put these skills into practice drains my battery fast. A director of a movie is called upon to summon the most extroverted level of engagement all day, every day—a director is one person's mother, another's father, sometimes a Dom, sometimes a sub—and it's exhausting for me.

I still dabble in movies, audio, and other media on occasion, but I've largely settled into the most solitary of the entertainment arts: writing. There I can afford to produce the right level of quantity, I can continue to fire on every cylinder, and I can do my best to succeed by being the most outrageous version of myself without trying to be someone I'm not.