

Ron Tite

COPYWRITER STAND-UP COMEDIAN

BA/ BPHE, Queen's 1993

In his own words: "I believe in enjoying everything you do. Life is too short to sacrifice happiness."

Talk about burning out. In August, 2000, Ron Tite found himself clutching a windowsill in his Edmonton hotel as smoke filled the room behind him. "I figure I was three minutes from dying in that fire, but the firefighters pulled me out. It was a weird, life-altering experience. It made me stop and think about what I was doing with my life."

At the time, Ron was living something of a double life. As an account director for Sharpe Blackmore EURO RSCG — a Toronto advertising agency that boasts clients such as Intel, Absolut Vodka, Home Hardware and Volvo — he was immersed in management issues — strategic direction, resources, billing, profitability. But he was also a successful stand-up comedian who had parlayed his comic writing skills into gigs across Canada and the U.S. and into the business of corporate comedy for companies such as Bell Canada, Dell and Nortel Networks. The fire burned a single message into his brain. "It was time to get out of management. I knew that I wanted to be creative all the time."

It wasn't a huge leap for him — more like walking across the hall to the creative department at Sharpe Blackmore. "It was a brilliant move because it brought together advertising and comedy in a way that lets me write all the time." In fact, his management experience gave him an edge

as a copywriter. "I have a sound strategic background that lets me weed out bad ideas fast and sell my own ideas better. And I've learned to be good at self-promotion and marketing, which helps my comedy business."

As early as high school, Ron was the guy who loved getting up in front of a crowd as MC or to do a stand-up bit. "Others were doing covers of Bon Jovi songs, but I'd cover a Bill Cosby routine." In 1989, he left Oshawa to start a BA/BPHE degree at Queen's. He intended to teach but university life put a different spin on his plans.

"Post-secondary education had always been a means to an end for me. At Queen's, I realized you didn't have to know exactly where you were going — doors would open. I was with the best and the brightest. The world just opened up for me. I also learned that the courses you choose in university aren't a big deal — studying mitosis, the bio-mechanical principles behind a baseball pitch, whatever. What's important is the skills you take away to complete a task."

His extracurricular activities included working with the Physical Health and Education Students Society, the AMS and Studio Q, the Queen's cable news station, where he was a news anchor and sports reporter. He also remembers doing stand-up comedy at Alfies and flopping. At the end of his third year, he scored a summer job in the Queen's Business School that

led to a full-time administrative position when he graduated in 1993.

It was a dream job. For the next three and a half years he was a program administrator for the upstart Executive MBA Program. “The director was unbelievable in terms of empowering people. It was a new program, so there were no procedures in place; we were flying by the seat of our pants. I was involved in everything — marketing, administration, consulting and finance. We had a great time launching that puppy.”

When the work became too predictable, he jumped ship, but not before turning into a “not-over-the-top computer geek.” His new technological savvy landed him a job with Affinity Edge, a Sharpe Blackmore partner specializing in web applications. Within five months he had crossed over to Sharpe Blackmore’s advertising arm to direct high-tech accounts. A big attraction of the job was the realistic attitude that kept everyone on an even keel.

“I liked the fact that we all went home at the end of the day knowing the pressure wasn’t killing us. Yes, we took our jobs seriously, but we also knew we weren’t saving lives. We were doing fun, creative stuff.” He believes it’s a worthwhile attitude for anyone in the work world, especially newcomers. “Don’t take yourself too seriously. *That’s* when you give yourself a chance to do some really creative work.”

Running parallel to his day job, of course, was the stand-up comedy. In 1998, after

honing his comedic skills through improv courses at Toronto’s Second City, he booked himself a 45-minute spot at Second City and sold out the house.

“I surprised everyone. It was a cocky thing to do, but I had a good routine and lots of confidence on my feet thanks to corporate presentations.” When the club dates started to snowball, Ron and a housemate from Queen’s — now also a comedian — teamed up to do corporate comedy. “It ramped up very quickly. It was customized comedy — I’d do something about phones for Nortel or tear apart a conference schedule comedically. It allowed us to combine a love of business and a love of comedy.”

In 1999 — its first year — Ron’s new company, Creative Performance Inc., hauled in impressive revenues. But as it became dominated by “administrivia,” he opted to return to straight performing, hiring himself out to the company he helped launch. These days, he

says, the balance between copywriting and doing stand-up comedy is just about perfect. It also gives him time to serve as the self-styled ranting spokesperson in a national television, radio and print campaign for Big Brothers of Canada.

His best advice for newcomers on the career path is to remain confident. “It’s kind of like the Roadrunner and Coyote bit where Coyote is holding an anvil in mid-air. He’s okay until he looks down. When you’re new at a job, try not to look down. Remember that you’re usually in there for a reason.” ❖

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