

TODAY'S COMMENTARY Tuesday, October 11th 2005

Behind the Scenes on This Thursday's The Apprentice

By Jim Hardison

Waiting for Dinner on The Apprentice

This Thursday, the task assigned by Donald Trump to his candidates on The Apprentice is to design a character for the Dairy Queen Blizzard, along with a costumed walk-around and an integrated marketing campaign, all in 36 hours. Five executives from Character, a Portland, Oregon-based firm that creates characters and develops story frameworks for brands, served as expert advisors to the competing teams, with partner and creative director Jim Hardison, along with his colleague Mike Wellins, working with Excel Corp., the men's team. Following is Jim's account of Excel Corp.'s struggles to perform the simple task of ordering hamburgers for Jim and Mike.

The Apprentice: NBC Thursday, October 13, 9:00 ET

I had an interesting time this last April trying to get a hamburger for dinner on NBC's The Apprentice.

Five of us from Character were Expert Advisors on the show, there to help the two teams design characters and character based marketing campaigns for Dairy Queen. I had been assigned to the "guy's" team with Mike Wellins, an artist, character designer, animator and director we've worked with often on our projects. We'd been told by the producers that our teams should get us food. If they failed to offer, we were encouraged to ask, and even to quit if they didn't get us something in a timely manner. We got the feeling the producers might actually have liked it if we quit. You know, for added drama. But Mike and I are easy going guys.

Around 7:00 PM on Saturday, April 23rd, after about five hours of working we first mentioned that we were hungry. Let's start the clock there.

7:30 PM A half hour's gone by. We mention a second time that we're pretty hungry and suggest that hamburgers from the drive-through down the street will be fine. The guys immediately reject our drive-through idea. We're working too hard for them to let us eat drive-through. They are going to get us something really special; the best burgers in all of New York. We're thinking, hey, alright. Maybe these guys are cooler than we thought. Except that this leads to a lengthy group debate about where to get the best burgers in all of New York.

7:50 PM That's right, it's twenty minutes later. It's been difficult but the guys finally agree on a place. We could have been happily eating our drive through burgers by now, but okay, water under the bridge. We're getting the best burgers ever, right?

7:55 PM Turns out the place is closed. This precipitates another debate, this time about which restaurant is the second best restaurant for hamburgers in New York.

"He then reveals to the rest of us that hanging up is a technique he is using to get the discount because no savvy New Yorker pays full price for anything."

8:05 PM Now the team is hotly debating who should be assigned the duty of calling in the order. The funny thing is that through the whole argument I can't make out whether the guys are trying to be assigned the job or trying to avoid it. They all take turns grandstanding about it until suddenly the dust settles and one guy's been elected. Let's call him Ordering Guy. (Sorry, our NDA's won't let us use the guy's names or you could figure out who is still on the show.)

8:15 PM Ordering Guy's first act is to phone the project manager of his team and get a budget. They can spend one hundred dollars. Apparently now the Sheriff of Food Ordering, Ordering Guy deputizes another guy to collect everyone's orders.

8:30 PM Ordering Guy finally has the orders from his deputy. Every order is complicated. Most of the guys ask for burgers, salads, soups and fries with little variations of condiments for each item. No mayo here, extra cheese there. Now, I'm a creative guy, not an accountant, but even I can tell this is going to run way over a hundred bucks.

8:45 PM Ordering Guy goes to work. He phones the second best hamburger joint in New York and immediately asks the name of the woman who answers the phone. It's Joan. (Not her real name. I can't remember her real name. Hopefully, it will be on the show.) He tells Joan his name, that he works for Excel Corporation and that he really wants to order food from her restaurant because it's great and he really wants to put a deal together that will make the order work for everybody. That's right. He wants to put a deal together for these burgers. During this speech, he uses all the slightly condescending rapport building techniques at his disposal, including a liberal sprinkling of Joan's name as punctuation at the beginnings and ends of all his sentences. See, he wants a discount. Joan tells him she'll check into it but that they generally don't give discounts for over-the-phone hamburger orders. At that, he says he'll have to call her back and immediately hangs up on her. He then reveals to the rest of us that hanging up is a technique he is using to get the discount because no savvy New Yorker pays full price for anything. Especially not a candidate on The Apprentice.

9:00 PM Ordering Guy has finally finished placing the order. But there's a problem. It's going to cost about a hundred and eighty bucks. This precipitates another huge and dramatic debate. It's not a debate about getting a lower price. Joan won't budge. No, the current debate is about who is going to call up the project manager to let him know that the food is coming in over budget.

9:10 PM Another one of the guys finally calls the project manager and gets chewed out about the cost. Our guy argues and complains but the answer doesn't change. Under no circumstances can the team spend one penny over the one hundred dollars budgeted for food. People will just have to go hungry. Except Mike and myself. We can have anything we want. We hear him say that over the speaker phone.

9:15 PM The team is in a tizzy. They're mad at the project manager, they're bickering about what to do about the food. This would be a good deal funnier if Mike and I weren't really hungry. They finally decide to cut back on their orders to bring the price down. This means that every one of the complicated orders has to be individually rethought.

9:20 PM Ordering Guy calls poor Joan back and tells her he needs to change the order. She says it's probably already done by now. He says that he has to change it anyway and starts trying to read her specific changes to each of the ten orders. After a few minutes of this, Joan says she'll have to get her manager.

9:25 PM The manager tells the Ordering Guy that it is too late. They can't change the order. Ordering Guy says, "Fine, cancel it then," and he hangs up on them.

9:30 PM It's two hours after we first asked for dinner and we are back to square one.

I'll spare you the next forty five minutes of intrigue because I'm sure you've got the gist of it by now. We finally got cold hamburgers sometime after ten from somewhere else. The guys on the team made a big show of enjoying them, but Mike whispered to me that his was far worse than a drive-through burger would have been. We both wonder if any of this will make it into the show, and if so, what it will look like.

So, how did this dinner fiasco happen? After all, our team of hamburger getters has been described as the most talented group of Apprentice candidates ever. They're pretty decent guys. Some of them are self-made millionaires, some are high powered financial advisors, one even has multiple degrees including a PhD. These guys are supposed to be geniuses.

The trouble with getting dinner on The Apprentice was that the contestants weren't really trying to get us dinner. That was the stated objective but the real story was about looking better, smarter, more savvy and heroic than the other guys. Every move was calculated, not to satisfy the task at hand, but to try to look good in the moment. Refusing to get us drive-through burgers in order to look good in the moment ultimately made eight geniuses look like idiots.

I know that The Apprentice is basically a marketing game show but I wonder if part of the show's appeal stems from how well it mirrors the underlying reality of marketing today. Despite the best efforts of tremendously intelligent and creative people, marketing frequently becomes a stunt instead of something real, because the people working on it aren't thinking in terms of authenticity and connection, they are thinking in terms of creating the biggest immediate bang. Following this approach, they frequently burn equity to fuel short term growth, grandstanding in the moment while failing at their real task—the consistent telling of a powerful story.

Following the logic of the show, maybe Mike and I should have quit over the cold burgers. It wouldn't have helped the team with the completion of their task, but I'm betting it would have gotten us some serious screen time.

Copyright ©2005 Character LLC