

Chicago Tribune

Business, March 23, 2008

Making the most of a big-league break

Executive helped marry entertainment, marketing

By Ann Therese Palmer

Watching television commercials was a favorite pastime for Jim Harris as a child.

"I liked the bite-sized humor for products like Volkswagen and Alka-Seltzer," recalls Harris. "But there was another dimension. My dad, Tom Harris, was a senior public relations executive for advertising firms here. Our dinner table conversations had a fair amount of shop talk. So when I watched ads, I was sensitive to details others might miss."

After graduating from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, Harris started as an assistant account executive on a new Dial soap product in Needham Harper Worldwide's Chicago office.

"Needham was pitching to land Michelob Beer," Harris recounts. "Late one Friday, I stopped to see the person running the pitch. He showed me the strategy and the ideas for the campaign, 'The Night Belongs to Michelob.' We talked for an hour."

The following Monday when Harris arrived at work he found he'd been transferred to the Michelob unit.

"It was like playing Triple-A ball and suddenly getting called up to the majors," Harris says.

Now 46, Harris is chief executive of Office Media Network, a Chicago-based, privately held company that transmits up-to-the-minute business news and information on high-definition screens in 500 commercial office buildings nationwide.

Q: What was so important about joining the Michelob team?

A: It was one of the most unique advertising management jobs in the country. Entertainment and marketing were just starting to combine in interesting ways, led by Michael Jackson being sponsored by Pepsi.

My job was to manage Michelob's sponsorships of Genesis, Eric Clapton and Steve Winwood, which were pioneering programs, yet became templates for standard marketing tactics today. What we're doing at Office Media Network has a lot of similarities -- innovating to capitalize on how technology is changing the advertising and media businesses.

Q: You've consulted for many high-profile clients, such as Google and the National Football League. Where do you do your most creative, most effective thinking?

A: Staring out of the window on an airplane lets things come together in my head in a way that doesn't work any place else.

I sit there with a legal pad and a pen, stare out into space and scribble down ideas. For some reason, it doesn't work on a laptop.

Q: After Needham Harper Worldwide, you founded your own entertainment marketing company, then left that firm to go corporate again -- with Miller Brewing. Why?

A: I was making more money than in the agency business but got disillusioned with what I was doing in entertainment marketing. I was the translator from the people who spoke business to the people who spoke entertainment.

When I was at Needham, my job was thinking and doing. When I was on my own, most of my job was selling. I missed the challenges of thinking and executing.

Q: What's the best advice anybody gave you?

A: My dad taught me to treat people as I'd want them to treat me. He inspired me to do things I love even when it wasn't easy, with passionate curiosity.

Q: How has your personal life fared, as you've climbed the career ladder?

A: I've been lucky. A mutual friend introduced me to my wife, Lynn, as I was graduating from Kellogg. She was beginning the program.

She's marketing director of Kellogg's Biotech Center. We've got two children, Zack, 14, and Allie, 12.

Mariane Pearl, wife of murdered Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, who recently spoke in Chicago, captured it, quoting "Little Prince" author Antoine de Saint-Exupery: "Love does not consist in merely gazing at each other, but in looking outward in the same direction."

- - -

Step by step

2005-present: Chief executive, Office Media Network Inc., Chicago

2002-04: Managing director, Equity Office Media Network Inc., Chicago

2001-05: Managing partner, ThoughtStep Inc., Chicago

1999-2001: Founding partner, Z Group, Atlanta/Chicago

1997-99: Executive vice president, chief marketing officer, Allied Riser Communications Inc., Dallas/Chicago

1992-97: Managing partner, Thomas L. Harris & Co., Highland Park

1989-92: Brand director/new products, Miller Brewing Co., Milwaukee

1988-89: President, JHEM Inc., Chicago

1986: Account executive, Needham Harper Worldwide, Chicago

1985: Assistant account executive, Needham Harper Worldwide

1985: Master of business administration degree, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, Evanston

1984: Summer intern, Russell Reynolds Associates, Chicago

1983: Bachelor of arts degree, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Summers 1980-83: Intern, Golin/Harris Communications, Chicago

1977-78: Part-time busboy, Aegean Isles restaurant, Highland Park

Summer 1977: Caddy, Lake Shore Country Club, Glencoe

Credit: By Ann Therese Palmer, SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

After graduating from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, Harris started as an assistant account executive on a new Dial soap product in Needham Harper Worldwide's Chicago office. Now 46, Harris is chief executive of Office Media Network, a Chicago-based, privately held company that transmits up-to-the-minute business news and information on high-definition screens in 500 commercial office buildings nationwide.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.