

ADVERTISING STAR



Lucas Donat: Co-Founder and CEO of Donat/Wald Company, Santa Monica, CA

[By Heather Jung]

As co-founder and CEO of direct-response advertising agency Donat/Wald Company, Lucas Donat has helped to create some of the most memorable advertisements in recent years for companies such as eHarmony, 1-800-Dentist, and TLC Laser Eye Centers.

Donat began his career as an advertiser as a film student at Ithaca College in New York, where he completed four years of education, but left the school before he graduated in order to move to Los Angeles after receiving a James B. Pendleton Grant to create his film *Silent White*.

After completing the film, he married Tracy Wald in 1984 and worked for a messenger service. In 1987, he and Wald, a film student who graduated from USC, created Donat/Wald. Having studied various film theories, they decided to utilize the auteur theory at their advertising agency.

"It was with great interest that I would watch what appeared to be this duplication of roles: production company producers, agency producers, agency creative directors, production company directors," Donat said. "And it struck me that there might be a more efficient way to create advertising, and that's really what we do at Donat/Wald; we take a very auteur approach with accountability from concept, strategic development all the way through delivery of finished advertising. We do so in probably a more streamlined fashion than the traditional sort of agency model."

Donat/Wald's first client was 1-800-Dentist. According to Donat, early focus groups felt that there was no future for the service, which pairs clients with dentists via the telephone.

Q. What do you do for fun?

A. I hang out with my family. My daughter is nine and has made 67 movies at last count. She edits on iMovie, and I thought I was going to be the one teaching her how to do it, but she is now showing me how to work it—it's just extraordinary. I take great pleasure and joy in making movies with my daughter and hanging out with my family. I am also an avid gardener. I just love organic gardening; I love composting.

Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?

A. I would have to say Alison Krauss.

Q. What is the last magazine you read?

A. Probably *The Economist*—less because I am erudite than we really wanted to win their business. I really discovered in the course of wanting to win their business what an amazing publication it is.

Q. What is your favorite TV show?

A. Probably *The Sopranos*.

Q. Who is your role model?

A. I would honestly say that I have been so inspired in the course of the three years working on this project with George Foreman that I would say if I think of another man whose life I would want to model who is living today, it would probably be George Foreman. He is an extraordinary man, and I have an enormous amount of respect for him and a great fondness in my heart for him. The other one I would say is my dear friend Neil Clark Warren, who is the founder of eHarmony. Two great men.

"What we found was that people loved the concept of 800-Dentist, but they had issues of trust," Donat said. "If our advertising could build a bridge of trust with the customer, we would have a great, great business."

Thanks to Donat/Wald's efforts, 1-800-Dentist is now a household name, receiving millions of calls and generating profits of more than \$750 million.

According to Donat, the campaign he is most proud of is the eHarmony campaign. As an auteur advertiser, Donat has written and directed all of the eHarmony ads and has thus met all of the couples featured.



"We went into eHarmony in the early days and saw that they were such a brilliant, passionate, wonderful company, and I just got it. So we developed strategy and positioning with them and developed a campaign together," Donat said.

Unlike some other advertising agencies, Donat/Wald does not confine itself to one medium. Ads created by Donat/Wald can be seen or heard just about anywhere: on

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television, online, in print, on the radio, and in podcasts.

"We do it all because we so believe in the power of an integrated approach," Donat said. "Often, what we find is that television is a huge driver for us, so the vast majority of advertising dollars for our clients are typically spent on television, but the halo effect of television is lost if you're not active in online, in print, in radio. Of course it depends on the media mix and depends on the specific needs and objectives of the client, but we are disciplined in all channels of advertising, so we really view our approach as multi-platform, from television to online to print to radio to podcasting to viral and all the other channels that are opening up."

Donat/Wald's next major project is a 30-minute infomercial for George Foreman's new personal transformation program. The infomercial will tell Foreman's story, starting out with his experiences as a mugger on the street and portraying his rise to become a heavyweight champion and one of the most trusted spokespeople in the world. Donat said that he is not "a jaded advertising person" and believes that advertising can be inspirational and have a great impact on the world.

The Foreman infomercial is not the first infomercial Donat/Wald has created. In the 1990s, the agency produced a Barbie infomercial for Mattel. Donat did his research and found that girls have very strong emotional relationships with Barbies. The agency also found strong relationships between Barbie and mothers who played with Barbies themselves when they were their daughters' ages.

"So this campaign was really about awakening that powerful connection with the brand for mothers who could now collect Barbie dolls and have that in common with their daughters," Donat said.

He also believes that despite technological advances like TiVo, there is still plenty of "runway" left in short-form advertising. He looks forward to the new challenges and possibilities the future will bring.

"I think TiVo is changing that dynamic, but I just don't see the demise as others do of short form altogether," Donat said. "I see its evolution, and I think change is very, very healthy, and evolution is very, very healthy. So we're excited about what the future has to offer, and I'm excited about what online now has to offer us as a medium to transmit advertising messaging. It is

now rich in streaming and makes it a much more interesting format for us to be working in. Certainly people are there; viewers and consumers are online. I think it creates innovative thinking, and I'm really excited about the future of advertising."

When it comes to a career in advertising-or any career, for that matter-Donat echoes Joseph Campbell's advice: follow your passion.

"Advertising is such an exciting industry because it involves business, it involves creativity, and it involves intense human interaction. There is so much at stake. The key is to be passionate," he said.

ON THE NET

Donat/Wald Company
www.donatwald.com

eHarmony
www.eharmony.com

1-800-Dentist
www.1800dentist.com