

ADVERTISING STAR



Steve McKee: President of McKee Wallwork Cleveland Advertising

[By Heather Jung]

At 22 years old, Steve McKee found himself in a crunch: he was a recent college graduate, newly married, and selling (not all that successfully he claims) health club memberships at a local gym. One day, he saw an ad in the local paper for a position as a field marketing manager for the Pizza Hut account and decided to go for it.

"I used to open the health club at dawn and then go home and go back to bed. When the agency called me for an initial interview, I was asleep, so I was disoriented, nervous, and incoherent. Needless to say, I bombed it. My wife encouraged me to write a letter explaining the situation and beg for a second chance, which I did. They gave me a shot at an in-person interview," McKee said. "Having nothing to lose, I converted a pizza box into a briefcase, put my resume on the back of a placemat, made a pen out of a straw, and wore the hand puppet they were putting into their kids meals when I introduced myself to the agency president. My wife thought I was absolutely crazy, but fortunately she said nothing at the time or I would have scrapped my plans."

It was his willingness to take these risks that got him the job. McKee said that his boss later told him they had been considering people with more experience but took a chance on him because he had guts.

Now, more than 20 years later, McKee is the president of his own advertising agency, McKee Wallwork Cleveland, which has been recognized by the American Marketing Association with two EFFIE Awards for excellence in marketing communications. Based in Albuquerque, NM, the agency serves clients such as Blake's Lotaburger, Glass Doctor, Presbyterian Healthcare Services, and Mr. Rooter.

"Our newest assignment is for the Natural Stone Council, which is a new cooperative marketing organization like the Milk Board or the Beef Council but for stone," McKee said. "We developed a branding campaign from the ground up, creating a 'Genuine

Stone' trademark and a comprehensive plan to roll it out first to architects and designers and then to consumers nationwide. It's a long-term program that's incorporated everything I've learned about branding over the past 20 years."

Q. What do you do for fun?

A. I have four kids who have a variety of interests, and what's fun for them is fun for me, whether it's working backstage at my girls' ballet production or coaching my son's basketball team. My wife and I try to spend as much time as we can with them, knowing that it's just a season in life.

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

A. I haven't played a CD in two years. My iPod goes with me everywhere. My last download was a Darrell Mansfield song from the late 70s, but I also put a lot of my kids' music on there.

Q. What is the last magazine you read?

A. I flew home last weekend from Detroit and read *Forbes* and the in-flight magazine. My only must-read is *World Magazine*. It offers interesting perspectives on a variety of news items, and I can usually get through it in about a half hour. Time is precious.

Q. What is your favorite TV show?

A. I've enjoyed *24* for the last two years, but I don't think I can handle the stress anymore. I always enjoy watching football.

Q. Who is your role model?

A. Jesus.

McKee feels advertising is an interesting business because it allows people to "cross-pollinate ideas across a variety of companies in a variety of industries." Assignments have their similarities but are also wildly different.

"It provides an interesting perspective on the world and no shortage of topics to discuss at cocktail parties. I know a little about a whole lot of things," McKee said.

McKee said that, thanks to the Internet and TiVo, advertising has become dichotomous—it is both changing and unchanging.

"Everything is changing. From a media perspective, the rapid proliferation in our industry is good because the more complexity it brings to the decision process, the more companies will need the advice of professionals like us. It's incumbent upon us to stay up to speed on changing technology, but that's what we do. New media options open up the creative possibilities exponentially. There's nothing to fear there," said McKee.

"At the same time, nothing is changing," he added. "As humans, we will always respond

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to storytelling, which in a nutshell is what we in the advertising business do. People like advertising. Oh, they hate bad advertising, and they hate when it intrudes on their world, but they like advertising that entertains or otherwise touches them, and they value the fact that it pays for things that they enjoy for free. And in some ways, the dizzying array of new media options makes genuine creativity an even greater value. If what Steven Spielberg did was easy, everyone would be doing it.”

McKee has four pieces of advice for those interested in working in the advertising industry:

- First, read. Everything you can. Read fiction, read nonfiction, read newspapers, and read magazines. Reading makes you smart. It keeps you plugged into the culture, and we’re a culture-driven business.
- Second, learn how to write. If you can express your ideas in writing, you can do anything. Everybody

thinks they’re a good writer, but very few people really are. Your high school English teacher was right. Get a copy of *The Elements of Style* and internalize it.

- Third, get into advertising before you land a job. I always ask applicants what ads they like and why they like them. I also ask them what advertisers are blowing it and why. In our business, unlike other professions, our work is on display for all to see. If you’re not already studying and critiquing and developing opinions about advertising, you’re probably not all that interested in the business. If you can’t talk about it intelligently at the drop of a hat, that’s a red flag.
- Fourth, apply what you know to yourself. You are the product, and the agency is your target market. What can you learn about the target? How can you position the product?

What communication vehicles will be most effective? If you can’t develop a smart plan to sell yourself to an agency, why would they believe you can develop a smart plan to sell their clients’ products and services? On the other hand, if you execute a well-conceived, custom, and differentiated plan to sell yourself, an agency would be crazy not to hire you.

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www.mckeeWallworkCleveland.com

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