

The Unintentional Businessman



Photo: Rick Stiller

Jim Stovall relies on insight, drive and serendipity to achieve amazing results in multiple ventures

By JAKE POINIER

The year was 1988. At 29 years old, recently having gone blind from a degenerative eye disease that started at 17, Jim Stovall was sitting in his house, in his hometown of Tulsa, Okla., figuring he'd never leave this 9 x 12 room ever again.

"Before losing my sight, it was the media room in my house," Stovall says. "I had a TV, a VCR and a pile of old movies. So, one day I was sitting there, and I put in *The Big Sleep*, a famous Bogart film. I'd seen it so many times that I thought I'd be able to follow along. About an hour into the film, someone was shot and a car sped away. It was frustrating, because I couldn't follow it, and I said to myself, 'Somebody ought to do something about that.'"

If you're reading this article, chances are that you've probably experienced the fruits of Jim Stovall's "somebody-oughta insight" only by accident. "If you push that button on your TV called SAP [second audio program], you'll hear an extra voice—'Jim slowly walks across the room and peers out the window,' which helps people hear what they can't see," Stovall says. Today, his Emmy Award-winning Narrative Television Network creates about 1,000 hours a year of accessible programming for the major networks and 13 million blind and visually impaired people across North America.

Making a Connection

Stovall's first speaking engagement in 1993 was a direct result of the early success of the network. He had hired some Los Angeles-based media consultants who wanted him to get out and meet the station managers at about 1,000 TV stations around the country. "As a totally blind person, I had reached the point where I could venture out of the house, stumble into the back of a limo, get to the office and stumble around there all day, and then reverse the process in the evening," he says. "But 1,000 TV stations? I said, I'm not doing that, and I'm paying you guys to come up with another plan."

Based on Stovall's background as an entrepreneur and experience as a national champion and Olympic-level weightlifter (which had been his fallback sport after poor eyesight dashed his dreams of playing in the NFL), Plan B was to book him as a speaker and invite the station managers in on a regional basis. At about the same time, he was invited to speak to the National Association of Broadcasters.

"Afterwards, one of the heads of a major network asked me if I'd be willing to speak to his people," Stovall says. "I thought it would be a good way to promote my network, so I said yes. He asked, 'Would five be okay?' And I honestly didn't know if he meant hundred or a thousand, but the fact was I was willing to go for free." It was, it turned out, thousands.

Author, Author

Thus the unintentional television executive evolved into an unintentional professional speaker. Stovall started making appearances with friends Dr. Robert Schuller and Dr. Denis Waitley in 1995. Suddenly, he realized inspirational speaking was a business in its own right so he hired a person to book all of his engagements and travel.

Stovall is quick to note, however, that he is a businessperson first, presenter second. "I'm not a road warrior," he says. "I do three arena-type events a month and that's it. And as I tell my corporate clients, I'm going to be back at my desk tomorrow, doing exactly what I'm going to encourage your people to do—it's not just a theory for me. I've never gotten away from our core business, and I encourage the people in our industry to stay active in their area of expertise. Any pilot will tell you that flying the simulator only gets you so far."

With his business and speaking career humming along, it was time for serendipity to strike again for Stovall. "We were at an engagement and Dr. Waitley commented that I ought to write a book," he says. "Of course, I said I can't even read a book, how can I write one? I went out on stage, and after I was done, he told me he had it all worked out: He'd write the foreword and his publisher needed the manuscript in 90 days."

Stovall says the result, *You Don't Have To Be Blind To See*, published in 1996, about his insights as an elite athlete and an entrepreneur, was a great experience. He was not as thrilled when the publisher called a few months later looking for his follow-up book. "If they'd told me I had to write another one," he says, "I wouldn't have written everything I knew in the first book!" Yet, his books met with a strong enough following that he ended up writing three more before hitting a wall.

"By this time, I was really scraping the bottom of the barrel," he says. "So one day I told Dorothy, to whom I dictate all of my books and newspaper columns, we were going to write a novel." Five days later, having begun only with a concept and a first line—"It was in my 80th year of life on this planet, in my 53rd year of the practice of the law, I was to undertake an odyssey that would change my life forever"—Stovall put the closing chapter on *The Ultimate Gift* and sent it to his publisher.

The good news was that the publisher loved the book, which told the tale of a young man given 12 challenges upon the death of his wealthy grandfather. The bad news was that, three weeks later, the publisher got taken out in a hostile takeover. When a representative of the new publisher called and said they were contractually obligated to put the book out, but weren't going to promote it, Stovall viewed it as a mixed blessing. "It just laid on the shelves and died," he said, "but at least they weren't going to ask me to write any more books."



The Unintentional Movie

That, too, would change, when Stovall received a call from a perplexed Amazon.com representative. What, he wanted to know, was Stovall doing to get people to order 100, 500 or even thousands of copies of *The Ultimate Gift* at a time? Stovall learned that financial planners, schoolteachers, faith-based community and philanthropic organizations were buying the book and giving it to people because of its strong message about the relationship of wealth and happiness. The popularity of the book, which is now published in 15 languages, also impacted his speaking business, by opening his message to a whole new audience.

It also caught the attention of a major movie studio, which contacted Stovall and wanted to make the book into a movie. He was flattered but cautious. "I've been in the industry long enough to see what they do to people's books," he says. "I told them I'm interested only if we could keep the message in place. They gave me script approval, but when they presented it a year later, it was so far removed from the book that I said no thanks." A second studio did the same

thing, delivering a script with the story and characters—and stripped of the message.

Stovall stuck to his principles. "We're not in the speaking or publishing business, we're in the message business," he says. "Speeches, books, movies . . . they're all just vehicles to getting your message out there."

When longtime friend and producer Rick Eldridge called Stovall, the third script was a charm. Not only did Stovall have control over the screenplay and message, but James Garner agreed to play the lead—and after reading the book and script became a partner and worked for nothing. With funds freed up, Brian Dennehy and Lee Meriwether could come on board, and they could afford Bob Dylan and B.B. King on the soundtrack. Then-unknown Abigail Breslin signed on to play the little girl—and in the meantime, she got

Reality Check: You're Cheaper than the Bagels

"I finished an event in front of 14,000 people last week, and afterward, the meeting planner came up to me," says Jim Stovall. "I said, thanks, got your check, got the limo, everything is good. And then I said how I feel so grateful to be in this business that sometimes I almost feel guilty. He said, 'Let me tell you something. You just did an hour and 15 minutes, and then we took a break. At the top of each section in the arena there are donuts and coffee and bagels. During that 10-minute break, the coffee, donuts and bagels cost me \$42,000. You're cheaper than the bagels.'"

Stovall encourages speakers to think about their fees in the total context of what it costs to put on a meeting. "That meeting was \$7.2 million for a four-day event; flying people in, putting them up in hotels, renting suites and everything else that goes into a world-class event," Stovall says. "Out of that, they had four hours of stage time. So, do the math and realize that our fee is essentially inconsequential.

"There's one thing we have to remember: Meeting planners keep their jobs on the fact that we don't suck. That's what it comes down to. And even while my fee has increased over the past few years, I've always got people who are hiring me for the first time. One of my *Fortune* 500 clients summed it up perfectly: No one wants to be the person that sees the CEO, right after the speaker bombs at the annual meeting, and all they can say is, 'Hey, but I got this guy cheap.' If they've got \$35,000 to spend on a keynote, they're going to spend it."

So You Want to Make a Movie?

"The more vehicles you can utilize to make your message work, the better off you are," says Jim Stovall. "There are a million people that have seen *The Ultimate Gift*. A lot of them are people who would never get caught dead reading my books. On the other hand, there are a lot of people who've read my book who haven't been to a movie since *Ben Hur*."

The way Stovall looks at it, writing a book is an obvious offshoot for speakers, but doing a movie isn't as outlandish as you might think. "Do you have a studio connection, do you have talent, do you have a director, do you have a best-selling book?" he says. "If you have one thing, you can attract the other pieces like a magnet." It's no different from marketing yourself as a speaker—you just hammer away until it happens.

"Hollywood is dying for great stories," he says. "If you want proof, just look at some of the stuff that made it to your local multiplex."



From left to right: Brian Dennehy, Lee Meriwether, Jim Stovall, Ali Hillis, Drew Fuller, Mircea Monroe and Bill Cobbs at the pre-release premiere of *The Ultimate Gift* in Tulsa, Okla., Nov. 8, 2006.

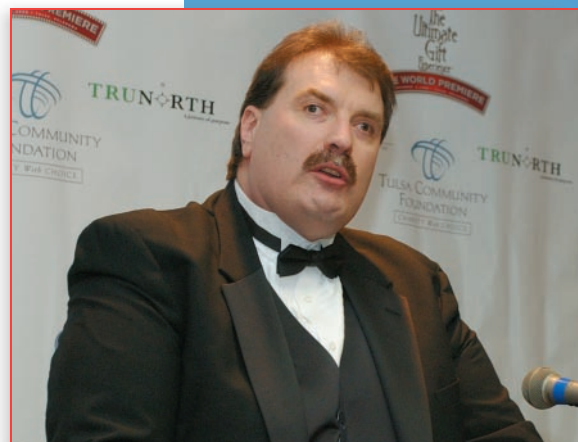
nominated for an Academy Award for *Little Miss Sunshine*, making her one of the hottest properties in Hollywood.

For Stovall, the process from dictating to a single person in a room to a cast and crew of 440 people illustrated the importance of collaboration in achieving amazing results. "It's never going to get any bigger than black ink on white paper until you allow other people to get involved in the process," he says. "You've got this little city that pops up, and they're responsible for bringing your thoughts and ideas to the screen. Two hours and 10 bucks later, when someone walks up the aisle, they need to have had the same experience that 4 million people have had when they turn the last page of the book."

The Ultimate Gift, which won the Heartland Film Festival's Truly Moving Picture Award and Crystal Heart Award in October 2006, also served an ulterior purpose for Stovall. For the six months prior to its theater debut in March 2007, the movie was made available to community foundations and schools for about 300 charitable screenings. About 100,000 people saw the movie—raising upwards of \$27 million for local organizations. "It's great when you can have a business success, and it's great when you can make a difference in the world," Stovall says. "The advantage of being in our business is that you can do both at the same time."

For this unintentional businessman, speaker, author and scriptwriter, there's a bit of intentional comedy at the heart of the serendipity. "Near the end of the film, there's a brief scene with a limo driver who has a couple of lines—that's me," Stovall says. "I thought it was

poetic justice to have the blind guy driving the limo." **S**



Jake Poinier has been a full-time freelance writer since 1999. In addition to commercial copywriting for clients such as Dial Corporation, Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, and Apollo Group, his magazine and newspaper credits include articles in USA Today and Golf Illustrated.