

August 2010 – Special Section: DR Milestones



Applauding the impact of the infomercial and the visionaries who recognized the opportunity

BY KEITH CONNERS

Welcome to the third installment of Electronic Retailer's celebration of the 25th anniversary of the infomercial.

It seems like yesterday the Chia Pet hit the airwaves and allured audiences of all ages to the point where they rushed to buy one. As a boy in the early 1980s, I had the opportunity to witness this product come to life in front of my eyes.

Or what about the Clapper? This was truly an awe-inspiring invention and I had to have it! The new vehicle promoting these innovative products like the Chia Pet and Clapper was a sneaky phenomenon that penetrated our households and set the stage for the powerful marketing tool known as the infomercial.

Behind the scenes in the early days, were a few influential pioneers who recognized the opportunity inherent in the infomercial. I can hardly imagine the exciting experience it must have been to develop those early long-form commercials, buy media time and wait to see what happened!

Of course, we all know what happened...sales soared and many inventors got in line to place their product on television. A natural progression occurred and the legend of the infomercial was born. Companies were created to orient those brave inventors to the process of purchasing media time and capturing the desired response with one thing in mind, keeping the customer happy so he or she will buy again and again.

In this issue, we recognize three visionaries who laid the groundwork for the Electronic Retailing Association that we know today. The first of which is Frank Cannella. In 1982, Cannella created the infomercial by recognizing a product, New Generation, which benefited men everywhere. Our second pioneer, Michelle Cardinal, put products like NordicTrac and Hoover on our televisions and in our homes. The final forerunner we acknowledge this month is Fern Lee. Her years of experience and

knowledge of the industry brought us FocusFactor, a product that has influenced the success of millions of professionals on a daily basis.

Visionaries like Frank Cannella, Michelle Cardinal and Fern Lee set the stage for the rest of us. It is truly an honor to introduce them to you as this month's infomercial pioneers!

Keith Conners is marketing director at MicahTek and a member of ERA's PR Committee.



Frank Cannella
Founder & Executive Director
Cannella Response Television, LLC

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Electronic Retailer: How did you get into the DRTV industry?

Frank Cannella: Believe it or not, my introduction to the business came when I was a kid cutting grass and weeding. When I was 12 years old, I took care of the lawn of a guy who became my mentor. I sought job advice from him prior to graduating from college. He must have liked the work I did on his lawn because he got me an interview at A. Eicoff & Company. I started in the accounting department and was promoted to media buyer upon graduating college. It's funny how networking can open doors, even at such an early age.

ER: Is there any one product that you believe changed the face of DRTV for the consumer?

Cannella: There were numerous products: just about any Guthy-Renker product, The Banjo Minnow of the mid-'90s, Tae-Bo, P90X and Total Gym, to name but a few.

ER: What is your most memorable (insightful, funny or endearing) story of the DRTV industry or a colleague in the industry to date?

Cannella: An advertising VP walks into an AE's office and gives him a lead to call on. The AE reacts and says, "It's for a half-hour long commercial that says it will cure male-pattern baldness. We'll never get it on the air. The FCC only permits two minutes max." The AE follows up on the lead anyway, obtains the account and gets numerous broadcast stations to run the media. The lead becomes the first program-length commercial on the air since the 1950s. This is 1982 and the joke is that this is how the industry all began. Eventually, the AE and his media staff expand the genre by capitalizing on the FCC's deregulation and take it to the mainstream broadcasters. After a couple of years of obscurity and thousands of airings, a new industry called "infomercial advertising" explodes! And I was the lowly AE who asked to follow up on the lead we never thought would go anywhere. Moral of the story...always follow up on your leads!

ER: What is the most significant obstacle facing the industry today?

Cannella: Consumers have so many media and other options to choose from now. There is so much technology that keeps them from traditional TV viewership. Add to that the proliferation of TV viewing options from broadcasting to cable networks to Netflix, and you have a viewership that keeps getting further fragmented. Fortunately, we are in a supply and demand business, and we can keep

clients profitable by negotiating lower rates and creating new media buying opportunities. We're all working harder to keep up, that includes broadcasters and cable networks, too.