

STORES

September 2009

(Circ. Online)

Sound Advice

By Janet Groeber

Craig Hubbell has been called **PlayNetwork's** "Oz" behind the curtain. He and his team of producers have been creating custom in-store experiences, from music playlists to digital signage and messaging, for a wide range of global retailers since Hubbell joined the company in 2002. From Under Armour to Jack in the Box, PlayNetwork helps keep customers and sales humming with strategic audio and visual communication plans.

Recognized as one of the fastest-growing private companies in North America (Deloitte Fast 50), PlayNetwork provides services to more than 50,000 commercial subscriber locations in more than 50 countries, reaching more than eight million consumers daily. These days, the company is reaching beyond the bricks-and-mortar environment, integrating mobile into the mix to drive customers back to the mall.

Hubbell has held positions in sales, strategic account management and media services in the hospitality and restaurant fields. Today, he is responsible for all of PlayNetwork's services (music, video display, advertising and media entertainment) and leads the company's sales and marketing teams.

What about your early work life?

I worked all the way through college in restaurants and eventually ended up on the cook/chef side, in addition to managing. I also did a stint in the hotel industry in college. But it goes back to age 13; I worked for a local casual dining restaurant in Seattle for a number of years. At that time I couldn't even lift the garbage cans up into the dumpster.

Clearly that was against most child labor laws, so was that your first paying job?

I mowed lawns and had a paper route from the age of 8 or 9 ... I was a motivated child. And yes, it was against the law to be working almost anywhere at such a young age.

Did those jobs shape your business philosophy?

I learned that a team is more powerful than an individual. In a restaurant it's critical that the kitchen [staff] move and act as one to put out an acceptable product. From the hotel industry I learned those people who work hardest — and who put the time and energy into what they do and love what they do — are the people who are really rewarded in life.

You've just been given the attention of all retailers: What would you tell them?

Obviously, coming from an entertainment media company, we believe entertainment is absolutely important to making a personal connection with customers. Regardless of the market vertical they're in, all retailers have an opportunity to connect with customers through entertainment media in ways that are completely relevant to their brand and to their business.

But the market is so challenging right now.

Getting customers in the door is more of a problem than ever. It's critical for brands to engage customers in their retail space and then stay connected with them after they've left that physical space. We're working to take mobile to the next level. When customers hear a song they like in-store, they can instantly

download it to their phones — plus hear a brief brand message that connects the retailer/brand to those customers every time they push “play.”

What about your own entertainment preferences?

I’m an avid reader and always have been; I was a literature major in college, minoring in both business and history. Right now I’m reading “The Book Thief” by Markus Zusak and “Blink” by Malcolm Gladwell. I’m a music fanatic and pretty much like everything. I’m listening to a lot of electronica music right now.

A guilty pleasure?

I like disco music.

If you weren’t working in this field, what might you be doing?

I turned down an offer to teach creative writing in college to get into business.

What do you do with downtime?

Every Sunday evening I do a retro-“Wonderful World of Disney” thing with my children. At 7:00 p.m., we crowd into a single chair in the living room in front of the 65-inch plasma screen and watch a movie.

Item on your wish list?

Professionally, I wish the record labels would become less restrictive on licensing requirements for the new digital applications. Other than that, I’d really like to visit Fiji.