

Maverick ad-man, inspirational talk-show host—and possible future New York mayoral candidate? —Donny Deutsch on the ups and ... well, mostly just the ups ... of being Donny Deutsch. By Jordana Horn



am sitting in Donny Deutsch W'79's office at CNBC's studios in Ridgewood, New Jersey, discussing whether or not he is going to run for mayor of New York City—and that's when he decides to get undressed.

"In reality, I could be mayor," he says, leaning forward in his seat with all the unbridled enthusiasm he's known for on the CNBC show he hosts, *The Big Idea with Donny Deutsch.* "You know, if I really wanted to do it, I would meet with a top advisor. I'd find some great political operatives, and hire the head of my campaign.

"I'd meet with all the top people I know on Wall Street, and start a fundraising campaign," he continues, pausing for dramatic effect. His voice gets a touch higher, the vocal equivalent of raising his hands in the air. "I'm a candidate! It's not that crazy!"

It is at this point that I notice, looking up from my notepad, that Deutsch is unbuttoning his shirt.

"You're gonna have to watch me take my shirt off, because I have to change, all right?" he says. He stands up and finishes unbuttoning his shirt, facing me and sliding it off to reveal a bare chest and a not-bad set of abs for a 50-year-old guy. It's clear that he's aware that it's a not-bad set of abs perhaps more than a little aware.

"This isn't part of the story," he says perfunctorily, but immediately follows up by saying, "Oh, you can mention it. I did it in advertising once—I ripped my shirt off in front of a reporter and told her I had the best body in advertising." He grins sardonically. "I can no longer make that statement."

I want to tell him, I know you did. I've read your book, *Often Wrong, Never In Doubt: Unleash the Business Rebel Within* (2005). I recall one chapter devoted entirely to the incident when he took off his shirt in front of an *Ad Age* reporter in 2002 (noting "It didn't hurt that the reporter was a woman"), and she reported it straight, rather than as the tongue-in-cheek move he'd intended. The title of that chapter—and I reconfirm it when I get home—is "The Big-Shadow Principle: Why taking your shirt off for the press is a really bad idea."

In that chapter (on page 234), he had written, "I should have known there's a

difference between taking my shirt off among friends and colleagues and doing it in front of a reporter. Sometimes candidness, a certain goofball lunacy, a willingness to let people into your world and have some fun, just backfires. It certainly did this time." The chapter concludes, "Sometimes, you're a wise guy and it backfires on you. Sometimes you just do schmucky things."

As Deutsch stands bare-chested, his publicist looks up from her desk across the room and rolls her eyes: She's seen this all before. "This is off the record," she says to me.

"No, she can put it in, I don't care," Deutsch tells the publicist. "I'm on my way to my next meeting, and it is what it is: The interview's over, or you have to watch me change."

Okay, back to business. He runs for mayor. He wins. So, congratulations, Mr. Mayor, what are you going to do? He smiles archly and walks behind my chair. "I'm going to stand over here so you don't have to watch me take my pants off." I hear the sound of a zipper.

Welcome to the in-your-face, candid, self-referential, unapologetic and (arguably) occasionally schmucky world of Donny Deutsch.

The world of Deutsch today—

host of his own primetime show on CNBC, multi-millionaire, single father—is a long way from the world he inhabited for the first part of his life. To be sure, it was a comfortable world of privilege ... but one in which Deutsch was labeled as someone who had "potential," rather than as someone who ever would act on it.

While he was a student at Penn, Deutsch recalls, for example, "I was a little bit of a fish out of water, a little bit of the village idiot. I think I was the last person off the wait list into Arts and Sciences—so I was literally the dumbest person they took in all of Penn."

Be that as it may, Deutsch transferred into Wharton and graduated *cum laude* after what he characterizes as a not-overlyacademic undergraduate experience. "It was a little crazy back then, let's put it that way. There was a lot of ... hmmm ..." He has a big grin on his face. "It was the late '70s, that's all we need to say. A lot of partying, and a lot of hard ... hard work, hard play."



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'Why not me?' Or else the next bold stepthat nonlinear step-never happens. Until you say that, the great things can't happen."

And, perhaps unsurprisingly, he notes, "My friends and I were more of the partying ilk. A lot of my friends were the least likely to succeed."

(Deutsch is a little more serious about his current Penn role serving on the board of overseers for the School of Social Policy and Practice. "It's an honor to be on the board working with Dean Gelles," he says. "He is an inspirational leader, and the school is really poised to do some amazing things."

Deutsch was one of the first boardmembers recruited by Dr. Richard Gelles, the Joanne and Raymond Welsh Chair of Child Welfare and Family Violence, who became dean in 2003. According to Gelles, in addition to contributing generously, Deutsch "has been extremely effective and helpful, both in helping us build the board and helping us put forward our first conference on nonprofit leadership ["Gazetteer," Jan|Feb 2006].

"Donny knows everybody," he adds. "When we build a board, I use the Gladwell approach—we need the board to be a 'tipping point,' so we look for people who are connectors, experts and sales people, and Donny's greatest skill is connectivity.")

As the heir apparent to his father's advertising company, success—or at least financial comfort—was Deutsch's birthright. But when his father decided to sell the company in 1984, Deutsch asked that he be allowed to run it instead.

He proceeded to shed his self-applied *enfant terrible* label and to rise to the occasion, renaming David Deutsch Associates as Deutsch Inc. and building what had been a small, print-oriented boutique agency into a top-tier full-service powerhouse. He sold the agency to the Interpublic Group of Companies in 2000 for \$250-300 million, remaining as both chairman and CEO until 2005. He still serves as chairman of the firm.

How did he do it? Arguably, simply by being himself. Deutsch was brash, inyour-face—and Deutsch Inc.'s advertising was as well. The firm's ads for Tanqueray gin featuring the sardonic "Mr. Jenkins" character, as well as the IKEA ads featuring a gay couple shopping for furniture (accompanied by no fanfare whatsoever), were, like Deutsch himself, memorable.

After dabbling a bit in a film production company, and writing his book, he wondered: What next? But why, one might ask, would anything have to be next? After all, with an estimated net worth of over \$200 million, why do anything at all?

"It's success and the irony of success," Deutsch confides. "To me, in advertising, there was no margin of failure," he notes. "It was a question of, well, do I grow [to] \$2.7 billion, \$3.2 billion. I felt I cracked the code. And if you can ever force yourself to climb a new mountain, well, the energy of when you, at 26, are just starting out, with the possibility of failure, it's so much more invigorating.

"So I want to force myself to another mountain, so that's why I keep doing other things," he says. "But having said that, still, all within the core competency of creativity, of creating content, of motivating people.

"After I sold the company and I was saying, 'What do I want to do next?' I thought, 'Hey, what about a TV show?'" he recalls, with a glint in his eye. Deutsch often poses rhetorical questions, to which the answer is almost always the same: "You've got to say, 'Why not me?' You gotta at least *say*, 'Why not me?' Or else the next bold step—that nonlinear step—never happens. Until you say that, the great things can't happen."

It is this conviction—the can-do, anything's-possible, expansive American spirit of the entrepreneur—

that animates *The Big Idea with Donny Deutsch*, which airs at 10 p.m. and 1 a.m. ET weeknights on CNBC. Gossip doyenne Liz Smith dubbed the show "Oprah at night." As characterizations go, one could do worse.

"There is no inspirational stuff on TV like what Oprah does during the day for mostly women at home," Deutsch says. "I'm trying to do that at night for young professionals, or people at any stage of their life who want to get going, go after their dream, and make millions." Deutsch himself is a born showman—if anything, your 82-inch flat screen isn't large enough to capture his ebullience. Even in breaks in taping, he's cracking jokes between sips of Diet Coke, wiggling to the disco music pumped into the studio.

"You have a big personality," I say to him at one point in our interview.

"So I've been told," he rejoins.

"Well, that's the good way of saying it," I add.

"What's the other way of saying it?" he asks, smiling.

"Hypothetically, maybe some might think of you as arrogant or egotistical," I tell him.

After confirming that his feelings aren't hurt, he says, "Look, here's what you learn, and it's a theme of my show. There are people who have very fresh ideas, or who do it differently-there is always a chorus of naysayers.

"Because when something is different, when you're out of the box, the traditional perspective is, 'No, you can't do that!' Or maybe it's different because it redefines others," he points out. "Whenever you're blazing any kind of path, doing things your way, very successful, putting a stake in the ground—you know, some people get a little threatened by it. It comes with the territory. Show me any successful person who trods their own path, and there are naysayers."

But now, he's enlisted his ego for the show, and for what he believes is a great cause. "What I'm doing, I like to think, is helping people," he says. "I'm very happy to do it. Anybody who has a problem with me now, it's hard to understand why. But you're never going to be all things to all people. And that's what I teach people about branding and advertising: you don't have to be."

The Big Idea with Donny Deutsch is a calculated hybrid of formats. The show runs in power-punch segments, some of which have a deliberately cheeky game show aspect. The gaming spirit incorporates segments like "Will It Play In Peoria?" where Deutsch poses the question of the viability of a newly invented product to a crowd in a diner in ... you guessed it. Another such segment is the recently minted "Elevator Pitch," where an aspiring entrepreneur has a oneminute interview with an angel investor: Can he or she seal the deal? Interview segments featuring both famous and non-famous guests are a dominant element of the program. The non-famous guests tend to be self-starting entrepreneurs with inspirational stories. The roster of the better-known runs the gamut from Dan Rather to Daymond John, founder and CEO of the urban clothing line FUBU, to *Top Chef*'s Padma Lakshmito actor Matthew McConaughey. The eclectic nature of the guest lineup is part of the show's *raison d'être*.

"We'll combine a celebrity or a billionaire with the little entrepreneur starting in the basement, because it's all about this community of people going for the American dream," Deutsch says in his office. "So I love that I can start out with an actor, but he's talking about success and how he got there. Then you go into a little woman who created a candy business out of her basement. It's that world together, from Bill Gates to the little guy. And that's what's different about this show. So whether it's with a politician, or a celebrity or a billionaire, we're lensing it through lessons of success and then bringing them on down to the little guy starting out, and it's a very inspirational hour."

Even though Deutsch has stepped away from day-to-day involvement the client-service industry of advertising, he is still selling a product—a positive sense of hope and optimism for anyone in or aspiring to be in business. But one notable interview went markedly off-message.

In October 2007, conservative author and larger-than-life personality Ann Coulter came on *The Big Idea*. She'd been on the show before, Deutsch points out, and the two had gotten along swimmingly (his favorable comments about her legs are on the record for posterity).

"I pride myself on the fact that the show is purely positive," Deutsch says, speaking almost contemplatively. "Most of cable is just people screaming at each other. We're pure positivity. That is not her MO. But I said, you know what? We can work with her business model, and say we're going to teach people how to build a brand and make money by being contrarian. Okay? And I wasn't going to fight with her, it wasn't a political debate; she'd been on before, and I said, 'I'm not fighting with you.' And most of the thing was like that. It was talk to try to really teach people, whether or not you agree with her, we're going to show people the Ann Coulter model."

The interview, however, went awryand eventually, viral, on YouTube and blogs around the world-when Deutsch asked her what her ideal world would look like:

COULTER: Well, OK, take the Republican National Convention. People were happy. They're Christian. They're tolerant. They defend America, they –

DEUTSCH: Christian – so we should be Christian? It would be better if we were all Christian?

COULTER: Yes.

DEUTSCH: We should all be Christian?

COULTER: Yes. Would you like to come to church with me, Donny?

DEUTSCH: So I should not be a Jew, I should be a Christian, and this would be a better place.

Following a conversational detour that included an exchange on whether interracial couples in New York have a "chip on their shoulder"—a Coulter claim that Deutsch rather restrainedly dismissed as "erroneous"—he returned to the question: "We should just throw Judaism away and we should all be Christians, then."

COULTER: Yeah.

DEUTSCH: Really?

COULTER: Well, it's a lot easier. It's kind of a fast track.

DEUTSCH: Really?

COULTER: Yeah. You have to obey.

DEUTSCH: You can't possibly believe that.

COULTER: Yes.

DEUTSCH: You can't possibly – you're too educated, you can't – you're like my friend in –

COULTER: Do you know what Christianity is? We believe your religion, but you have to obey.

DEUTSCH: No, no, no, but I mean -

COULTER: We have the fast-track program.

DEUTSCH: Why don't I put you with the head of Iran? I mean, come on. You can't believe that.

COULTER: The head of Iran is not a Christian.

DEUTSCH: No, but in fact, "Let's wipe Israel"—

COULTER: I don't know if you've been paying attention.

DEUTSCH: "Let's wipe Israel off the earth." I mean, what, no Jews?

COULTER: No, we think – we just want Jews to be perfected, as they say.

DEUTSCH: Wow, you didn't really say that, did you?

COULTER: Yes. That is what Christianity is. We believe the Old Testament, but ours is more like Federal Express. You have to obey laws. We know we're all sinners –

DEUTSCH: In my old days, I would have argued – when you say something absurd like that, there's no –

COULTER: What's absurd?

DEUTSCH: Jews are going to be perfected. I'm going to go off and try to perfect myself –

COULTER: Well, that's what the New Testament says.

DEUTSCH: Ann Coulter, author of *If Democrats Had Any Brains, They'd Be Republicans*, and if Ann Coulter had any brains, she would not say Jews need to be perfected. I'm offended by that personally. And we'll have more *Big Idea* when we come back.

When watching the clip, a viewer can easily discern Deutsch's anger in his facial expressions if not his words. When asked his opinion of the interaction in retrospect, he responds with a certain degree of weariness. "I don't believe Ann Coulter's anti-Semitic. I think the problem is that Ann Coulter is a little out of touch with reality," he says. "And what made it so powerful, and what I think made her look so poor, was that I wasn't fighting with her. And you saw a hate crime in front of you."

While it may have addressed a "big idea," the exchange was dramatically at odds with the show's purpose. "We didn't even exploit it after that, because I said, 'You know what? Our show is positive," Deutsch recalls. "Four or five days later, it just caught fire. It was the CNN story of the day." But he points out, and rightly, that after "going negative," as it were, Coulter has virtually disappeared from the cultural radar.

"Interestingly enough, we haven't heard from her since," Deutsch says. "That really hurt her."

Deutsch generally is almost relentlessly positive, always looking for the good spin-even, in the end, when it comes to Ann Coulter. "[Coulter] will be fine. She's brilliant, she's a very successful writer and she does have a lot to say," he says. "Sometimes she obviously goes too far, but it's an example of our culture: We create the monster. This is what we want, what we push for. She's almost trained to go there. And then it becomes collateral damage." And it is that collateral damage of yelling-head media that Deutsch hopes to avoid in the future: Coulter's not coming back on his show.

hen off-air and not being asked to talk about Coulter, Deutsch enjoys living the semi-famous life: "You get the best tables at restaurants, free desserts. It's a great way to meet women, nothing wrong with it-that, I'm finding as a recently single person," says Deutsch, who is separated from his second wife.

"Wealth—obviously, what a person does, who they are—you put any level of notoriety or celebrity on top of it, it's just crazy," he adds. "We live in a world which celebrates that in such a disproportionate, silly way, and it makes you a very appealing person. People are very drawn to that for some reason.

"It is a very seductive quality," he says, with a half-smile. "I'm living a science experiment in how our society elevates people. People just want to be around you."

Overall, whether you're the interviewer or the interviewee, there is a certain solipsistic quality to talking with Donny Deutsch. It all comes back to his relentless self-confidence, his brashness, his conceit, his deliberate "bad boy of business" persona. But, truthfully, you leave a conversation with him thinking that it's not such a bad thing. At one point, we were talking about the show-but could have just as easily been talking about him.

"I want to stay very focused on this niche. In order to keep it fresh, you have to stay narrow, but mine it in a very broad way, because it gets old after a while," he says, leaning back in his chair. "How do you make it more interactive, engaging, fun, entertaining? Stay true to your core.

"It's voyeuristic," he shrugs. "Hey, it's fun."

So does he really want to be mayor

of New York, as he has bandied about in interviews in various publications over the past few years?

"I would love to," he says. "I don't know if I've had too much craziness in my life, you know what I mean? I really love what I'm doing now. I really believe I'm inspiring people. I mean, that's a gift. And you know, I think I maybe can have more of an impact doing what I'm doing now on a broader scale. So we'll see. I'm not going to rule it out. It's obviously a big commitment to be mayor, but you know, stranger things have happened. You gotta say, why not me?"

And, as noted earlier, about two minutes later is when he started to get undressed. Call it naked ambition.

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