



PHOTO BY DAVID SPRAGUE

**Anti-Villain:** David Ackert, president of professional marketing firm Ackert Inc. in Sherman Oaks, played ‘bad guys’ in TV dramas before launching his company.

# Coach for Counsel

David Ackert borrows from his former acting career when teaching lawyers how to woo potential clients.

By **STEPHANIE HENKEL** Staff Reporter

**D**avid Ackert, founder and president of Ackert Inc., came to Los Angeles in his early 20s with the dream of seeing his name in lights. He landed roles on hit television shows, mostly playing villains and bad guys, but felt his business skills were underutilized. He started his Sherman Oaks consulting firm, Ackert Advisory, in 2003, helping law firms with marketing and business development. Several years later, he incorporated two technology platforms — e-learning software Practice Boomers and customer relationship management software Practice Pipeline — into his company and watched it grow beyond the bounds of Los Angeles into a global enterprise. Now he is moving into serving clients in other verticals like accounting and engineering. However, his entertainment and consulting careers aren’t as far apart as they might appear. Ackert still uses techniques he learned in acting and the creative arts to effectively coach his clients looking to grow their business.

**Question: What kind of roles did you play in your past acting career?**

**Answer:** I had some good early success. I was on a TV show called “Crossroads Café” for about 26 episodes. I had guest appearances on “The West Wing,” “Six Feet Under,” “NYPD Blue,” “Jag” and “Monk.” These shows are no longer around, but I played a lot of bad guys until I retired.

**The IMDB website says you are a published science fiction author. Can you tell us about that?**

I co-authored a series of short stories published in the “Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction” and a number of other literary magazines. One of my stories was published in an anthology alongside Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, China Miéville and Robert Louis Stevenson. It’s my favorite book on my bookshelf, and every time I open it up to the table of contents, it’s sort of like this surreal experience to see my name alongside theirs. So that was my 15 seconds of fame as a science fiction author.

**Why did you leave acting and go into consulting?**

I was making a living as an actor, and some of my friends started coming to me and saying, “Hey, you’ve got this business side of the profession figured out. Can you mentor me or give me some advice?” I started teaching a class at UCLA Extension called The Working Actor, and it was all about the business of acting, helping actors understand the importance of marketing themselves and giving them a business strategy or business plan that they could start to put together for themselves. Actors, like so many of the other professionals we work with, don’t necessarily have a business plan.

**What did you learn in acting that applies to your current career?**

## David Ackert

**TITLE:** President

**COMPANY:** Ackert Inc.

**BORN:** Lacrosse, Wis.

**EDUCATION:** BFA in acting, Ithaca College; master’s degree in psychology, University of Santa Monica

**CAREER TURNING POINT:** Retired from acting to dedicate himself to business coaching

**MOST INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE:** Wife and business partner; a close circle of friends who have become key advisors

**PERSONAL:** Lives in Encino with wife, Rebecca Nassi

**HOBBIES:** Hip-hop classes, singing karaoke and mentoring a 7-year-old through Big Brothers of Los Angeles

I would say the one skill from my days as an actor that I still apply consistently today has to do with public speaking. I do a lot of public speaking in my role as the founder of Ackert Inc. and when done right, public speaking is a kind of theater. I find that’s a very comfortable forum for me to be in front of people, put together a compelling message and deliver it in such a way that it has impact. I attribute that to my years as an actor.

**What’s the best thing entrepreneurs can do when marketing themselves or their business?**

Differentiate from the competition. If you sound like your competitors, it’s very difficult for your perspective client to know whether to go with you or someone else. One of the things a firm or a company can do is do some competitive intelligence. Go on your competitor’s website. If you see the same language on their website that you put on your website, the chances are you haven’t done a very good job of differentiating yourself, and you need to put more thought into that.

**What is the worst thing you can do?**

Be passive. I think that there are a lot of smart, competent people out there, so if your hope is that you’ll just outsmart or out-skill the competition, you may find that that’s an antiquated notion. In today’s market, only the proactive are going to find that they have any long-term job security.

**What’s one strategy businesses should do that you see ignored?**

Write down a short list of key clients, prospects, mentors and referral sources, and do everything they can to help those people. The list shouldn’t be any shorter than 15 people, and if it’s longer than 50 people, I would question the degree to which you can really man-

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age that many relationships. There is a reason we call it the short list.

#### What do you do with these people?

You want to see how you can be of service to them beyond the services that they've paid for. This is what converts you from a hired gun to a trusted advisor. This is true of your mentors. Don't just expect that they're always helping you. You should look at how you could be of assistance to them. How are you adding value? That's the question you want to ask yourself with each and every one of them.

#### What is your coaching method?

The first step in any effective coaching engagement is to assess chemistry. If the client and the coach don't feel like they both can be successful in the coaching relationship, then they are better off not trying to work together. A good coach will also be assessing coachability. Is this really someone who is open to new ideas and taking advice and direction? If they're not coachable, that's also a good reason to just step away and maybe revisit at some other time. The next step is to identify goals. What is it the client wants to achieve both long term but also within the scope of the coaching engagement? From there, it's a matter of regular contact and holding the client accountable.

#### How do you maintain momentum after the coaching engagement?

It's a challenge, because many times we see clients retreat. Now maybe they take two steps forward and one step back, but there is a retreat that occurs after the coaching engagement. It's done because that structure has gone away. That's why we developed our software. Because at least then you will continue to have these reminders, and you'll have something you can work with. Then you're not completely on your own.

#### How have you succeeded in consulting?

Technology has increased our revenue by 300 percent. We experience 30 percent growth year over year, and it is because of the technology. We weren't looking at that kind of scale when we were just a coaching and consulting firm.

#### What are your biggest challenges?

Coaching only works when you're working with someone who has a genuine commitment to the outcome. A lot of people want the quick fix. They want the end result, but they aren't willing to do the hard work. I would say that's probably the biggest challenge.

#### Did you ever feel like giving up, and how did you overcome it?

For the first five years, I felt like giving up about every week, and that's just the trials and tribulations of a young entrepreneur. You have to have the grit to push through the peaks and valleys of building a business. In 2009, I got to a point where it was sort of a personal crisis. I really didn't want to continue, but I didn't have a fallback. I decided to turn to prayer. I'm not a highly religious person, but I've always believed in a higher power. I started getting these really vivid dreams, so I kept a journal. Soon thereafter, I saw a recurring theme. There were these metaphors that just kept pointing to the same message — move your business online. So the first thing we developed was Practice Boomers and then Practice Pipeline. There was significant growth through these two technologies.

#### You help companies market and sell.

##### How do you market and sell yourself?

I have a weekly blog that goes out to — between our email list and social media — about 10,000 people. We host CMO (chief marketing officer) and managing partner roundtables, which allow us to develop relationships with decision makers of law firms. It also helps us understand what their needs are so that we can address those needs. I speak at



PHOTOS BY DAVID SPRAGUE

**On the Clock:** David Ackert's firm makes Practice Pipeline software to help attorneys manage time when selling their services.

#### Ackert's Advice: What to Do for First Meeting With Potential Client:

- **Do research before the meeting.** Look him or her up online and check out the LinkedIn profile.
- **Find a commonality to introduce during the meeting.** For example, if your brother has the same alma mater as the potential client, you've just given yourself a shortcut to connecting.
- **Be interested rather than trying to be interesting.** The more you are talking, the worse the meeting is going.
- **Ask questions.** Let the other person share answers and perspectives, and listen.

"You are going to find they walk away from that meeting a lot more satisfied, because you expressed a genuine curiosity in them. You came prepared to the meeting, and you clearly were looking for the opportunity to build a relationship as opposed to just getting a transaction in the meeting," said David Ackert. "That will benefit you further down the road."

least once a week in person or via webinar to audiences all over the country. I attend five to 10 industry-specific conferences a year that give me opportunities to meet perspective clients, reconnect with existing clients and meet referral sources. It's a lot of practice what you preach, but it is a significant amount of energy.

#### How do you advise companies to use social media outlets like LinkedIn?

LinkedIn is your CV (or resume) in the digital age. It's really important to make sure your profile is 100 percent complete. It's important to make sure that you are posting content to your profile, and that you have multimedia on your profile. This is still something a lot of people are underutilizing.

#### How does it work for your clientele?

According to the American Bar Association, over 70 percent of business decision makers look at a lawyer's LinkedIn profile before engaging them. So the client base is doing their due diligence. If a lawyer's LinkedIn profile doesn't represent them well and differentiate them from the other five LinkedIn profiles that that client is looking at, then they're



**Communication Skill:** Ackert talks with Marketing Manager Olivia Cowenhaven.

losing out on business that they don't even know about. They didn't even get the call, because the clients made up their mind in that assessment phase using LinkedIn.

#### How can LinkedIn help with active outreach marketing?

LinkedIn gives you a window into other people's databases. So go on LinkedIn, use search terms that help you identify the prospective clients and referral sources whom you know you should be meeting. Then, if they are second-tier connections, reach out to your first tier that you have in common (for the introduction).

#### Why is your firm in Sherman Oaks?

I don't think that an emerging growth company like ours needs to be based in Silicon Beach or Silicon Valley anymore. Maybe that was the trend a few years ago, but we're here in a co-work space (OfficeSlice in Sherman Oaks) that looks like all of the WeWorks that are in Santa Monica. We are in an environment where technology and the resources that can help a technology firm grow are really everywhere, and that's certainly true of the Valley.

#### How do you see your business evolving in the coming years?

We've proven our business model in the legal sector. We will continue to work with law firms certainly, but now were branching into CPA (Certified Public Accountant) firms, engineering firms and other service firms.

#### What is the best advice you ever received?

My favorite quote from Theodore Roosevelt is "Comparison is the thief of joy." This is certainly true for an entrepreneur and it's been true in all of my various endeavors, both professional and personal. When you compare yourself to someone else, it is a fool's errand, because their circumstances are their circumstances and yours are yours. That's why I always come back to this notion. If I don't compare, I find I have much more access to joy.

#### What is the best piece of advice you can give other entrepreneurs?

Same piece of advice I give myself every day, which is be patient. Entrepreneurs are incredibly driven people and are not prone to patience. I think they create a lot stress and pressure for themselves, and ultimately make the journey a lot more difficult. They forget that yes, you read in Entrepreneur magazine that it took so-and-so only four years to complete their third round of financing and have their IPO and now they are billionaires. Just like with the entertainment industry, there's Brad Pitt and maybe a few other actors that really, really made it, and then there's everybody else. Even a lot of these success stories took several years to make it happen. That whole notion of the overnight success is seductive, and I think entrepreneurs fall into it too. So that's why I would say don't fall for the overnight success myth. Success takes patience. Have patience, be patient with the process and just stay in the game.