

Lights, Camera, Makeup!

By Shari Caudron

At the front of many magazines, including this one, there is a contributors' page featuring the names and photos of contributing writers along with some bit of usually witty or offbeat information about those people.

As a writer, I read these mini bios because I want to know who I'm competing with for limited editorial space. As a reader, I'm interested in contributors because I want to know something about the author whose work I am about to spend time with. But mostly, I read these profiles because I'm nosy. I want to know other people. I want to know about their dreams, their fears, and whether they leave dirty dishes in the sink. I want these writers to be fallible, like me, but also a bit inspirational.

I don't know whether people who haven't been featured as contributors in the front of a magazine think much about these rogues' galleries. But to those of us who make our living from words printed on coated paper stock, the contributors' column is a chance to connect—with other writers and, more importantly, the readers for whom we do this work. So, when I was asked by my editor at *Training & Development* to complete a personal questionnaire from which she would glean information for the contributors' column, I froze. No, that's overstating it. I hesitated.

How much information should I reveal? What image do I want to project? Do I want to appear aloof with a touch of seriousness? Serious with a touch of humor? Humorous with a touch of irony? Did I want to come across as someone who takes

her work seriously and her life less so? Or vice versa?

Realizing that I might have been overanalyzing the questionnaire just a wee bit, I shook my head and tried to focus on the questions.

What was your first job?
No problem. Wrapping gifts at Sears.

What books are on your nightstand right now? That's easy. *The Imperial Woman* by Pearl S. Buck, *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, *Mama Makes Up Her Mind* by Bailey White, *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse, and—I'm not making this up—*Dave Barry's Only Travel Guide You'll Ever Need*.

I answered those questions easily because they required reporting, not personal reflection. But as I scanned the questionnaire, I stumbled upon one question almost impossible to answer: *Which TV show is most like your workplace?*

After staring blank-faced for what seemed like several minutes, I realized there is not a single television show featuring slipper-clad freelance writers working from home offices. But the fact that Aaron Spelling or David Kelley has yet to build prime-time drama around the work of writers doesn't surprise me. Writers, despite the romantic image that surrounds us, typically lead uninteresting lives. As novelist John Irving said recently at a workshop: "I'm completely overwhelmed by my life."

Still, there was the matter of the contributors' questionnaire. Certainly, there had to be a show that captured some essence of my professional life. Searching for inspiration, I thought about the workplaces of people I know.

I thought of Angela, my lawyer friend. Does *Ally McBeal* capture her work life?

Nope. Angela has yet to confront a singing judge, her cases are never resolved within 60 minutes, and her firm's restrooms are still segregated by gender.

I thought of my mom, who has spent the past 30 years working in a hospital emergency room. Does *E/R* resemble her work life? Hardly. Based on mom's stories, I'm convinced that few people who work in emergency care are as given to deep introspection about patient distress as they are on TV.

It began to dawn on me that it's not just my work that isn't portrayed accurately on television. The medium does a poor job, in general, showing what the American workplace is really like. Disc jockeys don't work in clean, stylish studios like they do on *Frasier*. Secretaries like Karen on *Will & Grace* would have been fired long ago. And the magazines I've worked for tend to be much quieter places, in general, than the workplaces depicted on *Suddenly Susan* or *Just Shoot Me*.

As everyone who reads this magazine knows, the world of work is much more ambiguous, complicated,

political, stressful, and, yes, sometimes mundane than the work shown on television. In our real work lives, no one ever refills the coffeepot, expense checks take weeks to arrive, and meeting rooms are never available when we need them. Sure, we'd all like to be surrounded by Seinfeldian wit and *Cheers*-like camaraderie. But, frankly, we just don't have the time. Besides, it's risky letting colleagues know too much about us.

When it comes right down to it, a lot of what we portray to the world—be it on TV, to our colleagues, or in a contributors' column—is probably nothing more than wishful, larger-than-life projections. Reality is one thing. Image is another. Is that bad? Not at all, for we aspire to what we can imagine. The tricky part is 1) determining what image to envision in the first place and 2) deciding how much to believe.

Now if you'll excuse me, I have a questionnaire to complete.

Shari Caudron is a freelance writer based in Denver and a frequent contributor to *Training & Development*.

Correction

The chart in the March 2000 issue of *T&D* on page 50 was incorrectly produced. The correct chart is shown below.

