

Mastering the art of selling

By ANNE FISHER

At first glance, artistic endeavors like acting or performing improvisational jazz may seem to have little in common with running a business. Yet in New York, where you can't swing a cat without hitting a performer of one stripe or another, some highly successful entrepreneurs are applying artistic talent to their businesses in intriguing ways.

Consider, for instance, Tim Askew, founder and CEO of *Corporate Rain*, which specializes in helping clients like AIG, Columbia Business School, Con Edison, Marsh & McLennan and Ogilvy & Mather sell their services to high-level executives. The firm employs about 30 part-time consultants, former big-company CFOs, COOs and vice presidents who "have left the full-time corporate rat race but who still have their chops and can speak peer-to-peer with senior decision-makers," Mr. Askew said.

He launched Corporate Rain 16 years ago with "no sales background whatsoever," he said, after having worked as a fry cook, bartender and nude artists' model at Cooper Union, all between acting jobs. Indeed, Mr. Askew moved to New York from Los Angeles, after a stint on the now-defunct soap *Another World*, in order to seek work on Broadway, where he appeared with Jack Lemmon in *Tribute* and with Rex Harrison in *The Devil's Disciple*, among other roles.

Acting, he said, "teaches you empathy. Inhabiting many different characters teaches you to listen and respond appropriately. The best actors are skilled reactors. When I first meet a client, I try to get inside their skin. What do they want? Who are they? And how do they approach the challenges they face? I don't even try to sell them anything until I feel I understand that."

Another way that Mr. Askew's years as an actor shaped Corporate Rain, he said, is that "even the most accomplished actors face rejection every day, at every audition, and it's very personal. It's you they don't want, not a product or a service but you yourself." By contrast, he said, salespeople in any business run into a lot of rejection, but "it doesn't sting the same way. It's not personal, so it rolls right off me."

He added: "I consider myself a failed actor, but without that experience, I wouldn't be successful at what I do now."

Chris Paradysz, who started playing guitar at age 8 and joined a musicians' union at age 10, still plays every day, although he's too busy running his company to perform in public anymore. Mr. Paradysz, founder and CEO of Manhattan-based online marketing firm PM Digital, which has doubled in size since 2006 to its current \$18 million in annual sales, was named one of Crain's 2010 Top Entrepreneurs.

Said he, "In music, you have a sound you're constantly trying to create, and it's never over. In business, you're constantly seeking the new, because if you stop innovating, you're dead. So the two aren't really that different."

Like Mr. Askew, he believes his experience as an artist has given him business skills he couldn't have acquired any other way. "With both customers and colleagues, it's all about listening and responding," Mr. Paradysz noted. "It's like a musical ensemble, where you have to listen profoundly to the other players or it won't come together."

"As an artist," he said. "I think you naturally come at business in a different way—but you arrive at the same place." Or perhaps a better one. ■