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Me minding my own business

Mike Rowe has drawn a crowd. Again. This time it's on a chilly December night in Florence, South Carolina, at a local joint called J. Michael's Grill and Raw Bar. In between autographing beer naps and posing for pictures, Rowe, the craggily handsome star of the Discovery Channel's hit series Dirty Jobs, is officiating an ill-advised drinking contest between one of the show's crew and a friendly waiter. The crew is enjoying a rare night off, and by the time Rowe joins them, the challenge-be the first to chug an Irish car bomb (a shot of Bailey's dropped into a pint of Guinness)-has already been negotiated. After watching two increasingly boisterous elimination rounds, Rowe decides to jump in as judge and jury. He sets the stage while his fans gather round. "I'll say, 'One, two ...'" He thumps the table. "Then you drink." He eyes the two gladiators. "What about spillage?" someone yells. "I'll be factoring that in," he deadpans. "And as always, the decision of the judge is final." The crowd roars. Rowe beams. The Dirty Jobs soundman puts on his game face and prepares to power down. Sadly for him, his fellow crew members have loudly bet on the local. There's one simple solution." He pauses. "Drinkoff!" The place erupts. For years, Rowe was a master of the simple solution. Largely free of ambition, he got by as an itinerant actor, taking on an infomercial here, a pilot or two there. He spent three years as a pitchman on the night shift at QVC, a job he lost for appearing to do ungodly things to a nun doll on the air. His was a life of guiltless underachievement. But Rowe has stumbled in the past couple of years into international celebrity through a most unlikely route-by doing other people's dirty work. On Dirty Jobs, he performs the sorts of tasks most of us couldn't bear to do but are really happy someone else will. He has tried his hand at more than 165 of them. He has sloshed around in sewers, peeled roadkill, cleaned up epic septic explosions, castrated horses, and hunted plagues of vermin-all while being coached (and sometimes mocked) by the real people who do it every day. (Unlike most shows in the reality-TV mold, it's the star, not the civilians, who ends up the butt of the jokes.) Dirty Jobs, which first aired in November 2003, is an homage to George Plimpton, with a nod to Studs Terkel-an introduction, Rowe says, to the "men and women who do the kinds of jobs that make civilized life possible for the rest of us." Watching Rowe struggle with a forklift or wade through raw sewage is good, nasty fun. But for all the bathroom humor, his real curiosity about and respect for his subjects telegraphs a powerful message: There's dignity in hard work, expertise in unexpected places, and deep satisfaction in tackling and finishing a tough job. These themes-plus the chance to see Rowe vomit on camera, which he does occasionally-have struck a chord with viewers. They flock to online fan boards, unabashedly declaring their "man crushes" (though the ladies dig him too) and reliving their favorite dirty moments. He is swarmed by autograph seekers at airports, captured on camera phones at Starbucks, and regaled with stories from dirty jobbers everywhere. "My family owns a sewer business!" gushed a waitress recently in South Carolina, as Rowe signed menus for the staff. Walking down the street in New York, Rowe got a shout-out from a cop and the handcuffed perp in his cruiser: "Man, you're awesome!" they said in unison. But Dirty Jobs isn't just working-class fare. It has become a monster hit, at least by cable standards. Based on total audience, the program has remained a top-three series on the network for the past two years and sits in the top five of all ad-supported cable shows for its Tuesday-evening time slot. And while it's huge with older folks, Dirty Jobs has given Discovery a welcome boost among younger viewers, delivering a double-digit rise in the lucrative 18-to-34 and 2-to-17 demographics. It was on track to air 700 times in 2007 alone. For Rowe, that success has translated into opportunities he'd never thought possible. He negotiated a major relationship with Ford (starring in a slew of spots throughout 2007 and 2008) and is inking deals with Whirlpool and HP. He commands six figures as a speaker, talking about the show's themes with undirty places such as Yahoo and Motorola. He has four book deals on the table-including one with his mom. As his star power intensified over the past 12 months, however, Rowe found himself at risk of losing the very thing he now cares about most: his authenticity. "I can't imagine going back into the kind of acting jobs I was doing before," he says. "I did them specifically because they didn't matter. I didn't want anything from them except a check for two weeks of anonymous work." Now, having only recently discovered his professional soul, the reformed slacker is fighting off those who would suck it back out of him. Rowe eschews entourages, managers, and other types of "people," so, armed with only his intrepid attorney, he's trying to avoid any step that might taint his brand. He passes on the vast majority of the requests he receives, like an invitation from FremantleMedia, the production company, to try out as the new host of the Price Is Right (Drew Carey was not so proud). He has politely said no to every major reality-television producer. And he barred the door against the Endeavor Agency, which came promising to package him as the next media supernova. "If I'm going to be a package, I'd just as soon wrap it myself," Rowe says. "These things are incredible and flattering, but I've come to realize that I'm really doing something else here." He's trying not to sound holier than thou. And his ideals sometimes put him at odds with his corporate overlords at Discovery. But Rowe sees it as his mission. "We're prisoners of efficiency, addicted to the notion of innovation," he says, "but we need people with dirty jobs. They contribute to progress, too. I feel tested at this point, way more than ever before. And I feel as though there's an audience watching my test more closely than ever before."The Dos Equis YearsIt's four o'clock on the Friday before Labor Day, and Rowe is in the green room of The Tonight Show, waiting for Jay Leno to stop by. "Any minute now," says the attendant, after handing Rowe a glass of red wine. It's Rowe's first appearance on the show ("Get it? Dirty Jobs? Labor Day?" he cracks), yet he seems perfectly at home. Leno pops in with a grin. "Hey, Mike, how are ya?" Introductions all around. Then Leno asks, "Do you have any questions for me?" Rowe feigns confusion. "Wait. Is this The Tonight Show" Leno cracks up. "Pretty much. That simplify things for you?" After Leno leaves, Rowe goes back to trading barbs with two colleagues he'd brought along: Dave Barsky, the Dirty Jobs field producer, whose frequent appearances on camera have made him a demi-celebrity in his own right, and Craig Piligian, a former Survivor producer who has produced several shows for the Discovery Channel, including American Chopper, teases back: "This is only your first time on the show, Mike? That's weird. The Chopper guys have been on twice already." Rowe may slip easily into the role of jester, but he has done more than any on-air talent to bring the Discovery Channel back from a ratings trough earlier in the decade. Discovery was rebuilt mostly on the strength of a few gritty series, including Deadliest Catch and Mythbusters. But Jobs is the clear standout. "It's our number-one show," says David Zaslav, president and CEO of Discovery. He's curious, smart, and fun. He teaches you about the world. And the subject matter is really accessible. I mean, he's not climbing Everest." Asked if Rowe could ever be replaced, Zaslav doesn't even blink. "The show wouldn't work without him." Period. That anyone would see him as a brand comes as a huge surprise to Rowe. In an acting career spanning two-plus decades, he has never appeared in a movie or soap opera. Not even a sitcom pilot. "This business is a great way for a lazy guy to work," he says, only half-joking. And Rowe has been, well, lazy. By looking for opportunities that were doomed to fail, he managed to get about six months of playtime every year. "You can have a great life in television if you don't want to get too successful. You just carve it off as you need it. It's why I worked in reality TV." As actors often do, Rowe started out terribly earnest. After a brief stint at community college, the Baltimore-area native attended Towson University, where he studied acting and voice. "I had a beard and was all righteous in the craft," he smiles. His first real job came as a standing player with the Baltimore Opera, in 1990-a production of Wagner's Ring Cycle, "a horrible crucible of misery, which lasted for 18 hours over four nights." One Sunday night, he and a castmate decided, as they frequently did, to head out for a beer during intermission. Dressed as Vikings. The bartender, who was also an actor, had QVC on the TV. "They were doing a talent search in our area," says Rowe. "He was prepping for it." Rowe was at once repulsed and fascinated by the spectacle of QVC, and recalls "railing against the decline of American civilization and the role of home shopping in it." But the serious actor was also a starving actor. And the gig looked easy. "The guy was just trying to sell pots and pans. At least it was honest." Somebody bet him \$100 that he couldn't get a callback, so Rowe crashed the audition the next day and was hired on the spot, for \$50,000 a year plus bonuses. He was stunned. "I had gotten out of school five years earlier, and had no money at all. I was a completely full-of-shit actor, just trying to figure it all out." He jumped at the job.QVC taught Rowe the ins and outs of live TV and how to talk off the cuff on just about anything. "There was no training," he recalls. "Nothing." Working the ultimate graveyard shift-3 a.m. to 6 a.m.-Rowe was left alone to hawk thousands of different products pretty much however he wanted. "Basically, I just made fun of the products and the callers. I was a complete anarchist." He was selling lava lamps, Hummels, and other nonsense, and falling in love with the occasional hand model. Then came the business with the nun doll. He had just returned from a weekend getaway involving the beach, a case of Dos Equis, and one of those hand models, when a Sunday-evening emergency call arrived from the studio: The prime-time host was ill. Eager to prove his mettle, Rowe rubbed the weekend from his eyes and headed into work, only to find a display of collectible girlie dolls waiting for him. "There were dozens of little hobbits," he recalls, still sounding vaguely offended some 18 years later. "Little pixies from another time, just sitting there like these little Victorian whores. I thought it was a joke." He was about to be humiliated in his first shot at prime time, just sitting there like these little Victorian whores. I thought it was a joke." He was about to be humiliated in his first shot at prime time, just sitting there like these little Victorian whores. I thought it was a joke." He was about to be humiliated in his first shot at prime time, just sitting there like these little Victorian whores. I thought it was a joke." He was about to be humiliated in his first shot at prime time. "I'd already called everyone I knew to watch." The producer tried to calm him down, but in his panic, Rowe just reverted to his usual shtick. He picked up the first doll, Rachel-"a nightmare in crushed velvet"-by the hair and plopped her in his lap. "I think I described her as 'soulless, a little creepy but kind of hot,' and as 'a runaway from Little Women,'" he says now, rubbing his head. The crew on the set was dumbstruck. But, Rowe says, "I was really encouraged because the little whore sold out in record time."Then someone handed Rowe a 2-foot nun doll named Sister Mary Margaret. "If you wound her up, she played 'Climb Every Mountain,' which I thought was hysterical." Rowe had four minutes to kill but ran out of material in 30 seconds, including the time he spent having her spank him with a ruler. Then he tried to crank up her music feature. "I've already announced that she plays music, and I'm squeezing her hand, looking around her neck, but I can't figure it out." When the technical director finally cut away to a display version of the same doll, Rowe, in desperation, turned the little sister upside down in his lap and peeled down her garment. He finally found the crank "in the small of her back, but it's really sort of in her ass." Unfortunately, the technical director cut back to Rowe without warning: "Suddenly, I see myself live on the monitor, with Sister Mary Margaret's face in my crotch, my hand on her ass, and her habit around her neck. And the damn thing is playing 'Climb Every Mountain.'" Rowe froze in horror, then made an unfortunate gesture not suitable for prime time. "It was not good." By the time he got home, his answering machine was jammed. "The 47th message was my boss, inviting me not to come back," says Rowe. But an outcry from viewers earned him a second chance. "I was always on double supersecret probation," he says. And he rarely made it off the graveyard shift. He lasted three years. After he left QVC for good in 1993, Rowe committed himself to a life of intermittent work punctuated with a lot of fun. The gigs were occasionally amazing. American Airlines, for example, hired him to create and host a series of short travel spots, which aired on its planes. "Basically, they gave me a crew, and free rein to fly anywhere the airline went for a year," says Rowe. But it was on the set of Your New Home that he honed his most valuable Dirty Jobs skill: getting regular people to go on TV and discuss what they do all day. A talk show set in the Baltimore area, it was sponsored by local builders trying to move residential units during the realestate crunch of the early 1990s. Rowe's role was to interview the salespeople. ("One woman was so nervous, she threw up in her hands," he says.) It was low on glamour, but he spent an astonishing 14 years at it. For a while, he was even getting paid in condos. "I got the idea that they could pay me in model homes, rather than money," he says a little sheepishly. "I'm not acquisitive by nature." In fact, to this day, Rowe rents his San Francisco apartment, and his only current real-estate holding is a condo he bought for his parents six years ago. "I'm just not into owning things." After years of defining work as the thing that happens between vacations, Rowe caught himself by surprise. "I was cohosting the local Evening Magazine on CBS-5 in San Francisco, and did a segment called 'Somebody's Gotta Do It.'" The viewers loved it. So did he. Somewhere deep inside him, a kind of quest was taking shape. At CBS, he created a pilot of the segment and shopped it around as a stand-alone property. He offered it to Discovery twice. They passed twice. The feedback: "Mike, it's a talk show in a sewer." That's when Rowe brought the tape to Piligian once before, on a 22-episode reality series called Worst Case Scenario, where Rowe was the in-studio host. Piligian saw the potential and brought Rowe's tape to his Discovery contact, Shawn Gallagher. "I knew immediately it could work," Gallagher remembers. And it did, eventually. After a 3-episode pilot series in November 2003, Discovery ordered up 10 more, which started airing in July 2005. Rowe, who had signed on to host Deadliest Catch, an established franchise, jumped ship when the call came in to renew Dirty Jobs. The show quickly became a viewer favorite and the channel ordered 18 more new shows, then in late 2006, another 30. Fans can expect at least 24 new episodes to start airing in 2008. Technically a weekly show, Dirty Jobs has been in heavy rotation since 2005, an industry tactic called "looping." According to Abby Greensfelder, former head of programming and development, it was part of a strategy to create signature series-and personalities-for a network known only for its specials. The Discovery Channel's ratings had been taking a hit for some time, and Greensfelder saw value in having faces and titles that could become the "connective tissue that drove repeat viewing. And Mike was the perfect Discovery guy." Frequent airings created a rising tide that lifted both Rowe and Discovery. It also kept the programming pipeline full, giving the network time to devote to specials, as with the Emmy Award-winning 2007 miniseries Planet Earth, which was five years in development. Rowe began to feel a certain paternal pride in Dirty Jobs. "I'd always had a LMNO philosophy on things-leave my name off," he says. This was different. So Rowe went to the network with his original reel and asked to be acknowledged, winning a rare "based on a concept by" credit. "It mattered to me," he says simply. As the realization set in that, somehow, he had stumbled onto a new sense of purpose, Rowe slowly began to understand where it had taken root. Growing up in a rural Baltimore exurb ("real Huck Finn stuff"), he'd watched his grandfather, whom he adored, live the perfect dirty life. "Every day of my childhood," he says, "my grandfather, whom he adored, live the perfect dirty life. "Every day of my childhood," he says, "my grandfather, whom he adored, live the perfect dirty life. "Every day of my childhood," he says, "my grandfather, whom he adored, live the perfect dirty life. "Every day of my childhood," he says, "my grandfather was building a barn, putting on an addition, putting in a sewer line, pouring concrete." designed the local church, without a blueprint. And while Rowe wasn't a particularly handy kid ("Nope, no manual skills, really," says his mom, Peggy), that memory has come to fill him with a rare-and forgivable- earnestness. "All of my earliest memory has come to fill him with a rare-and forgivable- earnestness." with the problem solved and a lot of yelling and laughing in between." Rowe pauses. "This is really about him." By 2006, Rowe had a bona fide hit on his hands. His carefree jig was up: The happy hand-modelizing prankster with a heart of gold and a short attention span had morphed into a BlackBerry-wielding impresario. When Whirlpool reached out to him in 2006 to help promote a new washer-dryer set, Rowe was open to the idea. He is, after all, a guy with lots of dirty clothes. They arranged a meet-and-greet with customers at a Lowe's in Woodstock, Georgia, near where he was filming. "We were expecting a couple hundred people," says Audrey Reed-Granger, Whirlpool's director of public relations. "More than 2,000 came-whole families, World War II veterans, an entire Boy Scout troop." Rowe, scheduled for a 2-hour visit, stayed for more events in 2008. And he has another deal on the boards with HP that's being finalized now. ("HP was started by two guys in a garage," he says admiringly.) He has also been in demand as a speaker for, of all things, tech firms such as Motorola. But the largest, juiciest fruit in Rowe's basket is his new multipart arrangement with Ford was the first name on it." To Rowe, Ford is the ultimate American company. Its trucks are, of course, fixtures on dirty-job sites. But when Ford first reached out to Rowe late in 2005 offering a Web campaign, he took a big gulp and passed. "I said, 'I'm interested, and I'm not sure I'm ready for a big national campaign, but that's what I want. "A year later, now with a hit on his hands, he took the extraordinary step of calling Ford back himself. And it was a much different conversation. In fact, in what amounts to a freak of nature in the traditional network-talent power structure, it was Rowe who brought Ford to his bosses. On Christmas Eve 2006, Rowe put in a call to Billy Campbell, then president of Discovery Networks. "I've just been offered, from the inventor of the automobile, an embarrassingly large deal," Rowe told him. "I have to make it. They need to be a sponsor of the show. Oh, and they have to know by the first of the year." The move sent the network into a tizzy, partly because Toyota had already expressed an interest in the show. But Rowe, who describes himself as "half missionary and half mercenary," didn't see the Japanese as a fit. "They're a great company. But Ford makes sense." Moreover, the Toyota deal didn't include him: Ford was offering the most lucrative payoff of his career-by far. The deal coincided with an executive shuffle at Discovery; Campbell, among others, was out, and David Zaslav came in at the top. "We had some trepidation" about Ford at the beginning, Zaslav says. "We needed to make sure it worked for everyone." Ultimately, Rowe gives Discovery credit for being fluid enough to accept his newly enterprising nature. In a line that wouldn't sound out of place in one of his sixfigure speeches, he tells me, "Corporate cultures tend to step over good ideas if they don't come through the proper channels." But Rowe deserves credit for forcing the network to the table. The Happy FewThe crew that puts on Dirty Jobs is, in every way, a band of brothers. Good-natured punking is part of life on the road. They can reengineer windshield-wiper nozzles to become moving water pistols; I watched them gleefully "test" a toy pellet gun on the torso of the willing production assistant. But the operation is remarkably sparse: There's Barsky the field producer (who also operates a camera), an audio technician, a director of photography, two other camera operators, and a production assistant. No location scout. No hair, makeup, or wardrobe people. No scripts. They're all dirty jobbers themselves. And they all get the point. "We really show up and do what they do and do the best we can to film it," says Barsky. Today, on a loop through South Carolina, the last shoot of 2007 is a repaving of the NASCAR has a lot of fans, many of them holding down dirty jobs of their own. But Rowe is uncomfortable. "Forget the fact that we're at war in an oil field, and these cars are burning fuel," Rowe muses when we talk about it. "This is a slickly packaged, multimillion-dollar corporate enterprise with millionaires driving 200 miles an hour on a curved track that regular people can't drive on." He searches for his next thought. "Is that really the mission of the show?" Still, saying no is hard. This segment was something that the suits on both sides were eager to make happen. But "for the show to work," Barsky explains later, "we need unique characters who are engaging in a process that we can follow." If they're using a method or technology they've cobbled together themselves, so much the better. "It's Discovery Channel. Our viewers have to learn something at the end of it." Barsky eventually decides that the repaving doesn't fit the bill. Rowe is relieved. "I was looking for an elegant way to kill it," he confesses. In his surprising second act, Rowe is relieved. "I was looking for an elegant way to kill it," he confesses. In his surprising second act, Rowe is relieved. "I was looking for an elegant way to kill it," he confesses. In his surprising second act, Rowe is relieved. "I was looking for an elegant way to kill it," he confesses. In his surprising second act, Rowe is relieved. "I was looking for an elegant way to kill it," he confesses. In his surprising second act, Rowe is relieved. "I was looking for an elegant way to kill it," he confesses. In his surprising second act, Rowe is relieved. "I was looking for an elegant way to kill it," he confesses. 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In his surprising second act, Rowe is relieved. "I was looking for an elegant way to kill it." he confesses was looking for a lookin really about balance," he declares. People who do dirty jobs tend to "work hard and be pillars of the community. They're happy outside of work, and the mixing of pain and fun-that's what it's all about," he says. "It's the Puritan work ethic repackaged as a deliberate way of living." He is extending this idea even into his own career, choosing deals and partners who exemplify the message. So while NASCAR doesn't fit and The Price Is Right doesn't either, Ford, to Rowe, does. Sitting with his legs tucked up under him at a Hampton Inn near the Speedway, Rowe muses about his future; he's in discussions with Discovery about their next 10 years together. "Discovery is the right place for me. I just don't know what it will look like yet." Creating Dirty Jobs has gotten tougher. As he and the show have become more famous, it has gotten harder to find people who don't play to the camera or hide the truly dirty stuff. "There are times when it feels like this will be it for me in television," he says wistfully. "I'm starting to think that if I can get to 200 jobs, then I'll have 200 stories." Fodder, he thinks, for a writing career about what he's learned about work and life. (See his "Seven Dirty Habits of Highly Effluent People".) "All shows end the same way. It's just a question of how long in its life cycle you continue to have fun and do well." The South Carolina trip is salvaged by a researcher back in L.A. who has discovered a rice plantation nearby. Campbell Coxe, a friendly fifth-generation farmer, is reintroducing a native strain of rice. "This is more us," says Barsky. Coxe's bottomless knowledge of his industry and decidedly unslick operation (the truck he uses to move the rice from silo to mill is made mostly of plywood and has no brakes) endears him to Rowe immediately. Coxe's rice is also the only product being created in South Carolina using certified renewable energy. Best of all, farmer Coxe isn't quite sure who the hell Mike Rowe is. "Campbell is a farmer," says his wife, Meredith, with an eyeroll. "He really only watches the Weather Channel." Rowe throws himself into the dirty work of rice farming, shoveling around in a silo, navigating well-used farm equipment, and in general, having a great time shooting the segment. There are always mishaps. Barsky takes a tumble in the silo, causing Rowe to lament the untimely death of his pal. "We finally lost Barsky," he intones. Later on, Rowe lurches around the mill on a forklift carrying a one-ton bag of rice. After setting it down, he watches helplessly as it slowly tips over, spilling its freshly milled contents on the cement floor. "I probably should have tied that shut," he mutters theatrically. Rowe points to the mess. "Uh, you've got people to get that, right, Campbell?" he asks, as Coxe rubs his eyes. "'Cause I'm feeling like it's quitting time right about now." He turns to the camera and smiles. "Quitting is in my DNA."

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