

a *TALK* on the

Dan “Tiger Guy” Stockdale Keeps A Captive Audience

BY JAKE POINIER

When your primary sidekick is a 500-pound tiger, being upstaged comes with the territory. “I don’t fight it,” says Dan Stockdale, a motivational speaker and president of The Leadership-Conservation Institute, a non-profit corporation dedicated to the development of leadership in organizations and the preservation and replenishment of endangered species. “I quickly learned there was no way to get the audience’s attention off the tiger—first, because they’re amazed, but also because they’re scared to death.” As Stockdale talks about the applications of relationships and leadership while physically interacting with the animals, the audience sees it in practice—leaving them with an unforgettable message.

For anyone who ever fantasized about running away and joining the circus, Stockdale is living the dream. Throughout childhood, he was passionate about animals—tigers, in particular. “I remember going on a family vacation when I was eight. We pulled into an Exxon, which has a tiger logo,” he says. “They were doing a special promotion, and I begged my parents for a tiger pillow.” At 15, Stockdale moved 500 miles from home to hone his animal-care skills at Porpoise Island in Pigeon Forge, Tenn., where his charges included deer, macaws, sea lions and Atlantic bottlenose dolphins.

After graduating from Kent State University with a degree in psychology (with an emphasis in animal and human behavior), he worked in a variety of managerial positions in several different industries—but the endless rotation of meetings left him yearning for his days in the wild kingdom. So, in 2003, Stockdale blended his passion for animals with his business knowledge as a consultant.

“Originally, I planned to make it a keynote speech from behind the podium,” he says. “But when I did the photo shoot for my book [*Taming Tigers*], I began doing more work with tigers and the concept took off.” What began with a single tiger on stage has since grown into a whatever-the-client-wants production. If a company’s logo is an elephant, for example, he’ll pack along a pachyderm. “Plus, we’ll bring a



Wild Side

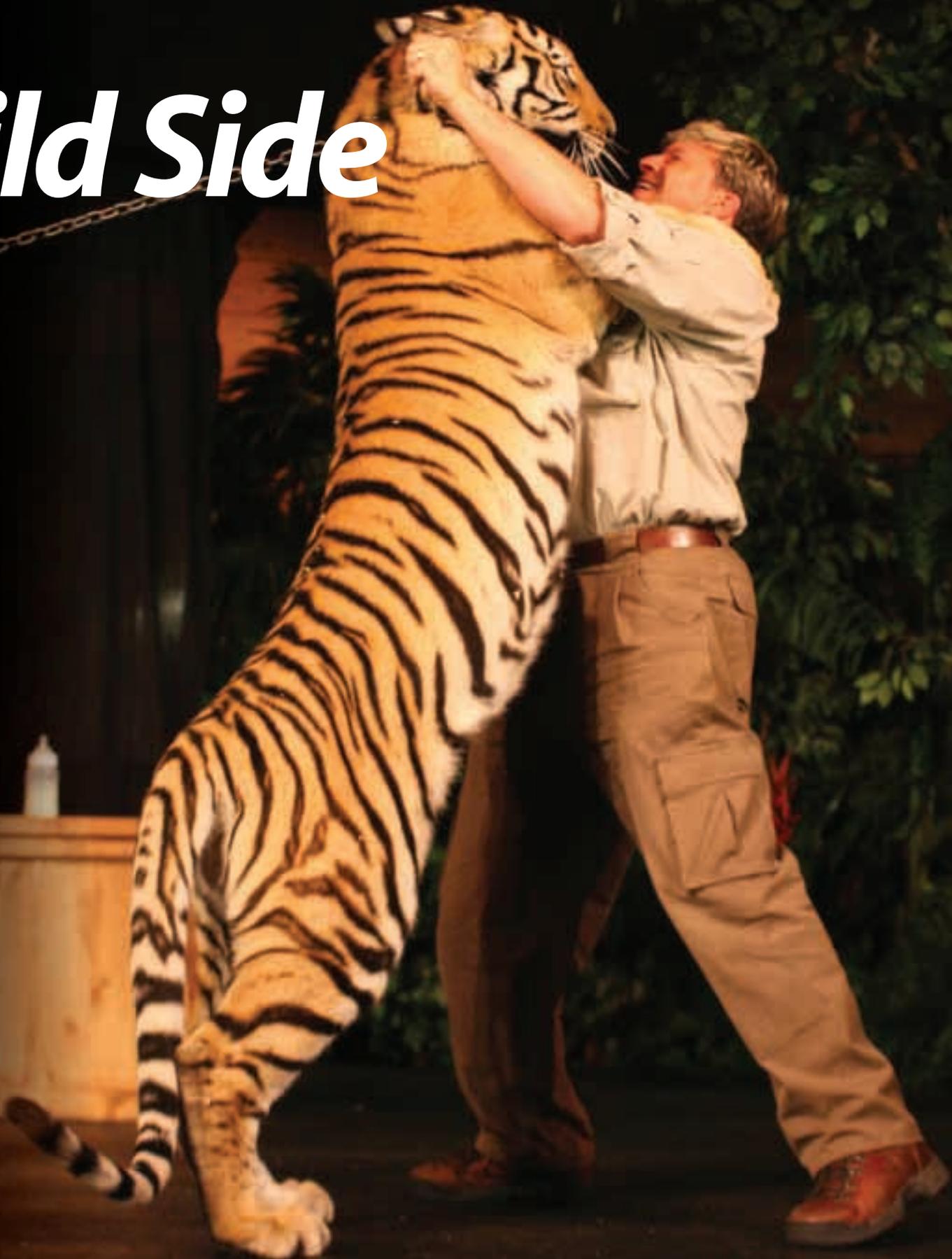


Photo: Robert Perez

Monkey Business

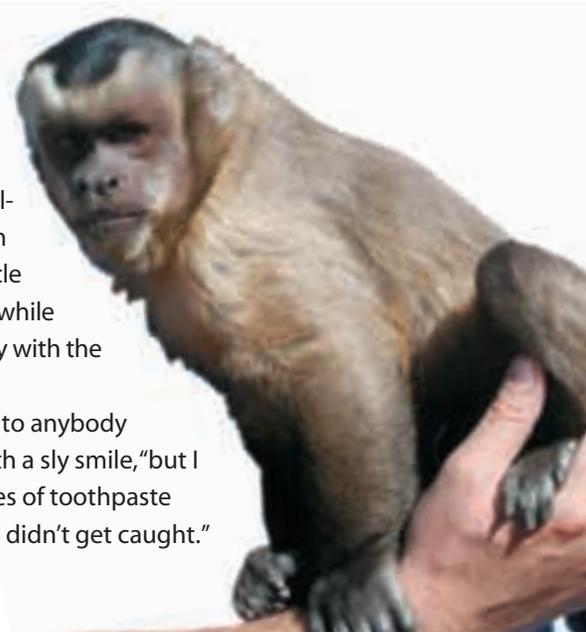
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hile animal trainers are responsible for driving the large animals to the next gig, Stockdale usually travels by air—and sometimes with a monkey in tow. “Just like a person, she has good days and bad days,” he says. “She’s generally quiet and content being in her animal carrier, which looks kind of like a large camera bag.”

In fact, most people don’t even realize what he’s carrying—until they reach a security checkpoint. “That’s when all heck can break loose,” Stockdale says. “I’ve gotten every kind of reaction from baggage screeners. Sometimes, it’s the tough guy who wants to appear that he’s seen everything, so he gives you the wave like, ‘Yeah, come on through, no problem. We do this all the time. We’re expecting a llama soon.’”

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Stockdale recently had a TSA agent who was so totally enthralled with seeing a monkey that he started calling all the agents over from the other lines. The spectacle totally shut down security while everyone took turns to play with the charismatic little primate.

“I’ve never admitted this to anybody before,” Stockdale says with a sly smile, “but I actually carried four ounces of toothpaste through on that flight and didn’t get caught.”



guy with a shovel and a strong back because cleaning up after one of those is like shoveling bowling balls,” he says.

Recently, a church commissioned Stockdale as the highlight of a series on Noah’s Ark. The cast consisted of a full-grown tiger, a baby tiger, a baby lion, a Harris hawk, and a black-capped capuchin monkey. Churches, however, aren’t Stockdale’s typical audience. “There are really three types of groups that hire me,” he says. “First, it’s folks with lots of money—just because it’s very expensive

from a logistical perspective. Second, if a meeting planner has a passion for animals, I deliver a leadership message along with a conservation message. “But mostly, I get calls from organizations where relationships matter—where they want to build meaningful, profitable, long-term relationships with their clients, customers and employees.” Whenever there’s a national incident involving an animal, Stockdale fields calls from Fox News, CNN and newsweeklies such as *Time* to provide analysis and opinion.

Methods to the Madness

Stockdale describes his events as “organized, dangerous chaos,” though the reality for audience members tends more toward the entertaining than the truly death defying: A falcon, instead of flying to the trainer’s glove, hangs out on the light bar above the stage. Or a bald eagle, in all its majesty, poops on stage. Or, like many animals, a tiger marks its territory by spraying—which happens to include some poor soul in the front row.

“It’s kind of like Shamu’s splash zone at SeaWorld,” Stockdale says. “Naturally, the impromptu things get more laughs than I could ever script.”

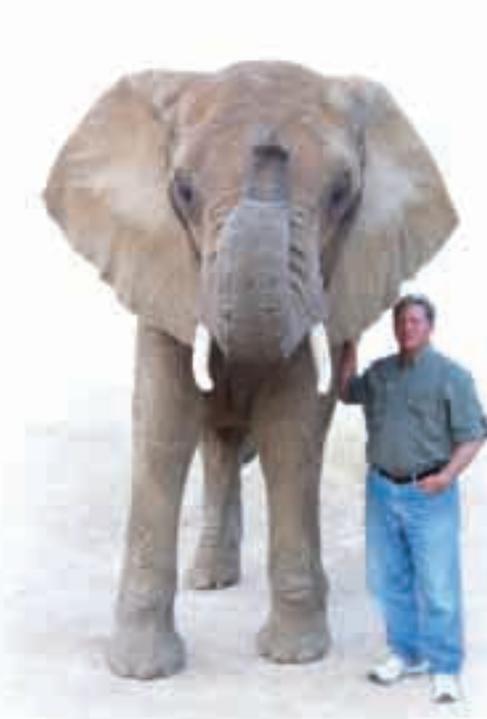
Even Stockdale’s star performer, Sundar the tiger, has his off days. On one occasion, the pair performed nine shows in a week. When it was time for them to do the grand finale—a shoulder stand where the tiger puts his front paws on Stockdale’s shoulders—Sundar just gave him a look like, “I’m tired and I’m not doing it,” he says. “He came over and kind of gave a halfway attempt, and then laid down next to me and wanted a belly rub.”

At the time, Stockdale seized the opportunity to draw an analogy for his audience. “You learn that you just have to roll with it,” he says. “If I got frustrated, do you think I’d really stand a chance trying to force a 500-pound beast to do a shoulder stand? Naw, I’d be history. So, consider that there are times in the office you’re not getting the exact behaviors you want, and it might be in long-term best interest to let it roll.” No matter where you work, there will be times when things fall short of expectations, leading Stockdale to suggest an analogy that can apply to any workplace: If my million-dollar sales star doesn’t turn in his expense report on time this week, is it worth the loss of motivation to get on his case about it?

Taking the Show on the Road

While spontaneity may rule on stage, a one-hour presentation takes weeks or even months of advance planning. “It’s a complex show, but we’ve got to be easy to do business with,” he says. “Once the meeting planner signs the agreement, we take care of everything—and that includes a thousand details behind the scenes.”

The traveling team for any given event might include a road manager/publicist, a production manager, a merchandise person, two back-up animal trainers, and an African dancer with two drummers. Staffers secure permits, prepare food and vitamins, and acquire ample sawdust for bedding. Depending on the destination, trainers drive the required animals from one of Stockdale’s outposts in Southern California, Central Florida or Ohio. One of the key logistical tricks is figuring out how to get animals in and out of the building. “One time, the venue had to evacuate the kitchen, including every drop of food, because it was the best way to get to the



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stage,” Stockdale says. “When we were through, the employees came back in and started cooking for the banquet.”

On game day, Stockdale unleashes a multi-sensory, multi-media jungle experience with three large video screens displaying separate content, including action footage as well as scrolling information about tigers and their correlations to the corporate world. During the presentation, a 10-question quiz helps participants identify which animal characteristics they have—using a bit of humor to make a deeper philosophical point.

“We’ve gone so far to the extreme of being politically correct in our society,” says Stockdale. “We have policies and procedures for a reason, but we also lose the flexibility of treating people as

individuals and understanding that everyone has strengths and weaknesses—including leaders.” The bottom line, he says, is that if the people on your team aren’t having fun, you’ve failed as a leader.

Stockdale’s stock-in-trade is “The Seven Ancient Secrets of Taming Tigers,” and he works with meeting planners to ensure the presentation covers those secrets that align best with the organizational mission. “It’s critically important to me that the whole experience is themed and branded around the taming tigers and Tiger Guy brand. It’s about a cohesive meeting experience. It’s what the planner wants, needs and expects.”

By leading meeting planners safely through their near-jungle experience, Stockdale strives to deliver corporate metaphors and life analogies that create a lasting message for their audiences. “There are an amazing number of parallels between the actions we must take to better care for the wildlife on earth, and the actions organizations must take to ensure that they too will thrive,” Stockdale says. “We demonstrate the principles with animals, but the leaders in the audience can easily apply them to their employees and customers. It’s all about relationships.” **S**

Jake Poinier has been a full-time freelance writer since 1999. In addition to commercial copywriting for clients such as Dial Corporation, Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, and Apollo Group, his magazine and newspaper credits include articles in USA Today and Golf Illustrated.

