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# GREEN FIELDS

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**IN 1991 OUR** house burned down. That was also the year I fired Phil Carter. So Jane was rebuilding the house as I was rebuilding the business. It was a very stressful time for both of us.

Springtime in Arkansas is beautiful but treacherous—we live in a part of the country where violent storms are a fact of life. It was April and I was racing in Atlanta; Jane was with me, and so was Carrie, who now lived in Atlanta. Rob, a junior in high school, hadn't been able to get away.

"It was a big house out in the country," says Jane. "We'd been in it for five years when it got struck by lightning. It was the middle of the night. Rob was supposed to be there but he didn't pay any attention to his curfew, so he was in town with his girlfriend. But a friend of ours, who was separated from his wife and was in the process of getting a divorce, was there. His name was Bill and he was staying with us. And Bill knew immediately what had happened. He managed to get the cars

out, and then drove to the house of a fireman we knew, Curtis. But Curtis was on duty and his wife wouldn't let Bill in.

"He finally talked her into calling her husband at the fire station, and so they got people out there—two or three volunteer fire departments and the Conway fire department. But the house was burned. The attic was completely burned off. The second floor was burned to the studs. The first floor was basically destroyed by smoke and water.

"We were in Atlanta at the race, and we couldn't get back because the line of thunderstorms stretched from Canada to the Gulf. You could not get around that sucker. So we sat in Atlanta until three o'clock that afternoon, twelve hours. Finally we got around it.

"It was not a fun time. We were in a rent house for eight months while they rebuilt it."



AFTER MANY WEEKS of quiet research and analysis, I concluded that we weren't going to "fix" Phil Carter. What probably sealed it was when Sharon came into my office, shut the door, and told me how mean Phil was to his administrative assistant, often leaving her in tears. "Nobody deserves that kind of treatment," Sharon said.

I told you before: When Sharon Tackett—the nicest, most honest, most discreet person in the world—thinks it's important to tell me something, I take it to heart. And I agreed with her completely—nobody deserves to be treated like a doormat. But if that had been the only charge against Phil, I probably would've simply given him a talking-to—at least the first time. That's not how we treat people in this company.

As it was, what Sharon told me fit a bullying pattern that I had uncovered about Phil. When I told some close staff people that I'd decided to let him go, they inevitably said things like, "Charles, I'm glad you finally saw the light. Phil was really screwing this place up." So why hadn't anybody come to me about it? The answers usually went like this: "Well, I actually work for Phil and didn't want you to tell him I said anything bad about him." The message I got was that Phil Carter was a vindictive man. Whether he fired you or not, he made it really clear: *Don't cross me or you're in deep shit.*

“So one Friday I get a call from Charles,” recalls Jim Womble. “I’m in Corpus Christi on a little beach vacation with my second wife and our children. ‘You got to come back,’ Charles says. ‘I want to fire Carter, and I want you to be with me in the office Monday morning when he walks in.’ Then he told me what Sharon had said to him.”

Jim got back on Friday night, and that weekend he and Rodger and I met on both Saturday and Sunday and worked out a script. You have to be careful with things like this; you can’t just go in and wing it. So on Monday morning when Carter arrived at his office—it was about 7:30—the three of us were sitting there waiting for him. “Phil,” I said, “I’m going to have to let you go for the following reasons....” His face went white. It was a *very* short meeting. Then I had security escort Phil from the building.

Unfortunately, that was the easy part. Now I had to deal with the mess I’d let happen while Phil was in the president’s chair.



“THE INSURANCE PAYMENT on the house was one and a half million dollars,” says Jane. “So it was a fairly good-size problem.

“But I had to be grateful that neither Bill nor Rob was hurt. And Curtis, due to the fact that he sometimes worked for us, and had for many years—he knew where everything that we loved was in that house. He got my father’s shotgun out from under Rob’s bed. And he got things off the walls that he knew I loved. And I mean he just saved things that most people wouldn’t have.

“And the firemen, when they thought they were going to lose the house, they pitched in and pulled furniture to the doors. It was pouring down rain, but our friends were out there. And A.J. Hambuchen, from Hambuchen Furniture, had brought trucks, and our friends would carry our furniture to the trucks, and A.J. would have the furniture taken down to his warehouse.

“But of course we didn’t save everything—there was a corner cupboard that had some antique china in it. And the firemen were so anxious to get that out that they tried to move the whole thing and it broke a bunch of the china. But they weren’t even family pieces. So I was just grateful to have what I have.”



TOO MANY LAYERS of management. Too many titles. Too much command and control—those were just some of our obvious problems. But Acxiom was like that T-boned Mercedes I'd once rebuilt in my garage: It was easy to see the now-misshapen frame. The deeper you got into the wreckage, though, the more you found to fix. Critical internal problems—problems of philosophy, of self-image, of well-thought-out *design*—were preventing us from running at full capacity.

But while my senior executives and I were trying to think out solutions, all the daily business of a going concern—whether going well or not—was piling up on my desk. I needed help, dedicated help. And the way I found that help was by asking a young woman in our accounting department to prepare some numbers for a meeting I was going to attend.

“What are you going to do with these numbers?” Cindy Childers said. “I mean, are you going to analyze them? Are you going to try to put some action together?”

“I haven't thought about that,” I said.

She volunteered to think it out for me, and in a day or so she brought me the numbers with a flexible plan for how to use and present them. “Wow, this is great!” I said.

By the time Cindy got back to her office, her phone was ringing. “You want to come work for me?” I said.

“Doing what?”

“I don't know—we'll figure it out. Stuff like we just did over the past couple of days.” Fortunately, she thought it over and said yes. And that's when the real rebuilding of the company began.

Even before Phil Carter left, we had scratched the idea of Quality Circles and started looking for other ideas. “Quality Circles was a management fad at the time,” recalls Cindy, “and for us a massive failure. My favorite story about Quality Circles was that we had a group of people looking for ways to shorten the amount of time it took them to accomplish something. So they did a lot of study, conducted a bunch of interviews, and gave their presentation to a group of managers. And the finding of this Quality Circle team was that they could best save time by buying a large trashcan and placing it in a certain area. ‘Oh dear God,’ said the managers, ‘we've missed the boat here. Just go buy the damn trashcan.’ For us, that was the turning

point with Quality Circles. The idea of it—to decentralize decision-making—was spot on, but the Quality Circles concept itself was just an over-engineered way of doing that.”

The next step was to see what other ideas were out there. We did that by visiting what Cindy called “benchmark companies—companies we thought had pretty cool stuff going on.” Cindy and a handful of colleagues called on about a half-dozen firms whose main ideas ran the gamut from “accountability” to “recognition,” with various impressive stops along the way. I visited two of these companies myself, and I remember being especially impressed with Milliken Carpets, which was strong at employee empowerment. Even in matters of cost control, Milliken allowed their employees to figure out ways to contain costs instead of imposing decrees from on high.

As a result of those visits, we formed a team that put together a 12-action plan to begin changing Acxiom’s culture. In 1990 and early 1991 we started trying to implement this new, more enlightened thinking through a top-down *re*-education plan that we called the “Race for Excellence.” It didn’t stress getting the checkered flag first at all costs, however; it stressed running the race right, keeping the bigger picture in mind. In fact, we eventually changed it from the Race for Excellence to the *Quest* for Excellence, because a quest has no finish line.

We began the program company-wide in a dramatic way, with me having a big management meeting—there were probably 50 to 75 managers there—and I stood up on a chair and said, “I just want y’all to know that *I am the problem*. And I’m going to start trying to fix me, and we’re going to try to fix this whole organization starting from the top down. We’re going to spend the next few days talking about how we do that.”

In the end, I taught all the senior leaders the concepts of the Race for Excellence and how we were going to implement those concepts—what everybody’s role and responsibility was. I taught a one- or two-day class that all those guys had to attend, and then they had to go and teach their people. So it was a waterfall educational approach.

But even as we were engaged in this re-education program, we began realizing that our existing company structure was totally wrong for the company we wanted to become. “We had thirteen layers of management,” Cindy says, “which meant every manager managed two-and-a-half people. By the late eighties it was not an

engaged workforce, okay? People came to work, checked their brain at the door, did what they were told, and left. HR at that time was doing payroll and hiring, but nobody was doing any organizational planning. So before we could *really* implement any new thinking, we had to tackle our obvious existing problems—the superfluous management layers and their accompanying emphasis on titles.”

Our goal was to create an organization around the concept of groups and business units—a flat organization, a more empowered, more fun place to work. I wanted our people to worry more about fun, productivity, and results for the customer, and less about what’s-my-title, how-many-people-report-to-me, and how-do-I-climb-higher-on-the-food-chain. My own title became, simply, “Company Leader.”

“We went from thirteen levels to three,” says Cindy. “And we eliminated all titles so that people didn’t have that competition thing going on.”

Ah, but humans will be humans—won’t we? “In hindsight,” says Cindy, “we should’ve done it a little differently. Because what we realized was that to some people when you lose your title, you lose your identity. So it rocked the organization. Thirty percent of the people were, ‘I don’t care.’ But seventy percent were, ‘Oh no!’ So we did replace it eventually, but not with traditional titles. We came back with you’re a team leader or you’re a business unit leader. We put leader in the title and that was intentional, because we wanted people to start leading. And we kind of adopted a motto—you manage things and you lead people. And if you can’t lead, then we’ll let you go manage things. But you can’t manage people. So that’s kind of how it started. That was a pretty big turning point, organizationally.”

These changes let us be fast, flat, and flexible, and by 1992 we had organized into business units. Each business unit had a business unit leader coordinating the work of some 25 to 75 associates. Under the business unit leader were team leaders, and above him was a group leader, who had multiple business units working for him or her. The group leaders reported to me. The very lowest-level associate formally reported to a business unit leader but worked under the direction of team leaders—they could work on more than one team at a time. That allowed us to move people around to whatever section had the highest demand at any given moment. The smallest business unit was probably 15 people; the largest—this would’ve been in some of the operational areas, such as computer operations—might have been 100 people.

We “franchised” these business units with major franchise-signing events. Every person in the unit participated and signed the “agreement.” It was a cool concept and people really rallied around it. A unit had to prepare and commit to be franchised, so it was a big deal to have the franchise signing ceremony. It gave the business unit leader and the associates “ownership” in their business.

Now, all of a sudden, I could look to a unit leader who had Citibank or Chase or First USA, and I could say, “You’ve got no excuses.” Because these business units had most of the resources necessary to get anything done—programmers, operational people, whatever they required. They were essentially small businesses that outsourced their data processing to a bigger business, which was Acxiom itself.

Finally, with the excellent help of Cindy Childers and other colleagues, I felt I had come to terms with my old nemesis—structure. It was really disruptive, but there was no way we could’ve grown this business without doing it. Once an organization gets 1,000 people in it, it can choke you. So what we did was lob a 100-pound stick of dynamite in the middle of the organization. Just blew it up like it was a piece of overgrown ground, blasting off all the gnarly trees and jagged rocks and thick, clingy vines in a single explosion.

Then we covered up the hole we’d made and it was like we’d returned to a pristine field—clean and calm and flat and green. Green fields are good places for starting over.



“OUR MARRIAGE,” SAYS Jane—“I can just say our marriage *before* about nineteen ninety-one and *after* nineteen ninety-one were two entirely different marriages. Over the years Charles became more argumentative and more interested in power, I guess. And it didn’t get to the point that I thought I was having trouble dealing with him until about ninety-one. His narcissism began to get out of hand. I think it may have been when he decided to take over Phil Carter’s place. And it just went out of sync. Carrie had said we never fought. But Rob was there those last few years and he knows we fought. Before that, we didn’t fight. But we did those last few years.”

Every story has two sides—at *least* two sides. Going into the 1990s, I felt that my life was expanding very quickly. It’s shocking to hear how little Jane understood

the significance of that period for me, either personally or professionally. The truth is, in the late '80s I thought I knew how to build and run a business, but I didn't know squat. The decade of the '90s was transformative for both Acxiom *and* me. Between 1990 and 2000, Acxiom emerged from a nice little business into an industry leader. And I, realizing now how little I really did know, learned—day by day and year by year, against tough odds and under the most trying circumstances—how to do my job.

I've already told you about some of the disastrous acquisitions we made in the late '80s—the letter shop, the fulfillment center. Fortunately, Alex Dietz and I had that all-important conversation about our “core competency”—our core business being data—so we were now more on track in terms of acquisitions. With the Race for Excellence we started attacking organizational issues, and from that effort we began to put in place more advanced thinking about what kinds of companies we ought to be buying.

It's important to understand that we weren't just buying to buy. We were buying to *grow*—to do more business better. So we had to develop a kind of three-pronged strategy for acquisitions: a strategy to identify a company that could help us in our core business; a strategy for making that acquisition; and a strategy for blending that company into ours.

Had that been all we were facing, it would've been one thing. But it all comes at you at once. We were also wrestling with how to get big city-based executives of prospective client companies to travel to Conway, Arkansas, so we could spend a whole day selling them on all our latest technologies and what those capabilities could mean to them. In the '70s, we'd lured a lot of top executives by flying them down in Charles Ward's jet. In the mid-'80s, we'd bought a little King Air that could accommodate four or five people, but New York in that plane was a five-hour flight one way, which made for a long day. So in the late '80s, we'd bought a Citation II jet. It would seat seven people, but it wasn't even five feet high on the inside, and it was pretty slow. And by the '90s, most of the big guys in New York were used to big airplanes. So the game had changed, and we had to change with it.

We also had to stay ahead on technology, or else what would we sell those CEOs when we *did* get their attention? One day back in the early '90s, Jim Womble and I were sitting in his office talking about our bank business. By then, we were working with seven or eight good-sized banks, each of which was sending us credit bureau

data feeds. So we were receiving a lot of the same data over and over again, and we were doing the same things to the same data—except these projects were getting longer and more complicated, and we were continually buying more computers to stay ahead of the business. For the most part we were just doing current credit data, but the banks kept wanting to send us monthly data for five years—they never took their eye off that grand goal of theirs. *No!* we'd say. *We can't buy the computers to handle that! And there aren't even enough computer operators!*

“Jim,” I said, “we’ve got to find a better way to do this.” Our problem was what we call “data fragments”—bits and pieces of questionable data. Let’s say we’re tracking data on a John and Mary Jane Doe, currently of Little Rock, Arkansas. Let’s also say this particular Doe family has also lived in Pittsburgh and Kansas City. But maybe, along the way, the information on Mary Jane inexplicably drops off—we can’t find in the various data we have access to that she actually lived with John in Kansas City. We do, however, have a Mary J. Doe on the same Kansas City street as John, but at a slightly different street number. Is this the same person who lived with John Doe in Pittsburgh, and who now lives with him in Little Rock?

If you don’t have any other data, you have to either *assume* that Mary J. is Mary Jane—or that she’s not. But the problem with assumptions is that they have a chance of being wrong, and wrong information makes for inaccurate data, and inaccurate data puts the banks’ credit card business at risk. And if the banks’ business is at risk, then so is ours.

That was one problem with fragments. Another big problem, from our standpoint, was that the more data we were given to process, the more fragments we had to deal with, meaning that these ever-larger jobs were taking us longer and longer to do and requiring more and bigger computers. I could foresee a day when we would reach the breaking point—when we couldn’t handle the work. That would be the end of us. So in the midst of everything else, I began conceiving of a plan to take Acxiom technology to the next level. Nearly a decade later, the result of this incipient planning would become a revolutionary product called AbiliTec. It would give us the extra data to help put Mary J. Doe and other fragments in their rightful place.

The ever-larger volume of available data also presented us with a more pressing problem—privacy. Data itself isn’t possessed of morality, good or bad. How it’s used is everything. I’m not talking just about intention. I’m talking also about care,

and about respect for others. In the early '90s, partly through my new position as board chairman of the Direct Marketing Association, I was becoming convinced that with Big Data came Big Responsibility.

But the direct-marketing industry—starting with some of my DMA board colleagues—wanted to sweep the whole subject of privacy under the rug. I was appalled at their short sightedness. Every day, it seemed, we heard another crazy story of kamikaze risk. Citibank, for example, had hired some new whiz-bang marketing executive, and we learned that he and his people wanted to use their own data for things that weren't even legal. I thought: *Do I really want to find myself on the front page of The New York Times because of something like this?* I never once doubted that our big-name clients, if they got caught doing something wrong, would say, "Hey, it wasn't us. It was those guys in Arkansas. They're really bad guys." They would throw us under the bus in a New York second.

My sensitivity to the subject of privacy was no doubt heightened by an internal change that we'd made at Acxiom. As a service bureau, for years we had bought the same data over and over for various clients—for example, if Chase wanted a list of wealthy men and women in Manhattan, we bought it for them, from whoever owned the best list of that type; then if Citibank or another client wanted a similar list, we bought it again. One month in the late 1980s we bought the same list eight times, which prompted a revolutionary thought: *Why don't we negotiate a deal with the list provider to buy the list just once, and then sell it ourselves?*

So we did that, creating a database of composite lists we called InfoBase. This was in 1988. Soon an international advertising, marketing, and consulting company called Wunderman Worldwide expressed interest in a joint venture with us—we would build and maintain this InfoBase database and they would sell it to their many clients. Jennifer—by then she was Jennifer Barrett, married to my old friend and colleague Don Barrett—was our business development person in those days, so she took the point position with Wunderman and InfoBase.

The joint venture rocked along for three years, during which time I became increasingly unhappy with Wunderman; they really weren't doing much for us. Finally I fired them and we brought InfoBase into Acxiom as one of our products.

"I remember," says Jennifer, "Charles said to me at the time: 'You know, now we're a data company, not just a service bureau anymore. And that probably means we need to do something differently. Would you figure out what that is?'"

The result was that, in 1991, I named Jennifer to the newly created post of Chief Privacy Officer. As a dedicated monitor ensuring the responsible use of all data in our possession, Jennifer Barrett broke new ground—she was the first such privacy officer of any company on the planet.

There was nothing at all altruistic about this appointment. I just knew that if marketers kept saying screw the public, one day we would have a big blow-up, and somebody would write a big privacy bill that would virtually shut down the industry. I decided to be proactive in confronting that possibility. I could already see that without a strong code of conduct, there were increasing opportunities for us to make the wrong decision and get into trouble. Jennifer's new job was to keep us away from that.



THESE WERE JUST some of the balls I was juggling when, beginning around 1991, Jane began to feel that our marriage was in trouble. I might add that some of this work pressure was occurring against a backdrop of the first Gulf War and a huge postal increase that turned our business on its head—in a single year we dropped from \$117 million to about \$90 million in revenue.

To add to my stress, the drop in revenue also dropped Acxiom's stock price, creating a personal financial crisis for Jim, Rodger, and me. A year or two earlier, Rodger had come to us with a "can't miss" investment deal—a beer distributorship with two locations in Little Rock and one in Shreveport, Louisiana. It wasn't cheap, and I was doubtful—for one thing, I didn't know anything about the beer business. But a pal of Rodger's vouched for the deal and Rodger urged us to invest. Against my better judgment, I said okay—as long as Rodger did all the due diligence and stood behind both the deal and the friend who had brought it to him. Rodger praised the soundness of the business plan and said his friend was a prince among men. So with that, we each put in about \$5 million, give or take, which we borrowed from the bank and secured with our Acxiom stock. Rodger's friend, who was putting up no money, was also getting ownership in the company. What a deal—he gets us to invest so he can make a killing.

As it turned out, this guy was a crook. He stole from us—embezzled money that we didn't prosecute him for. But the real problem came in 1991, when

Acxiom's stock was taking a beating. Suddenly the bank put out collateral calls, which neither Rodger nor Jim could meet. They were beside themselves—if they couldn't cover the note with some other collateral, the bank would sell their Acxiom stock. But they had nothing else to put up. Take my word for it—they were *frantic*.

I couldn't stand by and watch my good friends go broke, so I took on their obligations—betting a whole bunch more of my stock to save them. In exchange, I took some of their equity in the beer distributorship. But then we also had to plow \$5 million equity back *into* the beer business—it was broke. And now that I was the majority owner, I had to put up the majority of the equity that we used to recapitalize the business.

But guess what happened next. When things got better, I sold the majority of Jim's and Rodger's equity back to them for a token amount of money. And when the beer business was finally sold, they each made several million dollars on the deal. To this day, Jim has never forgotten the fact that I saved him from financial ruin. Rodger has never been quite as appreciative.

So, stress and worry? You bet, I had more than my fair share in that period around 1991, when Jane started finding me “difficult.” And I don't doubt for a second that I brought some of my worry home with me.

But there was more on my mind than business. I've always protected myself in the future—it's just in my DNA to look ahead, to *plan* ahead. By 1991 I was 48 years old and had been married to Jane since I was 23. A quarter of a century. How many years did I have left to work? Fifteen? Twenty? And then what? Spend my retirement sitting around the house with Jane?

The first time I seriously thought of getting a divorce was in about 1985. Back then I figured it was about a 10-percent probability—someday, when the kids were grown, I *might* leave and find another life. But over the next five to seven years, the probability rose dramatically. By 1994, it was 100 percent. Bob Ingenito's theory of time was like a roar inside my head.

Rob had gone off to college in 1992. He'd also announced that he wanted to start racing cars—that, however, is a separate subject, at least for now. But Rob's leaving hadn't decided anything. It had simply removed an important hurdle, though there were still other hurdles I had to find a way to clear. I was worried about Jane. I knew she wouldn't take my leaving well, but what I feared was that

it might be damaging to her mental health. By 1994, I thought about leaving all the time. But it was something I could always put off for another week...another week...another week.

Looking back, I think it's easy to see how my growing desire to make a break had developed. As an incidental byproduct of building a company, I had also begun creating an ever-larger life for myself. Call me narcissistic, but I discovered that I liked it. I liked having built that company, and I liked setting goals for it and continuing to meet or exceed those goals. I liked traveling to New York and London and getting to know other people with interesting and expansive lives. Of course, I *loved* my racing. And whether because of business success or racing success, I began to see myself and my company written up in prominent publications—*Success Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *Forbes*, and the like. That was also part of the larger life I enjoyed.

In 1994, the Sales and Marketing Executives Association named me Manager of the Year. I liked that too—especially when I received a handwritten note of congratulations from my Uncle Ralph:

*August 28, 1994*

*Dear Charles:*

*Your recent honor made news here in Fort Smith and I hasten to add my congratulations to you—It is really a signal achievement when you are selected as the best of anything in the U.S.A.!*

*I'm sure that Betty & Don are again patting themselves on the back for having such a famous & successful son. I assure you that I am a proud uncle & I may add grateful that my faith in your ability has been well repaid by the appreciation of my investment in Acxiom stock!*

*Keep up the good work—*

*Love,  
Uncle Ralph*

In my answer, I thanked him for his confidence in me and for taking time to write. "I always like to hear from happy stockholders!" I said.

My reason for mentioning these facets of the larger exterior life I enjoyed by then is emphatically *not* to blow my own horn. Rather, it's to help characterize how far apart I felt that Jane and I had grown. The more public my life became, the less comfortable Jane seemed to feel with it. I would want her to go with me to board meetings in New York or Washington, say, or events of the Direct Marketing Association, and she wouldn't want to go. Everyone else took their spouses to evening functions—that was part of the fun of it. “These are nice people,” I would tell Jane. And she *would* go, because she knew it was her duty, but she went reluctantly. And often she did have fun once she got there. But she really dreaded going.

Even our own company events now put her off. When the company was small, she didn't mind having everybody over for beer and hot dogs. And when we first moved to the big new house in the country—the one that burned and was rebuilt—she threw great picnics. People would park their cars all over the property, and Rob and his friends would be out there with buckets of water in case someone's hot manifold caught the grass on fire. For winter parties, Rob and his friends would be our valet parking team, taking each guest's car at the front door. I think Jane still had fun then. Later, as we grew so fast and took on so many new people, it got much harder—I'm the first to acknowledge that. By the early '90s, when we had a Christmas party at that house, we invited some 1,800 people. They came in shifts, in 30-minute increments.

Mostly, Jane got so she just preferred to sit and read her books. Even at races now, she would place a lawn chair under the awning of the motor home and sit there reading while the cars screamed around the track.

No matter what I urged her to do or to be a part of, it seemed to make her angry. More than once she told me she felt like she was just that person following behind me—that every once in a while I would stop to notice her, but that I didn't really respect her. To punish me, she clearly wasn't going to do anything I wanted her to do, such as stop smoking or exercise. Instead, she would just sit and read.

We did argue quite a bit when Rob was in high school. Once, we had a tremendous fight because Rob had left some things on the back stairs and Jane had been telling him for a week to get that stuff off the stairs and take it to his room. Being a teenager, he ignored her—and the louder she ordered him, the more obviously he ignored her. She would be hollering at him as he walked

through the kitchen, and he would be so pissed he would just look straight ahead and keep walking.

Finally, when he'd gone to his room, Jane turned her fury on me. She was in my face screaming that I hadn't taken her side by making Rob pick up his things. It's true, I hadn't. He was a *kid*, and I felt that her own behavior was so over the top on this issue that I didn't want to reinforce it. Jane turned the whole thing into "Rob doesn't respect me" and "You don't respect me either." Many of our fights were about Jane not getting the respect she felt she was due.

While some of those fights were bad, there are worse things in a relationship than fighting. "I don't really remember any fighting in high school," says Rob, and I'm glad to hear that—memory has its protective coverings. "But when I would come back from college for a weekend, I noticed they were both real short with each other. We'd be sitting down to dinner, and the communication level was just completely broken down."



HISTORICALLY, WHAT DID Jane and I do to bury our problems? Right. We built a house.

So in the fall of 1994 we decided to build a weekend home at Greers Ferry Lake. "This is hard for me to talk about," says Jane. "This falls under my Acxiom service. We were building that house really for Acxiom, as a retreat. I was supposed to find the house, four bedrooms, and I found some plans in *Southern Living*—though it was all backwards from what I thought it should be. But I figured out how to flip the rooms around, and we ordered the house plans and Charles put it on his computer—he had a program that would actually draw the plans. So we got it like we wanted. We did this together, which is something we'd never done before on a house.

"Then we went up and found the property and hired a builder. And we were going up there at least every weekend, every Saturday, to see how it was coming. It was a neat, neat house."

The lake house wasn't supposed to be what it became. We—I—began it in good faith. On some ideal level, I thought it would be a good place to bring our sprawling family together, in whatever iteration of "family" the passage of time

presented to us. As for Jane and me, I still hoped we could become the kinds of friendly exes you sometimes see in the movies; then there were my elderly parents; my brother and his wife; Jane's sister and Ewell and their children; Carrie and Rob and their eventual spouses; our someday grandkids. I saw this place as a big old happy house for the comings and goings of generations. At the same time, it *would* be a convenient site for my occasional two- or three-day management retreats, and even for entertaining potential clients.

Then one day it hit me: *This is how I get out of here.* When the lake house was finished, I could quietly move into it. No hullabaloo, no lawyers, no headline-grabbing new house to buy. Just a silent and dignified separation, moving from one of our houses into another. Under the radar. And once ensconced there, I could take my time working with Jane toward an amicable divorce.

Now, for me, those weekend building-site inspections were fraught with internal drama. The workmen were really *moving* on the lake house, and my heart pounded with every finished wall and door frame. Now that the long-awaited day was so near, I felt courage failing me. In early June 1995, when they poured the driveway, my own feet seemed encased in concrete.

My reluctance baffled me, because by then I had a new and pressing reason for wanting to leave my cold, unhappy marriage—I had met a young woman, an IBM rep named Cathy Cook. Cathy was as warm and as loving as my marriage was not. We'd been together only twice, once in New York and once in San Francisco, and I was like a schoolboy—it was all I could do to keep from telling *everybody* about my wonderful secret. But of course I couldn't tell *anybody*—except Sharon.

"I usually went out and picked up Charles' lunch and brought it back to the office for him," says Sharon, "so it was odd when he suddenly told me he was taking me to lunch. He wanted to drive sixteen miles down to Morgan, where there was a good hamburger place.

"Charles has always been really good about being sure I was in the know about things. Sometimes he would tell me more than I *wanted* to know—in this case, I felt bad for Jane—but his attitude was, 'You're in a position where you need to know what's going on.'

"So when we got to the restaurant, he said, 'There's something I think you need to know—I'm having an affair with Cathy Cook.'

“‘I know,’ I said. ‘I figured that out last week.’ The week before, Charles had been on a business trip to New York. And Cathy Cook had called our office and needed some information or something. And when I called her back, I found out *she* was in New York—and she was booked on the same plane as Charles. *Hmmm*, I thought, which was the first time the light bulb had ever gone off like that. And a few days later, he took me to lunch.”

The reason I told Sharon about Cathy was that I knew I was planning to move to the lake house, and I figured things might soon get a little crazy. But as it turned out, I never made my lake house escape. Other events superseded it.



BY THE MID-'90S, we had devised a business strategy centered on Acxiom's own data marketing product, InfoBase. To give you an idea of what InfoBase is, today it contains information on 126 million U.S. households and nearly 200 million U.S. individuals. All these separate nuggets of information—about 1,500 per person—have now been sliced and diced and shaken and strained, so that various combinations of these data elements create individual data *products*. These individual slivers of intelligence are then organized into umbrella categories, the main one of which is called InfoBase Consumer Enhancement.

So if you're a marketer who wants to reach customers with “Casino Gaming Propensity,” you would purchase element 2777. If you want to target people who're likely to become wealthy when a family member dies, you'll opt for element 1801—“Potential Inheritors.” If you're interested in “Heavy YouTube Users,” that's element 2722.

With InfoBase, you can access vehicle purchase and ownership data from dealers selling every brand of car on the road, from Acura to Volvo. You can segment your audience by College Graduates (element 7471), Empty Nesters (7472), Entering Adulthood (7473), Recent Mortgage Borrower (7468), or Probable New Teen Driver (7480). You can target Book Enthusiasts (2805), Corrective Lens Wearers (9505), Christian Families (7842), and Vegetarians (7742). You can track your desired audience's buying habits with highly predictive data gleaned from consumer online shopping, retail store purchases, and catalog activity—consolidated by month and by type, from Apparel to Weaponry. If you want to know how they

paid, you can order elements 6604, 6605, and 6610—cash, credit card, and retail card, respectively.

InfoBase wasn't as sophisticated in the mid-'90s as it is now, but the idea was generally the same. And the business strategy we designed around it, called "Lead with Data," aimed to streamline the selling process by converting new prospects to customers quickly, using InfoBase products. After all, prospects come to Acxiom for one reason—they want to improve marketing results.

One of the keys to this new business strategy was a concept called "briefing centers." If we had an opportunity to brief a big potential client—Allstate Insurance, say, which we landed in 1993—why would we want to beat the heck out of six or eight of our top people, our top assets, by flying them around the country for an off-site meeting that we can't control? They would have to go up the day before in order to be *sure* they make their flight connections. Then they'd spend all day the next day with the prospect and wouldn't get home until late that night. It wipes out a day and a half for each person, and it's just horribly inefficient.

But if we could bring the prospective customers to us, it's a completely different story. That's how the concept of briefing centers came about. These were rooms where our salespeople could conduct in-depth sales presentations to prospective customers—prospects who couldn't suddenly end the meeting because they had something else to do. They also paid closer attention when they were away from their own offices. If we could get the CEOs down there, we could wow them with our various capabilities and they would go home and tell their team, "You senior managers, I want you *all* to go hear what they can do for us!" This concept proved very successful—at the Acxiom campus in Conway, we built a 15-room briefing center, and many times I saw every one of those rooms full.

Now, though, how do you fill those rooms? The answer was a bigger, better airplane. In that way, the jet, the briefing centers, and Acxiom's success became inextricably linked.

In 1995 we took the plunge and bought a Falcon 20, a larger, sleeker plane that could seat nine people and had a cabin nearly six feet high. But we were still a fairly small company with a lot of debt on the books, so before we bought it we evaluated different ways of acquiring the plane. One was to lease it, which turned out to be insanely expensive—it was going to cost us something like \$200,000 a month. That didn't even include pilots and maintenance.

“Well, hell,” we said, “if we’re going to use it for a long time, the best thing is just to buy it.” Even so, there was a lot of resistance to loading on more debt. We were buying a lot of computers at the time, and our debt load was growing to an uncomfortable level. So there was considerable hand wringing: *What are we going to do, what are we going to do?*

Finally I said, “Look, I’ll buy the damn airplane.” And the way it worked out was that the board and I made an agreement for me to buy and refurbish a used Falcon 20 and lease it to the company at below-market value. If I used it for a personal trip, I would pay for the flight. If it was a business trip, Acxiom would pay. As I write this, that was nearly two decades ago. And I want it on the record that this *remains* the worst decision I’ve ever made in my life. Not because the plane didn’t turn out to do everything we thought it would be for the business—it did. But it also came back to bite me in a million different ways.

The foregoing is a long preamble to the pivotal story I’m going to tell you now—the story of how my lake house escape plan became superseded by other events.

In late June 1995, I was due to have a meeting at the Little Rock airport about our new corporate jet. As with the other Acxiom aircraft before it, this plane wasn’t just for executive travel; various business units would use it whenever they had to go somewhere to close a deal, have an important meeting, whatever they required. We continued to have naysayers in regard to the planes, but not only had our jets helped our business, they’d also *brought* us business. “It’s very hard to get to Conway from other parts of the U.S.,” says Jim Womble. “There was this one account in Richmond, Virginia, and the guy refused to come to see us. Changing planes, all of that. So we sent our jet for him, brought him to Conway, hot-boxed him, and sold the account. That account was worth ten to fifteen million dollars a year, running a twenty-percent profit. So we made two million a year from one round-trip flight.”

At the Central Flying Service facility at Little Rock airport, I was to meet with a couple of aircraft designers from Springfield, Illinois, who were flying in to discuss the finishing-out of the plane. They’d already given me specs for the built-in furniture, and I’d been working on that on my computer. It was a very interesting puzzle, this plane redesign, because we couldn’t change the actual configuration of the airplane without going through a laborious—and expensive—process involving

the FAA. But within the parameters that these designers had given me, I could change the shape or the width of individual drawers in a cabinet as long as the overall cabinet remained where it was. So I wanted to discuss that with these designers; they were also bringing boards to show me their thoughts on an overall interior color scheme.

I knew Jane was good at this sort of thing—how many homes had she decorated by now? I also thought it would be good for her to get out of the house a while. So I asked her to drive down to Little Rock with me. We could look over these designs together.

The designers were nice guys, but they were also strangers; I could feel Jane pulling into herself around them. For a long time she listened to the rest of us talk. Then: “I think those cabinets should be moved to the back,” she said.

“We really can’t do that,” I explained. “All the cabinets are fixed in place.”

She remained quiet for a while, then made another suggestion—I can’t recall what it was. But the response from the designers was that it couldn’t be done on this particular airplane. It was a perfectly polite answer to a matter-of-fact business problem.

When they showed us their color boards, the designers specifically asked Jane what she thought. “Oh, you know,” she said, and went on to say something that reflected her now-intense disinterest, or disdain. I could tell she was really irritated with us all.

When the meeting was over and we got in the car, she started in. “Why do you bring me to things like this to embarrass me and ignore me?”

“I brought you here,” I said, “because I thought you could actually help. You know I’m not very good at colors, so I thought you could pick the side panels and stuff. You were just asking us to do some things that weren’t really practical.”

“You just want to ignore me.”

“No, it’s because of the plane’s certification....”

“You’re full of shit.”

“Jane, I’m telling you—what you asked today really was impossible.”

After that it escalated, with her telling me *I* designed the cabinets, so *I* would’ve been able to add this or that. Soon she was screaming at me: “You do this all the time! You embarrass me in front of people and ignore me in front of people!”

“I wasn’t ignoring you or trying to embarrass you,” I said. I was determined to remain calm.

“You just put me down! You tell me I can’t do things!”

“Jane....”

*Screaming at me, at the side of my head.* Finally I broke. “I don’t know what you don’t fucking understand about what I’m telling you—*what you wanted to do is impossible! How do I say it so you think it’s okay?*”

“Oh, that’s what you always do—you never respect me and you *belittle* me! *It’s just your way of making me feel bad about myself!*”

It’s about 30 miles from Little Rock to Conway. I’ve driven it thousands of times, coming and going, and even after all those miles I still find the drive pleasant and soothing. Coming from Little Rock, you first descend through a curvy slash of black stone forming cliffs that introduce the wide Arkansas River. Once across the bridge, you soon bear a gentle left onto I-40, through woods and farmland, eventually passing exits to Morgan and Mayflower and coming upon pretty Lake Conway on the right, with its stubs of trees jutting above the water, clues to good fishing below. Finally, the sprawl of Conway itself edges south to meet you. On your left, the handsome Acxiom building, with its blue awnings, is easy to see from the interstate. Then comes exit 129, which was my exit. At the stop sign I turned left and crossed over I-40, and from there I either headed home or back to the office.

That’s the way the trip is supposed to go—easy and peaceful; *pastoral* even. But on that late June day in 1995, Jane and I were in a full screaming match by the time we reached Mayflower. The words made no sense, and no further clarity comes from my recounting any more of that argument here. It was simply a sputtering, spittle-ridden version of the argument we’d had over and over and over for *years*, in one form or another.

As I bore right and entered the exit ramp, I said to Jane—so quietly that I think it scared her: “Jane. I’m done. I have tried, but I’m through now.”

Her head jerked back slightly toward the passenger window. “What do you mean?” she said.

“I’m not having these arguments anymore,” I said. “I am done. This will be the last one.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I’m saying I’ve decided I don’t want to have any more fights with you.”

“Well, what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, exactly,” I said. “I’m upset now and I need to think about it. But I’m telling you, this is the last time.”