

PROFILE

Is He For Real?

Donny Deutsch, last of the Madison Avenue wild men, has got a \$200 million bank account, an ad agency that has gone from success to success, loyal friends, a new wife, and, he says, “the best body of any CEO in advertising.” so what else can he possibly want? Try a CNBC talk show. And After that, He wants to be mayor.

By [Steve Fishman](#)



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The conversation starts, this time, over dessert. Donny Deutsch, 45, one of the most successful CEOs in advertising history, is out with his wife, Stacy, 31, and another couple, which is what they like to do. “Donny can’t sit still,” says Stacy. So every night, it’s one restaurant or another. Tonight, they’re at Mr Chow with Stephanie Hirsch, 31, and her fiancé. Over a fruit plate, Donny presses three straightened fingers to the side of his graying head, as if teeing it up, then asks, “Am I fucking crazy?”

After Deutsch’s eponymous shop was named Agency of the Year by *Ad Age*, a photographer stopped by Donny’s office. Donny, who’s been working out five days a week and has dropped 50 pounds, ripped off his shirt in celebration. Cackling with laughter, he said, “I can kick the ass of any CEO in advertising.”

“Why not?” Donny asks the table. “It’s a wink. It’s a goof.” Taking off his shirt is a Donny thing. At company parties, for instance. Or, once, on a video conference call. “We’re the fucking-A greatest,” he told employees, and then, shirtless, rolled onto his desk and did twenty push-ups. “It’s almost as if he can’t contain himself,” said a partner, “as if the shirt is a restriction to the joy.” Donny agreed.

At Mr Chow, no one is buying that. “Everyone in advertising will hate you,” shoots back Stephanie, who owns

Inca, a swimsuit company. “In my industry, they already hate me,” Donny tells the table. “I don’t care what people think. Why is the world divided into successful businesspeople and people who have fun?”

But Stacy, who sells the top collections at Ralph Lauren, agrees with Stephanie. “They don’t need to think you’re a pompous asshole,” she says.

Donny grows thoughtful. The three fingers pitchfork his temple. “How many people do you know really well?” Donny asks. “Everybody’s crazy. Once you realize that, it’s okay. It’s mental health.”

“Donny’s not subtle,” says Stephanie.

Donny shrugs. It’s ten, and time for Donny, an early bird, to head home. But he’s not quite finished.

“Stephie and I, we slept together once,” he blurts out, and lets go a long, drilling laugh.

“We did not!” Stephanie shouts back.

Donny Deutsch is one of advertising’s last big personalities—“the Elvis of advertising,” says one admirer—and he’s also one of its most successful. Now he’s about to break out. He’s got a book deal with HarperCollins. He’s done a pilot for a new talk show with CNBC. He’s thinking about producing movies. He even toys with political ambitions. Would New York City like a mayor named Donny? “I’m ready to play on a bigger field,” he says. Which raises the question: Is the field ready for a man-child named Donny?

Nearly everyone who knows Donny—he’s never Don or Donald—agrees: Donny is a regular guy. Through years of winning successively more prestigious clients—Ikea, Pfizer, Mitsubishi, Revlon, Bank of America—Donny has consistently come across, as one admirer puts it, as “a yahoo, but a genuine yahoo.” He’s got a drilling Queens accent, wears jeans to work (with his Gucci loafers), is always the first person in a room to use the word fuck, and doesn’t feel all that comfortable with Wasps (nor, he says, do they with him). Donny likes to hang out with guys he’s known for decades, in some cases since first grade in Hollis Hills, Queens, the middle-class Jewish neighborhood where he grew up.

Donny likes to say that he is “average smart,” and those who’ve known him longest happily concur. “Oh, yeah, his personality was his biggest attribute, more so than his brains,” says his oldest friend. To these guys, Donny’s accomplishments seemed to come out of the blue. Some were surprised that he got into the University of Pennsylvania. “I was kind of the village idiot at Wharton,” Donny explains. Donny skated by (and, typically, still graduated cum laude).

Donny’s father, David Deutsch, had started a small advertising agency and, in 1983, hired his son—“I was a member of the lucky sperm club,” says Donny. David was on the verge of selling the agency for a small sum when he fired his son because, he likes to say, “he didn’t seem to love it.” “If you’re coming back,” he told

Donny, “you’ve got to take over.” Donny adored his father—David says, “When we were alone, he’d give me a kiss in the office”—but they’re different. “I’m brassier, more aggressive, messier,” says Donny, who had a small epiphany at the time, a turning point. He could be himself. “Don’t sell it,” he told his father.

David Deutsch Associates mainly did print advertising, with \$3 million to \$5 million in billings a year. Donny pitched a TV account, Tri-State Pontiac dealers. (Just to get into the pitch, Donny sent car parts to the home of the Pontiac rep. He sent a fender with a note that read, “We’ll cover your rear end.” The agency won the account, doubling its size. To do the work, Donny hired Richard Kirshenbaum, who’d later found his own agency, Kirshenbaum Bond. Kirshenbaum still keeps a photo from the shoot. In it, he’s standing with Andy Warhol and a bulldog. The ad’s tag line was “What’s the last exciting thing that happened to you?” Warhol was supposed to respond, “I went to the opening of an envelope.” Instead, his bulldog yawned, and they used that.

Donny hired young, driven people, who worked 90-, 100-hour weeks. “Jews, chicks, and fags” was how Donny sometimes described the mix. “A big, dysfunctional, ethnic family.” Donny appreciated talent and liked moxie. Greg DiNoto, a creative who worked at Bozell, recalls waiting to meet Donny for an interview at Coffee Shop on Union Square when he got a phone call: Donny couldn’t make the meeting. “Tell him, Fuck you,” DiNoto told the caller, who called Donny, who headed to Coffee Shop. “When do you want to start?” Donny asked.

The shop took on Donny’s personality—his dad retired in 1992. “The place was organized chaos,” says one copywriter. *Make it happen at all costs* was the motto. Paul Goldman recalls editing an Ikea commercial for three straight days. Donny, taking a peek, said, “You don’t get it.” “I completely destroyed the editor’s office, tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of equipment,” said Goldman. “We were screaming. Our noses were touching. Then we started laughing. After that fight, which was necessary, we came up with the right solution.”

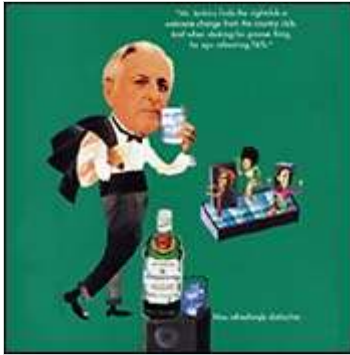
Deutsch became one of a handful of hot, creative New York shops—Kirshenbaum Bond was another—and as one observer puts it, Donny’s was the “wildest and craziest of the bunch.”

“My first impression of Donny,” says one devoted client, “was *You arrogant bastard*.” Though most agencies don’t like to ruffle clients, Donny sometimes seemed bent on picking fights. “He’s incredibly blunt about what he thinks is right,” says an executive at Novartis, another client. Donny could be belligerent, often on the client’s behalf. “Fuck Ben and Jerry’s, fuck Dairy Queen,” he’d tell Baskin-Robbins. “Let’s take on the fucking world.”

In part, a small agency needs to make noise—for itself and its clients. As a stunt, Deutsch shipped a red Pontiac to Russia. But Deutsch’s creative voice stood out as well. At a time when some agencies still favored celebrity spokesmen, Donny’s inclination was “to be real,” to communicate directly with consumers. Ikea was

a breakout campaign. It showed people shopping, including a gay couple. Another successful campaign, this one for Pfizer, had allergy sufferers talking about their “allergy lifestyles.”

Donny encouraged people to put their stamp on things—“When he trusts you, you have total autonomy,” says one executive. People responded. “You had a sense that this was the only thing in your life,” says a creative director.



Ad-ing Machine: A page from Deutsch's Tanqueray campaign.

At Deutsch in the nineties, professional and private inevitably blended. The place was known for its masculine vibe—an “obnoxious boys’ club,” says one observer— where even the women described themselves as testosteronized. There was a “he-man eating club,” in which guys ordered pounds of meat and ate it with their hands. “People were having sex all over the place,” says one employee. At a Christmas party at a Park Avenue restaurant, another recalls, “I had to ask two people engaged in oral sex to move so I could get my coat.”

The agency probably added 100 employees every year or two during the nineties—in particular after winning Mitsubishi, a \$250 million account. They pitched new accounts constantly, three at a time, including some they probably had no right pitching. They went after Bank of America, a huge financial institution that Deutsch inevitably suggested had “to be real and talk to consumers about money.” Midway through the pitch, the bank decided to require a second round. Donny had already spent his budget—probably somewhere over \$100,000—on the first round. “It’s nuts to be in this,” thought one account executive. “Deutsch has a New York office and a tiny L.A. office, and now we have to pitch a global business.”

Donny likes to say he’s an idiot savant, by which he means that he is, taken as a whole, unexceptional. Donny sells—some would say oversells—his averageness. He also believes he has a handful of focused talents that make him perfect for advertising—creative taste, a nose for talent, motivational and sales instincts, a feel for a client’s point of view. Even his impatience—Donny is sure he has attention-deficit disorder—is a virtue. In meetings, people have a few seconds to nail an idea, good discipline if you communicate in 30-second spots. Still, Donny contends that the magic, “the fairy dust” that set him apart, was confidence. His father suggests he’s always had it. *Why not us? Why not now?* That was a sense Donny communicated.

Deutsch won the Bank of America account and soon launched a campaign in 37 countries.

The pace, the intensity, the insularity of the Deutsch family wasn’t always great for outside lives. Donny’s first marriage fell apart. He put on 50 pounds, pushing 225 on a five-ten frame. “My first wife will tell you that she wished I had shown her the passion I had for my work,” he says.

Still, Donny seemed to ask everyone he met: *How I do I get to the next level?* “If you’re not playing on a bigger stage, you’re not winning,” he’d say. Not everyone agreed on growth. DiNoto, an idealist about the creative product, said, “Bigger clients are about not doing the wrong thing. They have nothing to prove, everything to protect. It’s less fun.”

Though the trade press liked to refer to him as a wild man, for Donny, advertising wasn’t about wild

creativity. “I appear wild on the outside, but I’m a conservative businessman,” he says. In advertising, creativity can be a kind of snobbery. Donny, no snob, preferred to present himself as a businessman looking after a client’s business. “He’s the first to punt on great creative if it’s not a good business direction,” says Greg O’Neill, COO and a president of Mitsubishi Motors North America, whose sales have climbed 80 percent since Deutsch took over the account. Donny wanted to service ever-bigger clients, which he knew required solid creative but also blunt business sense. Some people, as well as the ethos of organized chaos, wouldn’t last through the next step. Greg DiNoto and another top Deutsch executive chose to leave to form their own agency. “Greg probably couldn’t work at Deutsch today,” said Donny.

Through business, Donny has become friendly with people like Russell Simmons, founder of Def Jam and Phat Farm. Together they formed dRush, a small urban-oriented ad agency. (Donny had initially met with Puff Daddy, but when asked about beating up a record exec, Puffy said, “That wasn’t business, that was personal,” which wasn’t the reassuring vibe a future business partner was looking for.) Simmons, people-oriented and nonviolent, grew up a few blocks from Donny, in Hollis, Queens. “I love Donny,” Simmons says. “He’s practical, commonsensical. Is that a word?” When they happen to be in St. Barts at the same time, Donny will visit Simmons on his boat. Donny’s also friendly with Ron Perelman (head of Revlon, a Deutsch account), and in the Hamptons, he’ll go to parties at Perelman’s house—Billy Joel occasionally sits down at the piano, and Perelman, like an older brother, gives Donny noogies.

But Donny’s social circle consists mostly of people he’s known for 30 years, middle-aged Jewish guys; he could have gone to summer camp with them. They play sports together, sometimes on guys’ weekends in Florida. They sometimes wrestle. “I gave Donny a dead leg,” one friend boasted recently. “He crumpled to the ground.”

Donny gives the sense—emanates it—that he likes to enjoy himself. “He’s got that happy thing that comes out of him,” says Simmons. He isn’t the type to sit cozily at home. “Can’t stay still,” says Stacy. (Once, stuck behind a double-parked car, Donny got out and kicked the side-view mirrors off the offending vehicle.) He’s out most nights. And if his brand of fun isn’t the most sophisticated, still, it’s fun.

For his bachelor party, Donny went to Vegas. It was 25 guys, including his driver. “There were a lot of strippers, alcohol, a lot of nakedness,” recalls one attendee. “Fundamentally, he’s decadent in some part of him.” But Donny isn’t all that decadent; he’s not the least bit self-destructive. So there were strippers? For Donny, the important part was the guys. “There’s a certain incredible happiness just for us to be together,” says Jay Goldman, a college friend and head of his own hedge fund.

Deutsch today has 1,000 employees (two are his assistants), \$2.4 billion in billings, and a new industrial space the size of a city block. “He was the only guy among the outrageous upstarts who figured out the big picture,” says Randall Rothenberg, *Ad Age* columnist and Booz Allen Hamilton exec. Donny has promoted mature, stable, capable team players—many of them women. Four of his six managing partners, and all those in New York, are women.

“I don’t think of myself as a woman,” protests Val DiFebo, director of client services, from her tiny office. Yet, in part, Donny is probably at ease with them—as at ease as his coiled energy permits—because they’re women. “Every alpha male brings emotional bullshit to work,” says Donny, “Women want to get the job done.” Donny introduces two of his female partners the same way: “We’re like husband and wife at work,” he says. “We finish each other’s sentences.” Indeed, they are confidantes. Brash Donny is often found dispensing boyfriend advice. (“Tell him you want to be with him, and walk if he says no.”)

Then there’s the money. Donny pays well, always has. Still, when Donny sold the agency to Interpublic Group, his share was 87 percent, or more than \$200 million in stock. “The money journey is over,” he says. Some of the six partners, who got closer to \$4 million in stock apiece, were somewhat underwhelmed by the implicit assessment of their contributions. “It’s one of the rare times when Donny’s business instincts collided with his greed,” says one. “It’s the stuff that breaks up rock bands.”

These days, Donny says, “I really do less and less.” Still, he is the person in a room who all eyes go to. (“He takes up a lot of oxygen,” says one rival.) Who knows what he’ll say? One afternoon, he pops into a conference room, sits on the table in bell-bottom jeans, and says, “Tell me something: Is it distracting to have such a good-looking CEO?”

Donny sees campaigns before they’re finished, and offers his special blessing. He takes a look at the new Revlon commercial with Halle Berry—the Revlon business was taken from Kirshenbaum Bond. “Fresh feel,” says Donny. “It’s what the doctor ordered.” But he really responds to new Snapple spots. In one, Snapple bottles are dressed as tourists at the running of the bulls in Pamplona. The bulls are played by guinea pigs. “You are so fucking tweaked,” Donny shouts through a hennish laugh. “Fucking great.”

Still, for Donny, the challenge has diminished: “It’s not as exciting for me as it was five years ago.” In advertising, the era of big personalities is disappearing. A few years ago, Donny decided, “we won the game,” the one he wanted to play, the one suited to his talents, his personality. He swore he’d always be at Deutsch, but, he says, “I want to do other things, too.”

Donny had been a frequent guest and also a guest host on *Kudlow & Cramer* when he proposed a talk show about what he called “sexy business.” Think, he said, of “the Rolling Stones on the cover of Forbes.” Donny also thought in terms of politics. He’s a Democrat. “Why does the right wing own the opportunity to be irreverent? Provocative?” he’d ask. Donny often worked best with an enemy in mind. “Bill O’Reilly is the Antichrist,” Donny said after appearing on his show. Donny would position himself as the anti-O’Reilly.

CNBC was intrigued enough to see how he did on a pilot. He reeled in friends Russell Simmons and Michael J. Fox. After some uncharacteristic nervousness—“It’s my head on the chopping block,” he said—he did fine. He seemed natural, at ease. “He’s more comfortable on camera than off,” says one colleague.

Still, some wondered why Donny would get a shot at TV. “Some people think he’s a philistine,” says one colleague. He’s not a book reader or a museumgoer, it’s true. But the more perplexing question for some was, as one CNBC producer phrased it, “Why would a person with enough money to live on an island for the rest of his life put up with the rigors of a daily TV show?”



Snapple to Attention: From left, a memorable 2003 Snapple ad featuring guinea pigs.

When Stacy Josloff married Donny Deutsch at the Plaza Hotel in a wedding she was told rivaled the Plaza wedding of Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones, she had no idea her husband wanted to be on TV. He was among New York’s most eligible bachelors, but Stacy didn’t care much about that. “I’m a girl from Jersey,” she says. “He’s a guy from Queens”—which seemed the greatest part of his appeal. When they first met, she was a 25-year-old

party girl, and Donny, from what she could tell, was an obnoxious, though fortunately funny, 39-year-old party guy. She’d never heard of Deutsch’s business. They moved in different worlds—she was working as a fashion salesperson—and, in fact, in different generations. “She didn’t know who Paul Simon was,” says Donny. And their personalities were different. Donny loved the spotlight. “I don’t want the attention on me,” she says.

When they started dating, Donny hadn’t been thinking about settling down. “Changes in my personal life are nerve-racking for me,” he’d say. His first marriage had been a disaster. Plus, Donny liked being a bachelor. Once, in the back of his Mitsubishi Montero, he did a quick count. He figured he’d had 100 girlfriends.

After they’d dated for a couple years, Stacy told him, “If you want to be in my life, you have to make a commitment.” They broke up. Stacy dated other guys, one of whom even—and this seemed particularly galling—used Donny’s opening line (“How would you like to be the mother of my child?”). Donny got jealous. They got back together. Then, one evening, Donny surprised Stacy with a six-carat diamond. (Donny’s friends, still not convinced, had a betting pool till he marched down the aisle, when they gave him a standing ovation.)

Stacy is intelligent, and though she’s quiet, she’s funny and engaging when at ease. She’s also a beauty with luminous, jet-black hair and olive skin that shows off the earrings Donny gave her—two-carat diamonds. In her situation, she knows, a lot of women wouldn’t work. And yet over coffee one day at a Starbucks—she’s wearing black Juicy velour sweatpants—she says, “What else am I going to do? Sleep late? Go to the gym every day? TV? It would be fun for two weeks.” They live well, though below their means—there’s no boat or cook. They’ve got a driver—“He’s part of the family,” says Stacy, and useful if, like Donny, you like to drink at dinner—and they don’t always fly commercial. They have a place in the Hamptons, but for the time being, it’s a rental. They live in a townhouse on the Upper East Side, also a rental, and when it was featured in the paper, it mostly boasted a \$20,000 gym, four big-screen TVs, and not much seating. Stacy’s made it something more than a bachelor pad, but she’s far from an East Side doyenne. “I have a hard time with the money,” she says. “I still have my own bank account, and most of the things I buy I pay for from my own

account.” It’s not just the money. Invitations, charity events, foundations, “the whole social thing”—it all seems to leave her a bit unsure.

What Stacy really wants is a family. Recently, she told Donny she was starting one this year, and that Donny, who is fraught with anxieties about the prospect, was welcome to participate. Typically, Donny’s friends offered to help.

On the snowy march night that Bo Dietl invited Donny to his table at Rao’s, Dietl, the ex–New York City cop, explained, “This is the hottest fucking table in the world.” Rao’s is the Italian restaurant in East Harlem with a jukebox, five tables, six booths, and no reservations. People have weekly tables. Dietl, author of *One Tough Cop* and now head of his own security agency, has a Thursday table. “I put together a who’s-fucking-who table,” he says. He’s had Sumner Redstone, head of Viacom, and Ken Langone, co-founder of Home Depot, and Jack Welch, ex–GE CEO. Tonight, Steve Witkoff, owner of the Woolworth building and lots of other real estate, is there. So are top executives from Unilever North America and Donny, who met Dietl after the Unabomber blew up an ad exec. (Donny called Dietl for protection.) Since then, Dietl and Donny have become friendly, which Dietl explains this way: “Donny is a positive fucking guy. He’s not a negative motherfucker. I don’t suck his dick. He doesn’t suck my dick. But if Donny needs me, I’ll be on my fucking plane at 4 a.m.” Which, at Rao’s, naturally leads to a discussion of the best private planes.

“Boys from Queens,” says Dietl, punctuating that conversation. Like Donny, Dietl is from Queens. He sticks out his fist, looking for Donny’s.

As meatballs arrive, Dietl, who is built like a bulldog, slips off his suit jacket, made for him by Shelly the Tailor, to reveal a \$450 Egyptian-cotton shirt, cuff links made by Mike the Russian, and a surprisingly attractive handgun fabricated by Glock. Donny, as usual, is dressed for a ballgame, the only person at Rao’s in jeans and T-shirt.

The table’s net worth this evening is probably in the neighborhood of half a billion dollars, but Dietl, the tough guy, is the featured attraction. He tells a story about Tokyo. “Seoul,” corrects Witkoff. “Whatever,” says Dietl, and then describes how he let two stiff Koreans in on the subtleties of “relationship-type” businessmen. “He zoomed her once and then he zoomed her again,” Dietl told the pair, which apparently broke the ice, beginning a days-long party, just as, at the table, it brings a roar of appreciative laughter.

“Bo’s a lounge act,” Donny explains with affection. When Dietl takes a break, the table loses focus. There’s some desultory business talk (“Stevie, how’s real estate?” asks Donny. “Dead,” says Witkoff), some desultory political talk (“You’re not going Republican on me?” Donny says to Dietl. “No,” says Dietl, whose photograph with George H. W. Bush hangs on the wall).

One subject, though, brings the table to attention: the talk show.

“I heard about it just today,” Witkoff confides appreciatively. The table wants to know everything. TV, clearly, is more exciting than advertising or real estate or consumer goods.

And no doubt that’s part of the answer to that CNBC producer’s question. If Donny is looking for a larger stage, one where Donny can be Donny, then TV is unavoidable. In fact, Donny never really struggled with why he should do a TV show. Donny posed the question differently: “Why the fuck shouldn’t I be on TV?”

At Dietl’s table, Donny’s brassiness resurfaces. “It’s going to be a great fucking show,” he says. He reaches across the table. He could see them both being on the program—“Stevie for real estate, Bo for security”—says Donny.

“Guys from Queens,” says Dietl, looking for Donny’s fist with his own.

Later, Dietl will say, “When he goes on TV, we got to get him dressed up a little.” He thinks for a moment, then suggests: “I could get him over to Shelly the Tailor, who could fix him up real fast.”

By the time Dietl figures this out, Donny has already left. His driver is outside. It’s only ten o’clock, but then Stacy’s waiting at home. Plus, Donny’s in a mood. He’s been drinking vodka. And now, as the SUV plows through the unlikely March snow, another thought occurs to him: “Why the fuck shouldn’t I be mayor?”

He’d be great at it, he’s sure. He loves the city. He looks at his reflection in the window. “I would take half my fortune,” he says. As his driver speeds through a snow-quiet city, he seems to let himself imagine that stage for an instant. Then Donny pulls back. It’s a thought. “Let’s see what happens with the TV show,” he says.

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