

# BUSINESS INSIDER

## My strange encounter with Donald Trump when I was a reporter covering 'The Apprentice'

RICHARD LINNETT, CONTRIBUTOR

17H

When I first met Donald Trump, he did not grab.

He limply shook my hand.

But I was just a guy, and a member of what The Donald now considers the lowliest caste of the lowest class of people—a journalist at a business trade magazine.

He offered me plastic cuff links.

In May 2003, I was on staff at Advertising Age working on a story about the maiden launch of The Apprentice.

At the time Trumpland was enduring marital scandals and massive financial losses associated with casino bankruptcies. He was reduced to rubble and a recurring call-in guest role on the Howard Stern show.

The Donald needed to be great again.

It was surprisingly easy to get an interview with Trump. I simply called his office and said I wanted to write about him. At that time it was widely reported that he was a germaphobe who refused to shake hands. But when I entered his office on the 26th floor of the Trump Tower he offered his hand right away.

For the record, I don't recall if it was small or large. I just remember that I was surprised and flattered to shake it. He invited me to sit down at the other end of a huge desk covered with newspaper and magazine clippings, including copies of his magazine Trump World.



Melania and Donald Trump in 2003.

*Peter Morgan/Reuters*

All of the articles were about him.



*Frazer Harrison/Getty Images*

Over the course of a couple months, there were several interview sessions on the 26th Floor. Advertising Age's offices were just a few blocks away. It was easy for me to be at the Donald's beck and call.

After our first meeting, he called me directly, made me feel like an old friend. He asked me about my family. I told him I was married with a young son. And then we talked about him, the people he knew, the projects he was working on, beauty pageants, how much money he was worth—\$5 billion, he claimed—and his golf courses, which he invited me to play on.

One day at his office he showed me plans for a new construction project on Park Avenue. He was converting the former Hotel Delmonico into a 32-story luxury condo complex. He invited me to visit it with him someday.

On another occasion, I joined Trump and his son Donald Jr. on a tour of the set of *The Apprentice*, in construction on the third floor of Trump Tower. When we got to the contestants' living quarters, Trump engaged in some locker-room repartee, asking the set designer if cameras would be installed in their showers.

Meanwhile, my editor decided to push back the Trump story. It was a soft feature. So was Donald.

He was, in my editor's opinion, a bit of a has-been. I had worked with the research firm Millward Brown on past reporting and suggested we ask them to conduct a Q-Score type study into the likeability of the Donald, and by extension the potential success and profitability of the show.





The Mar-a-Largo Club in Palm Beach, Florida.

*Gustavo Caballero/Getty Images*

The Millward Brown study was not particularly flattering. In comparing him to other celebrity brands—Oprah Winfrey, Martha Stewart, Puff Daddy, and Ted Turner—the study found that Trump appealed to a “younger, male, aspirational audience.”

Right. But even then, Trump was showing signs of being unpopular with women.

“If you look at older females,” a Millward Brown vice president told me after crunching the numbers, “he does tend to alienate them. He is not necessarily actively irritating like some of the other names we surveyed, but he has a weakened appeal.”

Worse, only two percent of the survey’s respondents said they would buy a product from Trump.

It was around this time that I got phone calls from a mysterious, adenoidal sounding character who said his name was Joe Cinque, a very close friend of Donald, or so he said. Cinque was then, as he is now, a controversial figure in Trumpland. A 1995 New York profile described him as “a small time mobster, a scam artist, and an art fence” who was known to the authorities as Joey No Socks.

The magazine reported that Cinque had survived an attempt on his life, was a former pal of mobster John Gotti. Cinque identified himself to me as the founder of the American Academy of Hospitality Sciences, which created the world famous Star Diamond rating system for restaurants and hotels. The Donald had asked him to invite me to the Mar-a-Largo, Trump’s resort in Florida.

It was a magnificent palace, according to Cinque, the only Six Star Diamond private club in the world. He suggested I hop on the Donald’s jet with him. Clearly, this was not a business trip. Advertising Age policy prohibited reporters and editors from accepting gifts from anyone.

I thanked Cinque but declined.



Donald Trump at a casting event for "The Apprentice."

*Bryan Bedder/Getty Images*

A few days later Trump called and invited me to tour his Trump Park Avenue project, the former Delmonico Hotel on Park Avenue and 59th Street. The afternoon was unusually cold and overcast, with drizzle and occasional downpours.

When my cab pulled up, the Donald stepped out, shook my hand, and led me inside. We rode the elevator together to a top floor that was under construction and wide open, exposed to the elements. A construction worker lurked in the shadows, barely acknowledging us.

We strolled the floor cautiously. It was damp, and coffee cups and trash skittered across the concrete, whipped up by the wind.

I wasn't getting the tour I expected. The Donald didn't have much to say. He couldn't explain what we were looking at. He wasn't sure if we were on a penthouse floor or some other floor. He seemed preoccupied and tentative.

While Trump hung back, randomly pondering a maze of pipes, I walked to the edge and looked down some 30 stories into the blurry maze of streetlamps on Park Avenue.

Trump watched me, inched closer, took a wary glance over the side, and seemed flushed.

I asked him, "Do you ever get vertigo?" He replied, in a whisper, "Yes I do."

It was a good get for me, the lowly trade reporter. I caught the man who built towers admitting he was afraid of heights. I had my lede.



My visit to the top of the tower made me aware of a couple of key things about Trump.

First, he clearly loved himself.

Second, he loved press and went out of his way to cater to us, which is ironic considering his scorn for the media today.

His attempts to influence my reporting were obvious and unsophisticated, almost childlike. He was like a kid showing me his toys, and he was confident I would be impressed.

Trump's toys indeed were impressive. But he really wasn't connected to them. He didn't have a hands-on relationship to anything. He built skyscrapers but got dizzy standing in them.

A few days after our vertigo meeting I called the Donald to tell him my [Ad Age story](#) was finished and would break the following week.

He requested an advance copy, and I told him that was against our policy. So he invited me to his office. I dropped everything. When I sat down in front of his desk, he congratulated me on finally publishing the article. He wanted to celebrate.

"I have something for you," he said. "A little gift."

"You know I can't accept gifts."

"It's okay, here." He reached across the desk with a plush jewelry case in his hand. I pushed it back.

"No, Donald, I'm not allowed to take gifts."

"Don't worry about it. You can take this. Open it up. Take a look."



Images

Scott Olson/Getty



Melania and Donald Trump.

*Peter Kramer/Getty Images*

I grabbed the case and found inside two shiny gold cuff links embossed with the letter “T.”

“I really can’t take this.”

“Oh yes you can. Look at them. Turn them over. Take a look.”

I plucked one of the cuff links out of the case and turned it over. There was a sticker that read “Made in China.”

“You see,” he said. “They’re plastic. Cost about \$15. You can take them.”

And I did.

My story appeared a week later. I got a call from someone at Trump headquarters, I don’t recall who it was. They said The Donald was not happy with my article.

I never got another call from him. But we would meet again.

Months later, NBC threw a party at the 21 Club to celebrate the new Fall TV Season. I was circulating through the packed rooms when I bumped into Trump. He shook my hand and introduced me to his then-girlfriend Melania. I shook her hand, too.

His attention quickly shifted elsewhere, and he walked away. Fifteen minutes later I ran into Trump again. He pulled me aside and said he wanted to introduce me to someone.





Reuters / Eduardo Munoz

“You’ll really like her,” he said. “She’s a great girl. Very attractive. Very smart. And she’s single.”

It was Melania’s sister Ines, who had just arrived in the United States. He wanted to hook me up with her, thought we’d get along just great.

“She’s a good girl.”

“Donald, I appreciate you want to introduce to me to her, but that could be a problem.”

“Why?”

“I’m married. Remember?”

He stared at me, taken aback.

“But you’re not wearing a ring.”

True. I had broken my finger in a sport accident and couldn’t wear the ring for a while. When I explained that, the Donald sniffed at me before quickly retreating into the crowd at the 21 Club as if I had germs.

I never met Melania’s sister. I was flattered by Trump’s offer. He had nothing to gain from it. My story had already been published. Perhaps he felt I was worthy.

Then again, the thought crossed my mind that she might have needed a green card. For all I know he was just looking, as always, to make a deal.

*Richard Linnett, a former long-time marketing reporter at Adweek and Advertising Age, is a freelance writer and public relations consultant. He is the author of "In the Godfather Garden: The Long Life and Times of*

*Richie the Boot Boiardo" (Rutgers University Press 2013), about the ganglord who influenced David Chase to create the Sopranos, and the co-author of "The Eagle Mutiny" (Naval Institute Press 2001), about the only mutiny on an American ship since the Amistad.*

This is an editorial. The opinions and conclusions expressed above are those of the author.

×



