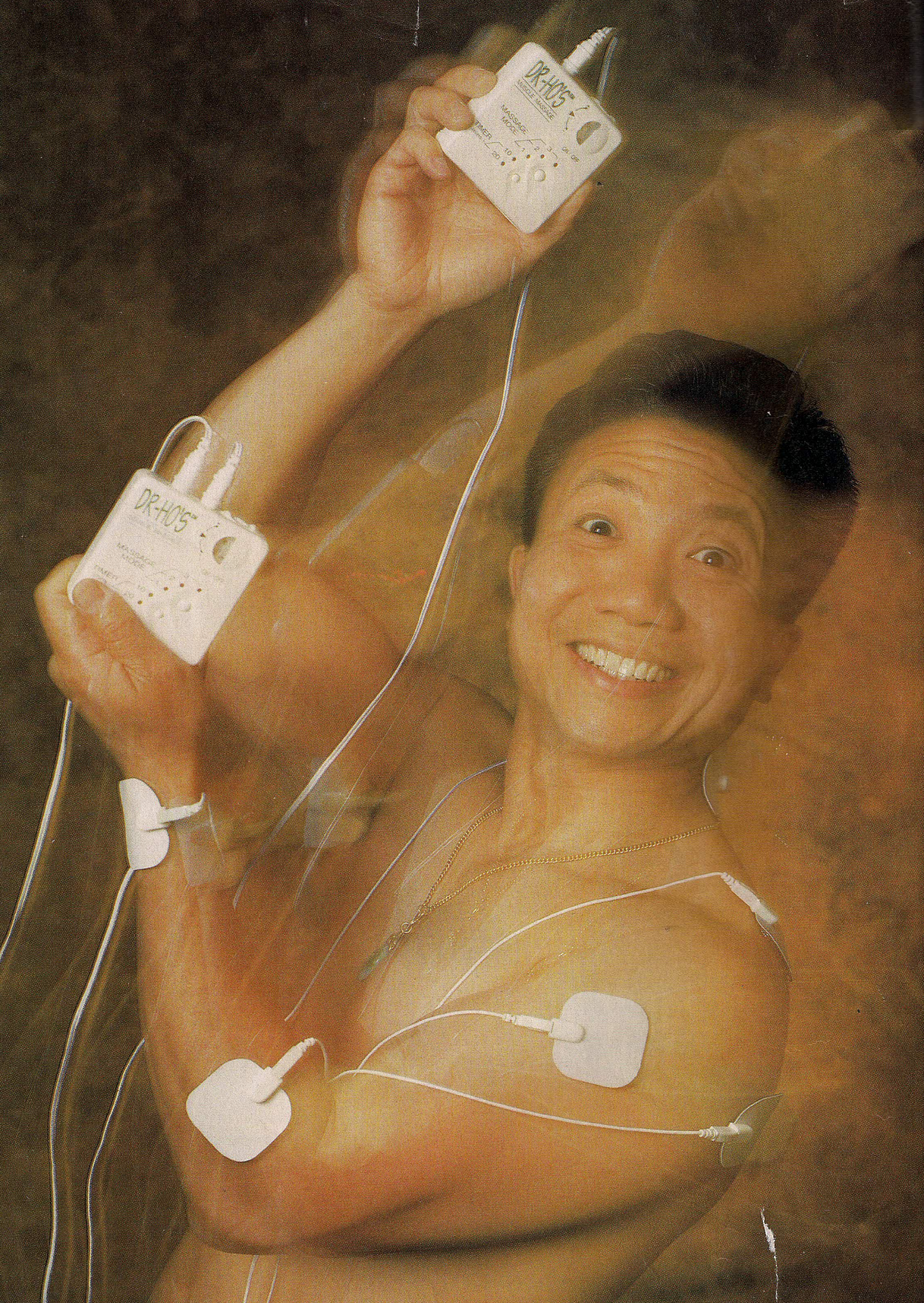
DR-HO'S
MASSAGE MODE
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DR-HO'S

Shock value

The Muscle Massage has made Dr. Michael Ho a late-night infomercial legend. Can financial success be far behind?

BY RAIZEL ROBIN

It's a Saturday night in March, and Mike Bullard is interviewing Dr. Michael Ho on Bullard's talk show, *Open Mike*. That's *the* Dr. Ho—the little guy who favors blue Spandex and bikini-clad sidekicks. The shrill pitchman who wants nothing more than to sell you Dr. Ho's Muscle Massage machine. The guy on the late-night infomercial who sticks white gel pads on his arm, then invites viewers to watch his muscles twitch as electricity surges through them. Yeah, *that* Dr. Ho.

So anyway, Bullard is interviewing the good doctor. "What's the difference between this and the electric chair?" he asks. "Your hair doesn't go up in smoke," Ho quips. He then sticks the gel pads, which are attached to the Muscle Massage console, onto Bullard's shoulders and hands Bullard the device. It's a little white box that runs on two AA batteries and sends a pulsating electric current to the pads.

Bullard cranks the machine to max. His shoulders begin to convulse in an exaggerated shrug and the audience goes ballistic. "It's not a pleasant experience!" he yells out. Bullard continues to twitch and giggle, and Ho joins in, his high-pitched, infectious laugh building to a crescendo. The audience is just roaring. In fact, if you ask him about it, Ho will tell you that Bullard's staff said it was one of their funniest shows ever.

But hold on a minute. Ho has been trying to convince the audience that his product is no joke. He says it's a serious treatment for a number of muscle- and joint-related pains—migraines, arthritis and tendinitis among them. And aside from the gizmo's possible health benefits, Ho has generated at least $34 million in revenue since he began selling it four years ago through his private company, Dr-Ho's Inc. All told, it's nothing to laugh at. So why is everyone laughing?

Because the story of Dr. Ho's Muscle Massage is not a run-of-the-mill business epic. It's the tale of a chiropractor-turned-pitchman—of infomercials and buxom babes, of mall demos and a product labeled "As seen on TV." It's the story of how to sell something that people don't really need but that might be of some use to them. Perhaps more than anything, it's the story of one man's struggle to make a buck, and maybe—just maybe—become a celebrity along the way.

Ho is slumped behind the wheel of his black Acura, his tiny, trim body sunken into the bucket seats. We're en route to the Markham, Ont., mini-mall where his company is headquartered, and Ho is busily expounding on the paradoxical nature of the infomercial: on the one hand, he needs viewers, so he features hotties in bathing suits who get their pecs and glutes massaged while milling around a hot tub; on the other hand, that makes it tough for his product to get any respect. In fact, he tells me, Bullard's shenanigans were just another example of how *not* to use the machine. "Guys fool around with it, shock each other, see how high they can go. Because of its entertainment value, not everybody

PATRICK FORDHAM

The Ho shebang: babes, bikinis and legislated gaeity continue to suck in late-night viewers with a taste for tacky. That's infotainment!

takes it seriously," he says in his lusty Cantonese accent. "It's a very serious machine, but some people do buy it to use as a party favor." Or a sex toy? "I don't think so," says Ho. "People joke about it, right? People ask: 'Can you use it for your private area?' We say no—it's for relieving muscle tension and pain."

Ho's office is suburban-minimal, with a chiropractic table, a miniature skeleton and a desk cluttered with credit card verification machines. His sister Nancy, one of four siblings, doubles as his administrative assistant; another sister, Donna, cohosts his infomercial. Video stills from the infomercial hang leeringly on the wall, with Ho surrounded by leggy blondes and brunettes who emphatically fill their colorful bikinis. ("Dr. Ho's is small but mighty!" pipes the 5'5" doctor in the infomercial, hot tub steam rising in the background.) At moments like this, comparisons to Vietnamese infomercial legend Tom Vu are almost inevitable. Vu, too, was diminutive, and was flanked by busty bikini-clad amazons. Vu dominated the late-night airwaves a decade ago, spinning stories about how to make millions by attending his 90-minute seminar. Surely, he must have been an inspiration to Ho? "No, no," he says, tittering excitedly.

Though Canadians usually associate infomercials more with cheese-mongers like Vu than with quality products, Dr. Ho probably didn't have many alternatives when he chose to flog his device on television. If you're an entrepreneur with a product you believe in but have little or no marketing budget—and if it's a product that requires some explanation, like a juicer, an indoor grill or, say, a muscle massage device—you're best off demonstrating it to the masses. Sure, you could set up in malls or at trade shows, as many people do. You could even sell it door-to-door. But TV really is the ticket, particularly on the likes of the Shopping Channel or its US equivalent, the Home Shopping Network, where airtime is free (the stations make money by marking up merchandise). If you flog enough jumbo grills or juicers, you may then be in a position to make an infomercial. And that's where it gets pricey. According to Ian French, president of Toronto-based Northern Lights Direct Response Television Inc. and a frequent columnist for *Marketing Magazine*, a typical infomercial can cost about $250,000 to produce. And then there's the cost of buying media time. Nine out of 10 infomercials lose money, he says, "but when they work, they're multimillion-dollar enterprises."

Ho might have a lot to say about his product, but he's a little hazy about sales. What he *will* say is that he's sold about 250,000 Muscle Massage devices since he launched his business four years ago. Retailing at $135 apiece, that puts his total retail revenue at about $34 million, or more than $8 million a year. It sounds like a lot until you do the math: running the infomercial 100 times a week on stations across Canada and the US (roughly $300,000 a month); operating two warehouses ($1 million a year), and travel expenses (he won't say). Then there are the subcontractors: R&D done by engineering firms "in the Orient" and, on top of that, manufacturing, order fulfillment, shipping and packaging. All told, Ho estimates the cost of running his business to be about $1 million a month. So is it really worth corroding his product's credibility just to run those infomercials? Ask him how much his sales have increased since he began airing the infomercial a year ago, and he can't say. Or won't. "I honestly don't know," says Ho. "Honestly, I'm not a very good businessman when it comes to stuff like that. I never sat down and calculated it."

French says that because infomercials are a form of direct marketing, they're easy to measure. The idea is to pay for the "shelf space"—or media time—and show your product on TV. Then you have to close the sale. "You have info on the product's features, its benefits, any testimonials," he says. "It has to be a complete, stand-alone sales presentation." When you count the number of sales you rack up after the show, "it's easy to tell if you're ahead of the game," says French, who adds that Ho's infomercial must be effective or he wouldn't be paying an average $750 per half hour to air it.

Before all the tanned women and the sales trips to Florida—before all the talk-show appearances—a family of seven arrived in Calgary from Hong Kong. Michael Ho was 10 years old at the time, born in 1960, the year of the Rat. The Chinese believe those born under that sign are intelligent and cheerful, and tend to live rich, easy lives. That