

The 12 Great Failures of Danger Man

A series of lessons learned from combining the Real Life Superhero movement with Guerilla Marketing

*"Only those who dare to fail greatly
can ever achieve greatly."
- Robert F. Kennedy*

Danger Man was, simply, the **greatest failure of my life**. It was an amazing experience that could have gone magnificently, if I knew these key lessons first. The only way that I could learn them was to fail; but you, dear reader, get to benefit from my failure without first failing yourself.





I am not an MBA. But I have off-the-wall ideas, and I once had the luxury to pursue one.

What if a **brand agent** was **not limited** to one venue? What if a sports mascot, for example, could leave the sporting arena and go out into the world, **interacting** with people and causing a ruckus, in order to **draw attention** to his brand?

During the summer of 2010, I created a RLSH (Real-Life Superhero) character called **Danger Man**. I made more than 30 videos for the Danger Man Show (www.dangermanshow.com), which I filmed and edited myself. I have a long history of performance training, which gave me the balls to interact with crowds and strangers as a costumed superhero.

The Real Life Superhero movement has been around for a number of years. The latest count puts the tally of active RLSHs above 300 in the United States alone. I blundered into this community armed with only my decades-old passion for comic books, and one unique qualifier: my skill as a **Parkour athlete**.

Most RLSHs are either 'crime-fighters' or volunteers who love comics, and (justifiably) get off on having an alter ego. But few are real athletes, and none are experimenting with **sponsorship**.

There was nobody else at this unique intersection, of Parkour, RLSH, and branding. I still believe that there will be a groundbreaking character who brings all three of these concepts together, in a field I call **Superhero-Themed Guerilla Marketing**. While I tried it first, I certainly did not succeed.

Looking back, I can see why.

It is difficult to convince a brand to put their good name on whatever an uncontrollable ego-tripping fanboy may do in the real world. This idea is way too new to convince any company to put up their money.

So I kept it an **experiment**.

What would it be like to have a costumed athlete running around a city promoting a brand? I developed some interesting ideas, and learned some unexpected lessons. Rather than apply these lessons into a subsequent version of the Superhero-Themed Guerilla Marketing concept, I will transcribe them here so that others may learn from my failures.

Failure #1 - Anonymity

Remaining anonymous was essential at the outset of the project, because I really didn't know what I was doing. I made a fool of myself in front of a few strangers, which is easier to stomach than alienating those whom I already knew.

I also had a public reputation to uphold, due to my very visible day job. Announcing my new hobby of trespassing in costume would have been dangerous to my professional life. So I kept my public and my private identities separate.

By remaining anonymous, however, I was trapped within my own mind. I was unable to gain the feedback of my friends and colleagues, and I was unable to functionally build an audience.

I made a Facebook page for Danger Man, and got a few hundred friends pretty easily. But I was unable to tell casual acquaintances, people that would have supported any project of mine because they knew and trusted me, and this frustrated my ability to get real feedback on the character and the project.

This lack of feedback kept me constantly improvisational. I had no director for my films, no scriptwriter to write me gags, no producer to change the direction of the show. I was way too solo, because I was anonymous.

Lesson Learned

Build a Team.

If you are going to start something new and groundbreaking, make sure you have experts on your side, even if they are only advisors. Getting an outside perspective on your activities is essential to success.



Failure #2 - Neglecting Community

The RLSH movement is in its infancy, and I was a part of the beginning of it. I went active just when *Kick-Ass* hit the theaters, which led to a surge in Real Life Superhero profiles created online.

There was already a fairly well-known RLSH in Portland, Oregon, where I live. His name is Zetaman, and he also does short videos for the web. I have never met him.

This was a huge mistake.

He once reserved a table at the Susan G. Komen Walk for the Cure event, and invited anyone and everyone to donate and join him in the walk. Had I done this, I could have helped him accomplish his goal, made myself of value, and gained a valuable networking partner.

By working solo, I denied myself access to his audience, contacts, and ideas.

Early in the Danger Man project, I met with Benja Barker a few times, who runs an organization called the Alter Egos society. It's a group of Portlanders who dress up as heroes or villains twice a year and go out drinking. I crashed one of these events, handed out flyers for one of my events (a Superhero-Themed Obstacle Course), and got precisely none of them to attend.

Soon thereafter, they went to a City Hall meeting and Benja spoke to the City Council about the importance of superheroes in the city. I recorded the testimony and broke in with a funny Ha-HAAA! at one point in order to get a laugh; but this through Benja off his stride, and ultimately alienated him from me. When I later tried to offer my services to help him out, he was not interested.

Had I started by contacting him, to find out how I could help him achieve what he was doing, instead of crashing in with all of my unknown crap, I could have preserved a relationship with a filmmaker and superhero enthusiast in my own city.

Lesson Learned

Help your Colleagues.

I was too focused on building what I was working on, a process that could have been amplified by help from others. That help could have been procured by helping them with what they were already working on. "You can get anything in life you want, if you just help enough other people get what they want." - Zig Ziglar.



Failure #3 - Treasure Hunts

I know there is something in this concept, but I was unable to successfully find it. The idea of interactive hunting, providing an audience with riddles to solve and prizes to win, has a new application that modern social technology allows.

While I made a couple of movies about treasure hunts, the truth is that nearly half of the work I put into the Danger Man project revolved around complicated street-level treasure hunts. Some involved breaking codes, others involved in-store promotions and partnering for coupons, and a few involved rooftop-level markers that helped you orient yourself to the position of the next clue. I ran test treasure hunts along Portland business districts with each of these models and some willing subjects, and never found the magic formula that made the treasure hunts easy enough to work with mass appeal.



While I was fascinated by complicated treasure hunts, I was not building them for me; I was building them for others. I tried dumbing them down, but it lost its appeal to me.

And besides, in the end, Danger Man had nothing to do with finding treasure.

Lesson Learned

Align with your Purpose.

If finding treasure was essential to the character's purpose, I should have made the RLSH a Pirate. Although I personally don't find the pirate culture very interesting, the fact remains that it is big, it has its own holiday and several blockbuster movies, and could easily serve as a crossover between RLSH, Steampunk, and Pirate crowds.

If I had it to do again, I would launch the Treasure Hunts as Captain Booty. And I would not play Captain Booty, but hire a buxom wench to be the onscreen personality. (See Lesson Learned #1 - Build a Team.)

Failure #4 - Moderate Parkour Skills

I am not an expert in Parkour. I am twice the age of some Traceurs, and without the spectacle of marvelous tricks, I relied on parkour too much for my schtick.

I felt, rightly, that Danger Man was unique in combining the RLSH paradigm with parkour. It is a natural crossover that few RLSHs have the ability (or athleticism) to accomplish. It made Danger Man easy to film and interesting to watch.



But, bluntly, I wasn't good enough.

There is not a single backflip in any of my videos. With the wealth of amazing parkour available to watch on YouTube, the bar was set higher than I was able to reach.

I could have gone the Daredevil route. Evel Knievel, Super Dave, and spectacle-grabbing stuntmen relied on their own character to draw attention to their dangerous feats. This would have suited Danger Man well, but my interest was not in building notoriety as a daredevil, but in exploring the Superhero-Themed Guerilla Marketing concept.

Lesson Learned

Go Big or Go Home.

If I wanted to rely on Parkour as my unique differentiator, I should have either spent three hours a day in training, or I should have allowed a stuntman to do tricks in my costume for me.



Failure #5 - No Counterpart

Danger Man did not have a nemesis. I made this choice consciously, even though I had opportunities to develop (or declare) nemesii during my short career as a RLSH.

I wanted to create a character that was NOT a “crime-fighter,” since we have crime fighters already. They are called cops. I think a lot of the buffoonery surrounding the perception of the RLSH movement stems from fatty fanboys that purport to be “upholding justice” by dressing up and pretending to hunt down criminals. Compared to a well-trained and equipped police officer, RLSH crime fighters are pretty lame.

Those few who do have the skills to pursue vigilantism seriously give rise to a harder question: why don't they just become cops, and avail themselves of the benefits of joining an organization of professional crime-fighters with whom they can work in concert?

Faced with these questions, I could not consider fighting crime (the basic fallback definition many RLSHs give themselves) as a suitable category for me.

By not setting myself in opposition to anything, I left myself with nothing to support me. I would have been better served to make Danger Man a villain, and declare some moderate annoyance (a la Angle Grinder Man) to be my enemy.

Lesson Learned

Story is Conflict.

This is the basic maxim of the dramatic arts. To engage people with a story, you need to show them a conflict; then, they will stick with you until the resolution (or the development of another conflict).

My one attempt to create opposition backfired.



Failure #6 - Graffiti Alienation

I had an inkling about my lack of purpose early on. I tried to manufacture a purpose by making a video about my Graffiti Cleanup Service; since Danger Man could climb buildings, I could climb up to graffiti-bedecked rooftops and clean them up.

This failed for a number of reasons.

First, those people who could get up to those places - they could have been my greatest audience, since they, too, go into out of the way places. Instead I alienated my potential fan base by making them my enemies.

Second, I really don't care about graffiti. It doesn't bother me at all, except when it's sloppy, or directly on a business's front doorstep. Graffiti in hard to reach places, where only athletes can reach, I kind of admire.

Ironically, my most popular YouTube video by far, out of the 30+ I have made, was the Graffiti Cleanup video. It was not viewed by thousands of graffiti-hating schoolmarms. It was viewed by those who I alienated, and I attracted a flock of haters.



Lesson Learned

Identify your audience.

If I had aligned with their goals, I could have made Danger Man into a street graffiti artist. He could have left new and amazing street art in hard to reach places, and due to my highly visible (and anonymous) persona, I could have served as a standard-setter for the graffiti community.

Instead, I just pissed them off.



Failure #7 - Early monetization

The entire time I worked on the Danger Man project, I was struggling with the confines of my day job. I had found something that made me feel truly fulfilled as a human being; I could perform, wear a costume, make a movie, interact with a crowd, and do athletic tricks. It was, in some ways, the most fulfilling period of my life.

Instead of enjoying it for what it was, I sought it as a method of escape. If I could somehow turn this new Superhero-Themed Guerilla Marketing concept into a viable income, I could leave my day job, and be Danger Man full time. What a nice thought.



Instead of spending my time making Danger Man cool, and valuable, and interesting, I spent my time trying to make him profitable.

And this idea is still too new, too untested, too unpredictable for anyone to put any money behind it. Especially when prospective sponsors couldn't know who they were dealing with (see Failure #1).

My few attempts to get an audience with marketing and branding gurus were laughable. "Uh, yeah, there's a masked guy in a construction outfit who wants to see Dan Weiden."

Lesson Learned

Make something great before you try to make it profitable.

Time spent improving the product will pay back any meager profits you might have made in the beginning.

Don't try to make something a business when you should be making a cause.



Failure #8 - Infrastructure

I did not have a logo, or a decent website, until I stopped making movies and retired from Parkour for the winter. This break allowed me the time to develop these things, but I did not have any way to collect information or provide value to people online during the summer of '10, when I created most of the Danger Man interaction.

I had two great kidney pockets in the Danger Man vest, which I sometimes used for flyers to promote my events (like the Superhero Obstacle Course). I didn't use them enough.

If I had a capture system in place, or a brand to promote, I could have gone out with a grip of postcards and showered them throughout the crowds and streets of Portland.

But I didn't even have a logo to put on them.

Lesson Learned

Put the infrastructure basics in place before you launch.

Even if you don't know what you're doing. That way, when you're beginning to figure it out, you don't have to stop and take three steps back just to make a solid foundation. Because by then, it might be too late.



Failure #9 - Finish what you Start, Even if it Changes

I declared that I was going to climb the St. John's Bridge, the highest span in the city. I made a video about my intentions, and entered it in the PDX Bridge Film Festival. Then I injured myself the day before the climb.



Two documentary makers came up to Portland from LA to film the climb. They followed me around the city the day before, and I showed them all sorts of Parkour moves and climbed some local landmarks. I turned my ankle at the end of the day.

By biting off more than I could chew, I left myself with a difficulty; I could ignore the biggest video and announcement I had made to date (which I did) and leave people wondering what the hell happened to me.

Or, I could have made another video, of me in a hospital bed, talking about what had happened when I tried to climb, and I was thwarted by a new villain. (The St. Johns Avenger, who was already developed and ready to go.) I have the mask, the character, and even the script, but I never followed through and made the video.

Lesson Learned

Deliver on your Promises.

If you don't deliver on your promises, people will not follow you. The last video on the dangermanshow YouTube channel is the declaration that I would climb the bridge. And then? Nothing. I have left no story for people to follow. No explanation for what happened (or didn't happen).

By leaving my audience in the dark, I removed the spotlight, permanently, from myself.



Failure #10 - Exclusive Self-Promotion

Nobody cares about you. But everybody cares about themselves. And they will go to great lengths to promote themselves, especially if someone else does the bulk of the promoting (under their own brand).

I experimented with some interview segments for the Danger Man Show, but never published them in episodes. Between Man on the Street interviews, and an exclusive interview with the Mayor of Portland (Sam Adams), I had enough footage for a decent interview segment in a couple of shows.

After the filming of each interview, the people I interviewed wanted to know where they could find my show. How they could show it to their friends. How they could promote themselves...by promoting my show.

This made me realize the secret formula that media brands use to gain exposure. Promote others to promote yourself.

The Daily Show, for example, has plenty of great content and a well-known brand. Yet they devote nearly a third of every episode to interviews. Despite this being the least popular section of the show to the audience, every single episode, it gets the Daily Show a new ambassador. The interviewee will promote this episode to everyone and anyone, promoting The Daily Show by promoting themselves.

Lesson Learned

Cross-Promote.

Use your own platform to help other people gain exposure, by making yourself the conduit.

Engage with other platforms, as well. As Danger Man, I could have entered athletic tournaments, pool tournaments, poker tournaments, game shows, spelling bees, open mics, anything that got me in front of people. I'm sure that some of these competitions would relish the extra attention from a masked RLSH competing against normal civilians.



Lesson #11 - It Takes Time

The longer a meme has to percolate in the mediasphere, the greater chance that it is absorbed and digested by someone who has the capacity to evolve it.



I kept Danger Man active for under 6 months. It was, in terms of media attention, a flash in the pan.

My greatest piece of exposure was in a documentary about Miss Fit, who visited RLSHs around the country and interviewed them (see Failure #10). After the film is complete, Danger Man could leverage this to greater exposure. That whole sponsorship thing might have happened.

But people need time, and circumstances need to align, for things to happen.

By placing a profile and website online, and feeding it with regular content once a month, you water the sprout that can grow into a mighty tree.

My failure was throwing everything I had into it at once, getting exhausted, and pulling out. There was not enough time for the Danger Man Show to take root and grow strong; it was, in plain terms, an oddity.

Lesson Learned

Take it Slow.

You can't make a baby by hiring nine women to work really hard for a month. Gestation takes time, for a reason. The time spent in slow reflection is more valuable than putting everything on display all at once.



Failure #12 - Rebel without a Cause

Danger Man didn't stand for anything. Not for safety, not for danger, not for the opposition to his enemies, not for the championing of any downtrodden demographic.

A large part of this led to Failure #5, No Counterpart. But even without an enemy, Danger Man still needed a Cause to champion.

Imagine if I had built the character around marijuana legalization.

Marijuana Man would have become instantly polarizing and instantly popular.

He could create informational videos on the medicinal benefits of pot, and leave joints hidden throughout the city at the end of treasure hunts.

Undeniably newsworthy. Anonymity would serve this very well, since it is in a realm of ambiguous legality. (What happens if minors find a joint? Can we limit participation to medical marijuana patients? Shouldn't a government agency regulate this activity?)

I toyed with this idea for a while, but decided not to implement it because the cause itself, one which I believe in, was too near to my heart.

Lesson Learned

Support a Cause.

If you cannot put your alter-ego behind a cause you fanatically support, you will lose the instant audience that a cause can bring to you.

Without a cause to define you, no audience can identify with you.



Epilogue

Danger Man is dead.



He served his purpose; as an experiment.

I would love to see someone implement these lessons and move the Superhero-Themed Guerilla Marketing concept into a full-fledged meme that shocks and inspires people to look at branding and RLSHs in a completely new way.

I stumbled into this door by happenstance; now you, dear reader, have the option of walking through it with intention, or pointing it out to someone who can.

If you know someone who would benefit from reading this short treatise, take a moment and [please forward it to them](#).

Ha-HAAA!

--Danger Man