

# A Career Guidance Counselor

An Interview with Sandy Montag,  
President and Chief Executive Officer, The Montag Group

**EDITORS' NOTE** Sandy Montag, a 30-year industry veteran, is President and CEO of The Montag Group. He spent his entire professional career at IMG before launching his own company. He started as an assistant to John Madden, traveling the country with Madden by train and on the first "Madden Cruiser." He went on to run IMG's Clients operations for 10 years. Montag developed and launched Ari Fleischer Sports Communications with Ari Fleischer, former press secretary to President George W. Bush, after Fleischer left the White House in 2003.



Sandy Montag

**COMPANY BRIEF** The Montag Group ([themontaggroup.com](http://themontaggroup.com)) has been launched as a talent management, consulting, content development, and media-strategy company, focused on the world of sports, entertainment, and lifestyle.

## Did you know early on that this was the industry where you would end up?

I was a sports nut and stats geek growing up. Marv Albert was my idol. I loved the broadcasting side of things and the intricacies of sports and going to live events. I thought I would be a broadcaster but I fell into production. I was a good statistician and was working freelance with CBS out of college when I got a chance to travel with John Madden on the train. I took that job and it got me into sports management. A year after that, I became one of his agents.

## What kind of experience did you gain by working with Ted Forstmann and IMG?

Mark McCormack founded IMG in 1961 with Arnold Palmer. I knew nothing about the sports agency business then but, in the mid-'80s, IMG was already into China and Australia. Mark taught me a lot about dealing with people, representing talent, and negotiating. I spent a lot of time sitting on his couch listening to him on the phone and learning.

This business is not as large as people think it is on the outside, and if you can develop relationships along the way, it's going to be helpful. Whatever limited success I've had is based on the ability to form good

relationships on the client side and on the customer side.

As I have told my employees, it's so much easier doing a deal with a person one knows versus cold calling.

## Will you talk about the core of expertise and services you offer today and will there be a broadening of those services?

The core of my brand is representing media and sports personalities be it John Madden, Bob Costas, Jim Nantz, Mike Tirico, or Scott Van

Pelt, and it has expanded to coaches like Tom Coughlin, and ex-coaches Bob Knight and Steve Mariucci. That will not change.

We've since taken that base and expanded to consulting and advising, which is a natural extension. We continue to work on the relationships and advise companies who need help in brand building or strategic planning.

In 2004, I started a company with Ari Fleischer that focuses on media strategy, crisis management, and media training. One of the few times I cold-called anyone was when he was at the White House, and we built a really good business in the world of media strategy. In today's world, with social media and things being live more than ever, how companies and personalities plan their media strategy is very important. The Montag Group also develops content ideas that we sell to linear and non-linear networks.

## Is a good mix of next generation leaders coming into the industry?

Over time, leadership skills have not kept up with other areas of business. Early on in my career, I had some leaders who were mentors. Mark taught me so much about leadership and negotiating, and how to listen. John Madden was a great leader and mentor to me. As I grew, people like Dick Ebersol and Sean McManus taught me a lot in this area as well. Even though it's hard to find really good leaders today, I do think it's something that students coming out of school and growing up in the world today miss out on if they don't have a good boss or mentor they can learn from. I let employees listen to my business phone calls. Mark let me do it 30 years ago. It's really important. It's hard to learn things unless one is listening to how

the world plays out in business live. I don't know if CEOs and presidents today give enough thought to how they are leading, what culture they are setting up, and how they are developing the leaders of tomorrow. The world has changed.

## Is traditional media still relevant today? How will it compete when there are so many other platforms?

There will still be live sporting events via television, be it over the air or via cable. Most people still want to see big events on that screen. I'm personally not on social media although it is a valuable tool for information gathering and the like, but to me it's a waste of time from a productivity standpoint. I believe it absorbs probably three hours a day of time where someone would be potentially creative and do something outside the box. People are now hooked on texting, posting on Twitter, and worrying about who said what online. Social media is truly great for public relations and for branding, but I find that the younger generation is addicted to it to the point where they don't know how to communicate verbally.

Having said that, smartphones are great devices for providing content and content on-the-go, in particular. I don't watch a lot of live entertainment television but I do watch a lot on Netflix and On Demand, and I use my iPad for communication.

The younger generation certainly watches more on a non-linear device, so as content providers, we absolutely have to keep up with that.

Tim Armstrong, who runs AOL and just bought Yahoo, is a great leader and his mind is focused on producing content and branded content on all of these platforms that aren't linear.

## When it comes to the title "agent," how do you define it?

The term has a negative connotation in a way so, in my mind, I'm a career guidance counselor as opposed to an agent. I don't just do transactions. I'm focused on doing a deal and then talking to my client throughout the term of the deal, as events are constantly changing. A lot happens from one deal to the next. The deal has to work for both parties so both parties have to be serviced, and I have to make sure that it's going well overall. I'm really in the service industry. ●