

An Interview with *Owner's Manual* Costar Marcus Hunt



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Nicky Bleiel: Welcome to STC *Intercom* conversations. I'm Nicky Bleiel and today I'm pleased to be speaking with Marcus Hunt, costar of *Owner's Manual*.

Owner's Manual, which airs Thursdays at 10:00 PM on AMC, tests one of the most common divides among men—those who read the manual and those who do not. Marcus reads the manuals. His compatriot, Ed Sanders, chooses not to read them.

Since the members of the Society for Technical Communication write the manuals, we know which approach is correct. Hi Marcus, thanks for joining me today.

Marcus Hunt: STC are my kind of people. That's all I have to say. Team STC all the way.

NB: Thank you. We've been saying "Team Marcus," so that works well.

Just to let you know, Marcus, STC's members write the manuals and develop the help systems, videos, training manuals, and more for heavy machinery, aerospace, software, hardware ... you name it. You can see why we're interested in your show.

MH: Absolutely.

NB: So far, your challenges on *Owner's Manual* have involved stunt planes, locomotives, dune buggies, and tall ships, rock quarries—this is a lot of fun stuff— ...

MH: It is.

NB: ... and logging are coming up in the next few weeks. Which one was the biggest challenge for you, personally?

MH: Whew. I would have to pick two.

I would have to pick the tall ship, which hasn't aired yet. It is a 136-foot, 120-ton tall ship. For those of you who don't know what a "tall ship" is, it's basically like an old pirate ship—the old wooden, big pirate ships.

This was one of my childhood dreams and almost an epic adventure. Basically, it was nighttime, it was windy, we had hail, we had seas coming over the bow, and we had a crew of ten. In all the other scenarios, all the other shows, we were basically responsible for our own doing, and in this one, we had to command ten people.

They were never put [in danger]—obviously, if we just said something so stupid or tried to give them a command that was so stupid, they wouldn't do it—but they were asked to do everything we told them to do, whether it was right or wrong.

Just having to command that many people in those types of conditions. The crew were all over the boat. That was, by far, the biggest challenge for me.

The second one would be in Oregon, 21 degrees, the yarder, crazy logging system, 30,000 pounds of lifting. It was just so cold the entire time that it's one of those where you can barely move for three days straight.

NB: Those do sound really, really challenging, and also with the tall ship, getting that command experience I'm sure was very interesting.

MH: For your bucket list, though ... Bucket list stuff. It was amazing.

NB: That's very, very true. Which challenge of all of them had the best documentation, do you think?

MH: [laughs] OK. You know, funnily enough they actually all had very good documentation, but the best would have probably been the locomotive.

They actually gave me the original manuals from the 3100, which was the locomotive that we used; it's a 275,000-pound locomotive. Then they gave me no end of manuals for hand signals, for ... you had to know how many toots to toot when you're crossing a crossing where there's going to be pedestrians or there's going to be cars.

If they didn't have the owner's manuals for them, I would try to look it up. I would YouTube it or just go online and research it. Then again, if I couldn't find it then, a lot of the time they would actually give me manuals on set, and I would read them there.

NB: Well, technical communicators made it happen.

MH: Yeah, they did.

NB: We reduce the liability for you, the user—and I'll count Ed in that—we're going to talk more about Ed later.

I don't want to leave him out of this, but it's also the product owners as well. Everyone wins.

When did you come to the realization that reading the manual made your life easier?

MH: I was a geek as a little kid. Not that people who read manuals are geeks; I just peg myself out as that guy because I am that guy.

When I was a little kid, my parents used to buy me little science kits and little projects to do. I remember taking something apart and not being able to put it back together properly, and I pretty much ruined it, because it was pretty complicated.

What I would do is, I would actually create my own little manuals. What I would do is take my paper, I would draw in colors a diagram of what went to where. I'd have my little parts list, and then when I put it back together, I would be able to do it no problem.

That kind of stuck with me all the way through. It's my personality, and funny enough, I'd probably fit in.... It is a very patient and meticulous and oriented-to-detail type work that you guys do. Could I do it? I don't know, but I definitely could be an amateur STC-er.

NB: Well, you definitely have the genes for it. We may have to recruit you at some point if this acting thing doesn't work out for you.

You have a lot of challenges on the show, and they're really not for the faint of heart. You're doing a lot of dangerous things. You and Ed Sanders work together very well, although technically you're supposed to be competing in this battle of "book smarts" versus "street smarts."

MH: Right.

NB: Was there any time you thought Ed might actually be in danger because he hadn't read the manual, or was there any time you recall thinking you might have been in danger if you hadn't?

MH: I like to think of Ed as Herman Munster or the missing link between ape and man. Just kind of the guy who goes in there pressing buttons, like [grunts]. The truth is, he's a smart guy. We're both smart enough to appreciate each other's opinion, and respect that if he has a better way to do it, I'm going to listen, and if it's better I'm going to do it. The same goes for me.

We had experts on every show, off in the distances, so were we ever in "I'm going to rip my arms off and die" danger? No. But was there absolutely real danger? Yes, there was, in most every episode. The tall ship, as I said, we had to strap ourselves in and hook in because we're sliding all over the decks. Yarder, we had 30,000 pounds of logs hanging from cranes and Ed was down in the brush.



Marcus Hunt (right), and Ed Sanders, costars on *Owner's Manual*

But to answer your question, probably the airplane for Ed. While I don't think it was so much a safety issue of the plane having an issue, Ed was a bit motion sick so he blacked out twice, he threw up, and he almost pooped his pants. Maybe a little more information than you need to know, but I got a heads-up on that.

I learned the G straining maneuver, which is very funny to look at. If you don't know what it is, it's the ... G-LOC is the loss of concentration. It's where you just kind of black out like this [demonstrates].

Well, to do it properly you tense up all the muscles in your body, and you've got to take these real short breaths. It looks stupid, but it's like [demonstrates]. It looks just that silly, but what that does is it allows the blood to stay in your brain so you don't black out.

Because I read the manual, it made me better off and less sick, and Ed not so much. To answer your question, I think that would be a good example of where reading the manual versus not reading helped me out, being safe.

NB: That would be the example. I, of course, watched all the episodes and in that episode you cut most of what you described out ...

MH: Yeah.

NB: ... of how sick Ed was, and I would like to say thank you to your editors for that.

MH: [laughs] Yes. He would, too.

NB: [laughs] I did want to mention, I don't know if you noticed this—you probably did—that AMC posts a poll on their website after every episode, and the question is, "Whose approach worked better? Ed's or Marcus's?" You won the stunt plane and locomotive polls by a wide margin.

MH: Nice. I did not know that, but I'll have to go look at it.

NB: You'll have to look. You creamed Ed both times.

MH: Good.

NB: Not so much on the dune buggy.

Now, how much time do you spend reading the docs to prep for each episode? You've said in other interviews that you not only read the manuals, you also watch videos.

MH: I do.

NB: Do you prefer one over the other, or just different approaches for different things?

MH: OK, how long do I spend? I spend quite a bit of time, actually. For the first two episodes alone I had about 250 pages of manuals that were given to me beforehand, and then I watched ... I probably watched an hour's worth of clips on fighter pilots and things like that, which may not seem like a lot but it's a lot of information to cram into a few days.

Do I prefer ... when I have to cram a lot of information that quickly I prefer visual things, especially when it's technical data, just because you may know what it says and you may even know what it is, but when you see it all of a sudden it snaps like that for me.

I really appreciated, like for the locomotive, getting to see where all the different pieces were inside that locomotive in order to start it: all the different buttons, what switches had to be done, and all the different colors and the hand signals and stuff like that.

I'm probably visual, 10 to 1.

NB: It makes sense. That's part of the reason that technical communicators provide so many different types of documentation, because people have different preferences. I'm glad to see that that's the way you stand on it.

MH: Yeah.

NB: Can't end an interview without talking about the zombie apocalypse, for some reason.

MH: [laughs]

NB: It's just a very popular topic.

MH: Ed's stupid zombie apocalypse. Go ahead.

NB: Ed ... I don't know why, maybe it's all the movies, but Ed defended his approach—you know, the not reading the manual approach—in an interview you both did with *Popular Mechanics*. His explanation was, "If there is a zombie apocalypse, no one will have time to read the manual to figure out what to do." Therefore, his gut approach is correct.

Now, I'd argue that this is an apples-and-oranges kind of analogy. I mean, the zombie apocalypse is an event. It's not something that needs to be operated correctly.

MH: I pretty much think that everybody on the planet would argue against Ed's defense of zombie apocalypse. I'm actually working on a serum to create zombies so I can create a zombie apocalypse to prove him wrong.

I don't even know where he came ... he comes up to me like, "Oh, the zombie apocalypse and the manual..."

That's the last thing you would be doing. Let's say you ran to a plane or something, the first thing you'd do would be to shut the dang door, lock it, and then I guarantee you if you don't know how to start that plane, you're going to find a manual or something to figure out how to start that plane. I don't even know why he came up with the zombie apocalypse, but if it happens I guess it's going to be a good tell-tale, which is right.

NB: Yes, and by then we won't care.

MH: You may or may not matter anyway.

NB: That's right. That's why people use that argument, I think.

MH: Yeah.

NB: Now, the show's pretty heavy adrenaline, you have a danger kind of vibe because there are dangerous things going on, but at its core it really does confirm that you need to consult the documentation to do a job correctly and safely.

MH: Yes.

NB: That's why you named the show *Owner's Manual*, right?

MH: It is, and it's a ... there's no doubt. You cannot argue the fact that having a manual is not better than not having a manual. The show shows that street smarts versus book smarts ... it shows two very different personalities. It shows adventure.

The truth is, every single thing we stepped into this season, you absolutely have to have a manual to even figure out how to start it. Maybe not the one where Ed had the one up on me on the cars. Those you could figure out.

You could sit there and you could flick buttons and figure it out, but in an airplane and in a locomotive, there were seven things that you had to do before you could start that locomotive, and they were 15 feet apart. You were switching switches inside, having to walk around and on the other side open doors, prime pumps, press things for it to glow and then heat up.

There is no way that Ed would figure that out just by pressing buttons, so I am an absolute true believer in manuals and I don't think you can argue that point.

NB: Great, and you appreciate the fact that the ... high-quality manuals, because you've obviously been reading a lot of information that you have found to be of great quality.

MH: What's funny is that you read them and you [know] there are some better than others, and you really appreciate the well-written ones, after having to read so many. You can tell. Some were just kind of, "I've got to make this because it probably needs to be made," and then some you could tell that probably the STC-ers, you really love what you do[...]

Some may think it's an absolute boring thing, but I'm one of those people who I'm very meticulous and I love to write that stuff down. I'm always the one to record what I'm doing and make sure that ... I even create manuals; I own an old RV. I created a fifteen-page book with pictures and arrows and how to dump the tanks and how to turn on the generator and all that stuff. While people are like, "Oh, it's that guy," the second they open it, they are so happy to have it.

NB: Awesome. Well, we're definitely going to have to consider you an honorary member of the Society for Technical Communication, Marcus.

MH: I'll take it.

NB: I really thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. Please tell Ed that even though ... I could tell he's a really nice guy.

MH: He is. He's a very nice guy.

NB: We all think he's really nice, but the members of STC are going to keep continuing to root for Team Marcus ...

MH: I like it.

NB: ... in the weeks to come. Have a great day. Thank you so much.

MH: Nicky, thank you so much and thanks to everybody at STC for watching. 

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