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The Bachelor's Mike Fleiss on Coming up Roses

Reality TV producer Mike Fleiss has created hugely popular shows, but his career has had to rebound from a few heartaches over the years

By [Rebecca Reisner](#)

For TV producer Mike Fleiss, the ebbs and flows of business have little to do with the recession. Fleiss, CEO of Next Entertainment and creator of the enduring ABC ([DIS](#)) reality series *The Bachelor*, thought his career was voted off the island forever in January 2000.

The first reality romance show he created, Fox's ([NWS](#)) *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?*, premiered to fabulous ratings but terrible publicity, after it was discovered that bachelor Rick Rockwell wasn't such a great catch. Next Entertainment's revenues dropped from \$1.2 million in 1999 to negative \$600,000 in 2000.

By 2002, however, Fleiss found himself a huge success with the introduction of *The Bachelor* (produced in association with [Warner Horizon Television](#)), now the longest-running reality romance show. Counting its sister show *The Bachelorette*, the series has had 17 seasons. The most recent one, featuring single dad Jason Mesnick in the title role, made its debut on Jan. 5, 2009, with 8.7 million viewers, according to the Nielsen Company.

"Along with *Survivor* and *American Idol*, *The Bachelor*, because it was the original, remains the gold standard of its subgenre," says John Rash, director of media analysis for advertising agency [Campbell Mithun](#) and author of the Rash Report column in *Advertising Age*. "Even the seasons with lower ratings are still higher than those for most other shows."

In 2008, Next Entertainment took in about \$100 million. Fleiss, who is based in Los Angeles, recently spoke to *BusinessWeek's* Rebecca Reisner about bouncing back from setbacks and maintaining a product's freshness over the years.

The show you executive-produced back in February 2000, *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire*, got great ratings but bad publicity. How did that affect you?

It almost spelled the doom of Next Entertainment. I thought my career was over. I didn't hear from my agent for months. The network [Fox] was pissed off. They audited the show and dug in and disallowed certain expenses. It was a scandal, and the network was looking for someone to blame.

How did you manage to bounce back?

I did what I do best, which is creating shows. I created *Million Dollar Mysteries* and *Battle of the Child Geniuses* and sold them to Fox. But they punished me by not letting me produce via Next Entertainment. So I produced working for [Dick Clark Productions](#).

How did you retool the romance reality show in the form of *The Bachelor*?

I knew there was tremendous energy in this concept, women competing for someone we certify as a great catch, and I could see there was tremendous audience appeal. I thought of ways to make it more respectable. With *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?*, the contestants didn't see what the man looked like until the end of the show. With *The Bachelor*, they meet the bachelor first and are empowered to leave if they want to.

Why has your show lasted when so many other romance reality series came and went?

Some of the copycats were shot in only two or three weeks. You're just watching play-acting. There's no sincerity, and the audience knows it. We shoot *The Bachelor* [season] over seven weeks, so it gives people a real chance to fall in love. There are still women out there who are in love with Andy Baldwin [season 10], and wonder if he's going to call them.

How does the show stay so popular when its objective—to end in a marriage—has failed to materialize in every season except one (Trista Rehn in *The Bachelorette*, season 1)?

People like to see the emotional roller coaster of romance more than the completed romance.

The season with Charlie O'Connell (season 7) in the title role seemed like the nadir of the series. Its ratings were among the lowest, and the sets were plain compared with other seasons'. Some of the contestants seemed a little trashy. What happened?

We had gotten complacent about the show. I don't blame my staff; I blame myself. The series was so successful we thought we could continue it without adjustments.

How did you reinvigorate the show?

We made it so it wasn't so predictable. We started taking chances. In Brad Womack's season [season 11], it became clear he didn't have strong feelings for either of the final two women. The network and some producers were freaked out once we knew Brad was going to reject two women on air. But we let it happen. And I think that unpredictable end revived interest in the show. It made it fresh. We also started putting more effort into casting good contestants.

One way you've made the show fresh is to film seasons abroad, one in Paris and one in Rome. Isn't that a little extravagant?

It still costs much less to film than scripted shows. The writers, actors, and directors get paid a lot more [for nonreality shows]. We don't have that layer of cost. I could write the script for Chris Harrison [host of *The Bachelor*] in 15 minutes. An episode of *ER* would take weeks to write.

Any plans for the future, aside from more reality TV?

Before I got into TV, I was a sportswriter. My next goal is to put together a group of investors to buy one of the [NFL](#) franchises.

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