

KINK.COM CEO AND
FOUNDER PETER
ACWORTH IN THE
DUNGEON OF THE PORN
PALACE, WHERE FETISH
FANTASIES ARE PLAYED
OUT TO THE TUNE OF \$16
MILLION A YEAR.

the new pornographers

NATURE MADE PETER ACWORTH A
BUSINESSMAN WITH A THING FOR BONDAGE.
THE INTERNET MADE HIM A MILLIONAIRE.

BY ROBIN RINALDI
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The dungeon is nearly as hot as a steam room. In the center stands 21-year-old Riley Mason. Around her neck is a steel collar, which is chained to four Gothic columns. She's wearing nothing but a shiny black, hooded straitjacket and six-inch black pumps. Metal braces on her ankles keep her long, slim legs spread and in place. Twenty feet away stands Lew Rubens—a bondage expert and the webmaster of Waterbondage.com. He turns on four high-pressure water jets, aiming two of them at her breasts, visible where he's ripped open her jacket, and two at her bare crotch. Riley's makeup begins to run and she squirms, but it's hard to tell whether she's struggling against the straitjacket and the deluge of water, or trying to maneuver her hips into just the right position.

The dungeon is just one of many rooms in this three-level SoMa building. There's also a dark "barn," a dank "basement," a bare "jail cell" and a long hallway stocked with riding crops and leather floggers. Upstairs, on the second floor, two dozen young film-school grads and dot-com survivors sit quietly at their workstations, editing footage on Final Cut Pro. In the corner office, 35-year-old Peter Acworth, the CEO and founder of Kink.com, checks his email. He's wearing cargo shorts, a loose polo shirt and flip-flops. Flow-charts are scribbled on a whiteboard behind him; DVDs and biographies of the Marquis de Sade fill his bookshelf. Outside his window, across Mission Street, is the *San Francisco Chronicle* building. A block away rises the dome of the new Westfield Centre San Francisco.

Above Acworth's desk is a framed article from a British tabloid, *The Sun*, which he picked up by chance while vacationing in Spain in 1997. The headline reads, "Fireman Makes ¼ Million Pounds Pushing Internet Filth."

"I realized this article was going to change my life," says Acworth. At that point, he had already earned a mathematics degree from Cambridge, a master's from the *École des Hautes Études Commerciales* in Paris—one of Europe's most renowned business schools—and was working toward a Ph.D. in finance at Columbia University. He had also worked for a year at Barings Bank in London.

"This guy had simply taken some photos, put them behind a password-protected area and started charging people with credit cards. There was nothing even remotely clever about it. The fact that he could make that amount of money was astonishing. I thought, Do I really want to finish my Ph.D. and end up in a bank?"

When he got back to New York, Acworth tried his version of the English fireman's plan. He signed up with an Internet service provider, bought a disk of licensed photos of women being

bound with rope and put them up under the domain Hogtied.com. The first day, the site made \$60. He bought a program to help move Hogtied higher in search-engine results, and soon the \$60 became \$500. Then he bought his first ad. By the end of 1997, Hogtied was making \$1,200 a day, and Acworth had lost all motivation to finish his Ph.D. He moved to San Francisco—"It's a liberal city, and the dot-com boom was gearing up"—rented a place in the Marina and started shooting live footage in his apartment, with models he found on Craigslist and through photographer friends. It was a lot more fun than pursuing a doctorate in finance: windsurfing at Crissy Field every day and earning a living by filming himself tying up pretty girls in his living room. "I'd have a still camera and a video camera on tripods, and I'd be running in and out of the shot to tie and spank the model," he recalls. "Models began referring each other to me, after they realized I was safe to work with."

It was a lot more fun than a finance doctorate: windsurfing at Crissy Field every day and earning a living by filming himself tying up pretty girls in his living room.

One day in 2000, Acworth's cousin sent him a video clip of a woman having sex with a dildo attached to the end of a single-piston machine. Acworth found someone on Craigslist who was willing to build a similar machine for \$3,000, and his second site, the far more graphic—and graphically named—Fuckingmachines.com, was born. These two sites remain the most successful on Kink.com—which was called, rather boringly, CyberNet Entertainment for almost a decade before Acworth bought the Kink.com domain earlier this year as the initial move in a rebranding strategy. Kink's other popular sites, whose names are fairly self-explanatory, include Sex and Submission, Whipped Ass, Water Bondage, Men in Pain and Wired Pussy (involving what's called "electric play" with electro-stimulation units, the kind chiropractors use on stiff muscles). There's also the female wrestling site Ultimate Surrender and a new documentary site called Behind Kink, a backstage look at how Kink runs its shoots.

With each site Acworth has added to Kink's repertoire, the company has grown: from five employees in 2000 to 15 in 2001, when Acworth bought an 8,000-square-foot commercial building on Eighth Street. The dot-com shakeup that ravaged SoMa barely registered at Kink. "September 11 was a slow day," says Acworth, "but two days later all our numbers were back up to normal." By 2003, Kink had outgrown its Eighth Street facility, so Acworth bought a larger building on Mission Street. It was originally valued at \$4.8 million, but he picked it up for \$3 million after the bank repossessed it from a developer who had already outfitted it for dot-com use.

It's in this 25,000-square-foot building, nicknamed The Porn Palace, that most of Kink's footage is now shot. The dungeon and barn are just two of the 11 sets that the Kink team has built from scratch. Today, Acworth employs 51 people. His various sites are run by five webmasters, creative directors who control all the content and earn a commission from the revenue. Somewhere between 50,000 and 60,000 people—mostly men, about half of them American—pay a monthly subscription fee of \$20 to \$35 to watch the weekly updates to Kink's nine sites.

It's estimated that from 5 to 10 percent of the US population engages in BDSM—an umbrella term encompassing bondage and discipline, domination and submission, sadism and masochism—on a regular basis. For the rest of us, stereotypes and misunderstandings are rampant: Mention bondage at the water cooler and watch how people react.

One common misconception is that those who practice BDSM are neurotically acting out sexual trauma from their past: In fact, studies of BDSM players suggest that the rate of sexual abuse they've encountered is no higher than in the general population. Another is that sadists/dominants ("doms") are similar to sociopaths, because both seemingly enjoy inflicting pain and control on others. The key word is "seemingly": Unlike criminal violence, domination and sadism within BDSM are temporary, negotiated and ultimately within the control of the submissive/masochist (commonly called the "sub").

The catchphrase throughout the BDSM world is "safe, sane and consensual," though admittedly those are relative terms, vociferously argued within the BDSM community itself. Still, in a typical BDSM scenario, both parties agree to the sub's limits and desires before the "scene" begins; their activities within it are referred to as "play" (breath play, electro play, even needle play and blood play); and most important, a sub can use a "safe word" to end a scene at any time, no questions asked.

Kink prides itself on adhering to safe words, along with several other shooting guidelines it posts online for models interested in working with the company. Those “models” (as the stars of the videos are called) are largely adult-film professionals who fly up from Los Angeles for the day, courtesy of Kink, and earn \$600–\$1,200 per shoot—the exact fees are based on the activities performed, and are also posted online. Kink’s rules include a strict condoms-only policy for male-female intercourse (even for monogamous couples), a negative HIV test no more than 30 days old and a ban on activities deemed too hardcore or risky—like needle play, for instance. Kink webmasters conduct two interviews—one immediately before the shoot and one immediately after—showing the model “out of character” talking about his or her experience. Those interviews become part of the final video that is posted online.

At a Whipped Ass shoot, for instance, webmaster Marty, a soft-spoken 20-something in khakis and a flannel shirt, goes over some basics with Alexa Von Tess, a model without much BDSM experience. Marty first tests Alexa’s pain limits with nipple clamps, then shows her the various props laid out on a production cart covered in black felt. He holds up a ball gag.

“Have you ever been gagged before?” he asks.

“No. I’ll probably drool.”

“Drool is fine. The messier

scene, breaking into Alexa’s bedroom, tying her up and gagging her as she lies helpless on her stomach. As the camera rolls, one of them hikes Alexa’s bottom into the air while hissing theatrically, “Little bitch, saying you don’t like it, and look at you—you *do* like it.” She slaps Alexa’s butt repeatedly.

As soon as Marty cuts, the blonde leans toward Alexa’s gagged face and asks, “You OK? How’s your ass?” gently rubbing the spot she’d just spanked. “Her skin gets red really fast,” she tells the crew maternally.



ACWORTH GETS A DOSE OF “WATER BONDAGE.” ON WATERBONDAGE.COM, BOUND MODELS ARE DUNKED IN HUMAN-SIZED TANKS AND HELD UNDERWATER FOR UP TO 20 SECONDS.

“When you’re tied up, it gives you a total release from responsibility. There are no decisions to make, and you can just enjoy it and be in the moment.”

the better. Your safe word will be ‘uh-uh’ while you move your head side to side. OK? So even with the gag in your mouth, you can use the safe word any time you want to stop. Is there a part of your body you don’t want touched?”

“I just don’t want my p—y spanked hard. That’s it.”

“OK, no spanking hard on the p—y.”

Later, two sultry blondes play out an assault

You could say that Acworth is simply a savvy businessman who was in the right place at the right time—porn is a perennial moneymaker, estimated to earn \$12.6 billion in the US each year. And as the industry expands from DVDs produced in the San Fernando Valley to streaming and downloadable video on the Internet, companies like Kink—with seasoned webmasters, online editors, programmers and

dotcom-savvy CEOs—are at an advantage. Like most porn companies, Kink.com is privately held and its revenue figures are difficult to verify independently, but Acworth says it made \$16 million last year, and expects that to increase by 30 percent this year. Some of his online competitors—RK Netmedia and BangBros.com, for instance—reported \$130 million in revenue in 2005. That kind of potential is music to Acworth’s ears.

“I’ve always wanted to be an entrepreneur,” says Acworth. Growing up in Derbyshire, England, he sold vegetables from his family’s garden back to his parents. At Cambridge, he started a dating service called Matchmaker. And at business school in Paris he produced a recruitment brochure and sold ad space to British financial companies. He counts Virgin CEO Richard Branson as one of his personal idols.

But capitalism wasn’t the only thing running deep in Acworth’s veins. For as long as he could remember, rope had harbored a strange fascination for him. “Even before age 10, I’d be watching a cowboys-and-Indians movie and if someone got tied up, I’d get an erection. I didn’t understand why.”

No one yet knows why some people are drawn to BDSM. But more than half of men who enjoy sadomasochism have had that tendency since before puberty. The majority of women who practice BDSM, on the other hand, don’t begin experimenting with it until

adulthood, usually at the request of a partner. Psychologists have speculated that the power setup in BDSM, with one person completely in control of another, is reminiscent of the childhood bond with parents, and thus evokes positive feelings of trust and safety. They also point out that as mammals, we’re hardwired to practice and enjoy domination and submission.

“I like the power dynamic, that’s what’s hot to me,” says Princess Donna, a Kink model who’s also the webmaster (and dominatrix) of Wired Pussy. “The trust, the eye contact, letting someone push your buttons. That’s what makes me happiest.” Dressed in black jeans, black loafers and a white Ralph Lauren button-down shirt, with her curly hair tied in a ponytail, Donna looks like any fresh-faced 24-year-old. She graduated from NYU two years ago with

a double major in photography and gender and sexuality studies, and now spends her days tying up porn stars like Justine Joli and Katja Kassin. “If a model’s not having fun, I stop the shoot,” she says. “I’ve never had a model say she doesn’t want to come back, and I’m really proud of that. When I’m the domme, my focus is completely on the girl, the sub.”

It might sound surprising—or perhaps a little naïve—that many doms report such a relatively selfless, relational experience during BDSM scenes, but it’s nevertheless true. What seems to turn them on is not primarily the ego gratification of being temporarily all-powerful, but watching the sub’s arousal and feeling completely responsible for bringing her pleasure/pain. “When I’m on top, I’m turned on if she’s turned on,” says Acworth, who’s been both dom and sub in his personal sex life. “She has to be getting off. The best of all is if she looks like she’s in a little bit of discomfort, but she also looks like she’s getting off.”

In the scenes portrayed on *Sex and Submission*, for instance, it is the sub experiencing most of the ecstasy. The sub moans, begs for more, comes to climax, while the dom appears focused, even businesslike. The dom strategizes and adjusts his actions to the sub’s response; the sub, on the other hand, experiences wild abandon. “In daily life, things are always expected of you,” Acworth explains. “You’re expected to be something. When you’re tied up, you just can’t. It gives you a total release from responsibility. There are no decisions to make, and you can just enjoy it and be in the moment.” There’s also a physiological aspect: During BDSM play, a masochist’s bloodstream is flooded with the body’s natural response to pain and stress: endorphins and mood-altering epinephrine and norepinephrine, the same neurochemicals at work in some drug addiction and in “runner’s high.”

All these factors may contribute to the peak experience submissives sometimes report as pain and pleasure merge, their own will is surrendered and the ego falls away. The feeling is called “subspace,” and it’s been described as blissful, trance-like, with a sensation of flying or floating. “Being with someone when they’re in subspace is a lot of fun,” says Acworth. “I’ve experienced

mild forms of it, but I’ve been with subs who have totally zoned out to the extent that I had to sit with them as they recover and come back to reality. They’ve all described it as blissful. As a dom, you have to be careful with someone who enters subspace, because they are no longer capable of making sane decisions about how much more they want or are able to take.”

But don’t expect all zoned-out bliss if you sign up for *Sex and Submission* or *Whipped Ass* (or even just watch the free previews). Many of the images can alternate between highly arousing

pants or impairing one’s ability to function—the fact is that BDSM explores some primal and potentially dark territory within the human psyche. While relatively few of us are drawn to the very center of that territory, most of us are quite at ease at its edges, experimenting with degrees of discomfort, control and aggression. A blindfold, a tug on the hair, a bite are just a few of the ways we dip our toes into the BDSM waters—or, to put it another way, a few of the ways we experience some of the aggression inherent in sex, which is simply magnified in BDSM.

Acworth’s goal now is to bring more of us in from those edges, and even to meet us halfway—and, not incidentally, increase his company’s revenue in the process. “Right now, a lot of our sites turn away the casual viewer because they’re a little out there. So we’re in the process of making more soft-core products.”

He also hopes to draw more female subscribers with full-length movies that explore the relational aspects of BDSM—similar to 2002’s *Secretary*—but also include graphic sex scenes. And he wants Kink to become more than just a porn site, serving as an educational and a BDSM community resource as well. To that end, the Porn Palace will begin hosting parties and fundraising events for local BDSM organizations. Acworth also helped the SF-based Society of Janus—the country’s second-oldest BDSM resource



WEBMASTER PRINCESS DONNA (CENTER) SUGGESTS, “HAVE YOUR PARTNER TIE YOUR HANDS BEHIND YOUR BACK AND BLINDFOLD YOU. WATCH HOW HEIGHTENED YOUR SENSES BECOME.”

“Subspace” is the peak experience submissives report as pain and pleasure merge, their own will is surrendered and the ego falls away. It’s described as blissful, like flying or floating.

and stomach-clenching. And if you consider yourself a feminist, or have suffered real violence in your own life, some of the scenes can prove emotionally upsetting. Until 1994, sadism and masochism were classified in the US as mental disorders. Though they’re no longer seen in that light—the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* now defines them as pathological only when involving nonconsenting partici-

group—establish their community center, the Citadel, which for two years was located in Kink’s former building on Eighth Street.

“Each city seems to have a community of people into this, but they’re still underground, a little marginalized,” says Acworth. “My goal is to demystify the fetish. I grew up feeling weird, wondering why I liked seeing people tied up. But there really is nothing wrong with it.” x