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[Taking stock of Jim Cramer's 'Mad Money' picks](#)

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Sunday, July 31, 2005



Watching Jim Cramer host his hyperkinetic stock-picking show produces a range of emotional reactions.

There's laughter. There's concern. There's amazement. And let's not forget horror.

To say Cramer is animated is like saying Al Gore is calm -- a gross understatement of character corrected only by an exponential increase in adjective. Al Gore is bone-crushingly dull. Jim Cramer is flat-out insane.

If you haven't seen the show, "Mad Money" on CNBC, Cramer uses his years of experience as a Wall Street insider and hedge fund operator to help viewers pick stocks. The best part of the show, by far, is the final segment, "Lightning Round."

Pacing around the cheesy set of the show and sweating profusely, Cramer takes calls from around the country that invariably begin with the greeting, "Booya, Jim!"

"Booya, Bill!!!!" Cramer hollers back, staring maniacally at the camera and waiting for the caller to throw out a favorite stock.

More often than not, Cramer will yammer out something positive about the company's standing and recommend a buy, which he signals by slamming this giant button on his desk that produces a stampeding cartoon bull on the screen that bellows its approval as it rushes toward the viewer.

It's like the George Michael Sports Machine on steroids.

A typical Cramer segment this week involved Mike from New York. After the obligatory Booyas, Mike asked about Daimler-Chrysler, which had just canned its CEO.

"Mike in New York!!! YEAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH! Daimler-Chrysler??!! THIS IS NOT THE AUTO COMPANY YOU WANT TO BE IN!!!!!! I like General Motoooors!!!!!!!!!"

It was a rare rejection of a stock from the relentlessly bullish Cramer, but it followed his primary mantra: "I LIKE TO OWN BEST OF BREED!!!"

It's one call after another, with Cramer growing increasingly agitated and loud. You actually start to fear for his health. In other words, it's great TV.

Whether it's any good as a finance show is another matter. Cramer has long existed in a vortex of controversy in the business news community due to his status as a Wall Street

insider.

The man has had a varied and eclectic career that includes a Harvard education, a stint as a newspaperman, a law degree, a gig working for former Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin and a role in the creation of American Lawyer magazine.

After running a hedge fund on Wall Street for a while, Cramer burst onto the national media scene when he founded TheStreet.com in the late '90s.

It was a classic dot-com, rife with new ideas, shaky revenue prospects and conflicts galore. The national business media were horrified that an actual trader was running a site that professed to practice business journalism. The requisite walls were erected between Cramer's businesses and the site, essentially divorcing him from editorial control, but the concern was always right there under the surface. Cramer's personality didn't help anyone feel better about things.

(A brief aside: Longtime Chronicle readers will remember that Cramer enticed our former stocks columnist Herb Greenberg away from print and to TheStreet.com years ago. Although Greenberg eventually jumped to online competitor Marketwatch.com, he's one of the only regular guests on "Mad Money," providing a relatively sober counterpoint to Cramer's rantings.)

Regardless of what you think of the founder, TheStreet.com is still around, and Cramer became a star because of it. For a while, he wrote a column for the old Hearst Examiner. He has a radio show. A column for New York magazine. And he still writes for TheStreet.

Cramer also parlayed his role at TheStreet into a regular gig on CNBC, sitting opposite arch-conservative economist Larry Kudlow, best described as Paul Lynde in pinstripes, on the network's "Kudlow & Cramer" show. That ended when Cramer decided to throw all caution to the wind and become the Howard Dean of finance on "Mad Money."

As he says at the top of each show: "Other people want to make friends.... I just want to make money."

So, is he giving people good advice? Like any stock picker, it's a mixed bag. Let's take a look at some of his recent stock-of-the-week picks, provided by viewers of "Mad Money" on the unaffiliated Money Talk personal finance Web site (www.money-talk.org).

-- On April 11, he picked Apple. At the time, it was trading at \$43. On Friday, it closed at \$42.65.

-- On April 18, he chose Pfizer. On that day, it was at \$27.75. It closed Friday at \$26.50.

-- On April 28, it was Google. Then: \$220. Friday's close: \$287.76.

-- On May 2, he picked Constellation Brands Inc. At the time, it was trading at \$27. It closed at \$27.40 on Friday.

-- On May 9, it was the PNC Financial Services Group. Back then it was at \$54.50. On Friday, it closed at \$54.82.

So, there you have it. Nothing great, other than Google, which my 4-year-old could have picked. But no train wrecks, either.

I guess it's best to take the long disclaimer that runs at the top of the show to heart. The

hilariously long block of text zooms past the screen at high speed and is essentially unreadable, but if you go to the Mad Money Web site (moneycentral.msn.com/content/CNBCTV/TV_Info/P108231.asp) it tells viewers that Cramer's picks are his own and should be taken with a huge dose of care.

I say watch the show. For every time he slams a Dell keyboard on the desk to prove the worth of the company's products. For every time you swear he's going to stroke out. But not for advice on your college savings plan.

Mad Money airs at 3, 6 and 9 p.m. on CNBC, which is channel 58 in most of the Bay Area.

Booya, Jim.

Talk back. Send your items to Money Talks at asaracevic@sfchronicle.com.

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