



## OUTthere Magazine - Issue 86 August 2011

Businessprofile ●

# Your call is important to US...

Mitch Brook catches up with a business personality who has worked hard to relieve our on-hold telephone angst: Kym Illman of Messages On Hold.

**"I** was pretty cheeky as a kid," says Kym Illman, owner of the Message Group – a group of companies based around flagship brand, Messages On Hold.

"I loved the radio. I used to call up for all the radio competitions, and went into radio for work after I left school."

It wasn't to be though, and after around five years of working in radio, Illman resigned, picking up work at Channel 9. That didn't work out however, and two years later Kym took a different path, one that would show his entrepreneurial spirit and prove his determination.

"I couldn't get a job in the media, so I started my own business in audio production," says Kym.

It wasn't long before his business was making in-store radio productions for around 100 Jeans West stores. After doing this for around 8 months, a pivotal moment came – one that would define his career: "I was put on hold to American Express," says Illman. ☺



skywest SW69

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Illman heard the uninspiring on-hold messages while waiting to speak to American Express ... and saw opportunity ...

Everyone has spent time on hold – whether it be to government agencies, telcos, insurers or a multitude of other services. Illman heard the uninspiring on-hold messages while waiting to speak to American Express and saw opportunity: this wasted time was in fact filled with marketing potential.

"I thought, 'Wow I could do that! I could voice it, I could read it, I could write it. I'd worked in radio [and had experience with this], so I went out there and started selling that idea."

His first client came in 1989 – the Australian Taxation Office in Perth (you can just imagine the monotone hold music that a call centre such as the Tax Office might have).

Messages On Hold provides a premium service for businesses who want to sound professional on the phone. The service is made customised to each applicant in the company's studios, with their copywriters, sound

technicians, voice actors and audio producers. In the last two decades, the company has expanded exponentially.

"Some 11,000 offices around Asia Pacific now have our systems in place and about one million people listen to our productions every day in 20 countries and in about 14 different languages," says Illman.

In addition to this, The Message Group now includes Message Vision, a visual marketing brand, and long-term investments in a number of high-end holiday homes.

The secret to the company's success?

"We push. Every day for the last 22-odd years, we have been working our bums off to introduce the idea to businesses. It's not the sort of product that anybody ever thinks of and rings up to say, 'Right, we're ready for it now, we ☺"



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Above: Kym Illman in the Messages On Hold studios in Perth.

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**FAST FACT**  
Ambush Marketing is a marketing strategy where advertisers associate themselves with events, companies or broadcasts without paying fees. By placing (often unofficial) marketing material in public view, brand awareness is raised.

Right: This image shows ambush marketing in progress behind an unsuspecting Richard Branson.

want to buy it! We pique an interest through our clever marketing, and then we have to sell the product and make potential clients understand how much of an impact it can have for their business."

Illman is a master of clever marketing. Hailed as one of Australia's best 'ambush marketers', he's been able to secure millions of dollars worth of free advertising for Messages On Hold over the years.

"When the idea of our product occurs to someone we want them to think 'Messages On Hold, that's what that's called.' We want our service to be the first one to come into their minds."

Illman gives an example of past ambush marketing successes for the company: "More often than not I'll provide my staff with the means to get into an event like the Olympics and they'll have to make their way down to somewhere visible, like the 100 metre start. At a certain time I know there'll be a camera shot at one end of the track, and if there's going to be people in the shot – they might as well be our people!"

In his spare time, Illman likes to keep it fast paced. "I race cars in Targa. In fact I was in Targa Tasmania last

year and I had one of the best crashes ever. I came off the road while travelling at 190 kilometres per hour."

Illman was unhurt by the crash, but the spectacle has over 120,000 view hits on YouTube (incidentally, all with the Messages On Hold logo throughout the footage – there's ambush marketing for you).

"I've also just started helping out a local football club in Lancelin where I have a holiday home, and I love photography too. They're the three main things I like to do in my spare time."

His wife has supported him in his business since the early days.

"She was my first staff member – that's how I met her and I thankfully married her. She still runs the business with me. My kids – how do they support me? It's nice watching them grow up and achieve things of their own."

If they learn anything from the something-from-nothing father, and make use of some of his marketing knowledge, perhaps they will come up with equally useful and worthwhile business ideas such as Messages On Hold.

We've all been on hold to companies and been subjected to their brain-drumming, ear-tiring looped trumpet fanfares and piano riffs that are high with static. On the odd occasion that you do hear an on-hold track that seems professional, informative or entertaining, perhaps you have Illman and his company to thank.

Starting out as a lackey in radio with a passion for audio production, Illman has pursued what he enjoys doing and built a large and successful business out of it. Out of his success, Illman has one piece of advice for other aspiring business owners that dream of success.

"Do not take no for an answer. There are too many people out there who specialise in no, and when I started up a lot of people said no. Certainly if I'd listened to all the people that said no to me, I wouldn't have been getting my own business out there." ☺

Hailed as one of Australia's best 'ambush marketers' ... secur[ing] millions of dollars worth of free advertising ... over the years.

