

WEEKEND

INSIGHT

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PAGE 53



The man who loves his name up in

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LIGHTS
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How Kym Illman became
the king of ambush
advertising **Pages 40-41**

He got Shane Warne cheap and other successful self-promotion

The king of being a nuisance

He's Perth's biggest publicity seeker, who either impresses or infuriates. Kym Illman loves his name up in lights and not just the Christmas variety. **Gail Williams** finds out what makes the media junkie tick



WHEN it comes to marketing opportunities there are no sacred cows for Kym Illman. Not even royalty is immune.

Sitting behind him in his East Perth office is a cardboard cutout of a tiara-wearing Queen Elizabeth. She's holding up a hand that bears a giant M and a huge tick. And emblazoned on Her Majesty's royal blue sash are

the words "Messages on Hold".

To Illman it's a constant reminder of the one guerilla marketing ploy that got away. To his critics it's just crass, evidence that this man's boldness and daring know no shame. If his plan to hold up the cutout at the royal sausage sizzle on Perth's Esplanade last year had worked, the free plug for his company would have gone global.

"Security wouldn't let anyone

go in with any signage," he laments. "It's a shame. It would have been great."

Shame? This coming from a man who, according to his detractors, doesn't know the meaning of the word. Messages on Hold, the business which he launched from his bedroom in 1989 after getting the sack from Channel 9, delivers entertaining messages to waiting telephone callers.

With a turnover of \$13 million a year, surely he can afford to advertise? But Mr Illman much prefers the ambush, with the company logo popping up everywhere an opportunity is identified.

It's appeared behind sports commentator Tim Gossage's head and at the Melbourne Cup. It's even popped up on a helium balloon behind Ann Sanders during coverage of the Olympic

Games in Sydney. "That one was really difficult," he said. "The studio was three storeys up and I had two guys holding on to the balloon with a great big long piece of fishing wire. No one at ground level would have known what the guys were doing."

And he scored thousands of dollars worth of free publicity from TV coverage at football matches at the then-Subiaco Oval in 1992 when he Blu-Tacked his

logo to the highly visible coaches' box.

"I got six games before anyone contacted me and told me I couldn't do it," he said. "Then I started paying for the spot and paid \$10,000 for a few years before anyone realised the publicity was actually worth around \$30,000."

"It's all about being cheap, identifying an opportunity and getting in before anyone else sees

Ideas even cheaper but this year, he admits, he finally went too far



Name up in lights (anti-clockwise from above): Kym Illman's Christmas lights this year with the *Gangnam Style* theme; Mr Illman takes down the lights down after the overflow of spectators impacted on his neighbours' last week; Mr Illman with Shane Warne during their Messages On Hold campaign.

it. When I watch sport I am always looking for stuff that I can get below par value. I want to be the first to get the spot at a low price." He did the same with Shane Warne, snapping him up in a very cheap sponsorship deal when no one else would touch him.

"We sponsored him for five years," Mr Illman said. "Picked him up when no one else was interested. At that stage he was in the papers for negative reasons. We also went to Ben Cousins and he never ever got back to me. Shane, in terms of image, went from zero to 100 and Ben Cousins went from 100 to zero."

When Mr Illman appears smug, it hasn't gone unnoticed. This week, when he pulled the plug on his annual Christmas lights show at his Churchlands home, saying the huge crowds were posing a threat to peace in his street, online comments on the story when it hit websites were dripping with cynicism.

From one "Poor guy? Seriously... meet him. He is and always will be an attention whore and doesn't do this for any other reason than to stay in the spotlight. Look at his history of publicity stunts. Better yet... don't. It's what he wants."

Mr Illman is the first to admit he's a media junkie. Volume of scrapbooks filled with newsclipper attachments to that. He'll get up at 4.30am to do an interview for eastern states TV. He will phone a newspaper if he's within sniffing distance of a good story (especially if he's the

subject). But the criticism is water off a duck's back.

"I wouldn't be in this business if I was thin-skinned," he said. But he agrees that, at times, he has gone too far. There was the time he held up his sign in front of a TV camera outside Portman Stadium, then learned that the reporter was doing a story about a young footballer who had died during the game.

He was unceremoniously marched off the course during the Johnnie Walker Classic golf tournament at Lake Karrinyup for holding up his sign behind South African champ Ernie Els.

"It was successful though," he said. It is there such a thing as too much publicity? Apparently.

He spent 200 hours setting up his Christmas lights and 90 hours programming them to the Korean pop hit *Gangnam Style*, but pulled the plug after just three nights.

He's blaming it on an American talkshow host Ellen DeGeneres. "After she named it as her favourite YouTube video we got 19 million viewers," he said. "On Sunday night they were expecting maybe 200 people (to come to the house) and we got 1000 and I knew that would increase exponentially to around 25,000 and the street would not be able to handle that many people so I just had to take control of it and took the whole thing down."

So ended a community act of goodwill that has raised funds for charity and entranced passers-by for five of the past six years. This

time the money would have gone to community sports organisations in Lankein.

Mr Illman said he was motivated as much by community service as opportunities to get his company's name out there. And though he curled abuse from disgruntled sightseers when the lights were turned off, there were far more heartwarming stories than sad ones. "Two years ago

of those since starting out on his astonishing entrepreneurial journey from humble beginnings in Adelaide.

Since he threw in a bank job, he earned a living as a disc jockey in Darwin before stumbling into a career as an audio engineer with Sky Television then Perth's Channel 9. And then he was dismissed.

"I can't tell you why I was sacked," Illman said. "It was a

chiever of the Year by The Australian Financial Review in 1995 and 2007 WA Entrepreneur of the Year. And his company has been Tebby's Small Business of the Year and had three listings in Business Review Weekly's list of the top 100 fastest-growing private companies.

In addition, he can brag about hanging out with Warne and the guys from Top Gear, Jeremy Clarkson, Richard Hammond and James May, who stayed in his \$5 million six-bedroom house in Lankein last year.

Mr Illman can thank American Express - along with his wild imagination - for all that.

After trying to establish a business selling peepholes for doors - "a stupid idea," he admits - he began recording audio segments to be played in Jeans West stores that he said, "got me out of the poo, monsywise". Then, one day he was on the phone to American Express and was left dangling on the line listening to its advertising spiel.

"It had never occurred to me before that you could use me for that by spreading a valuable advertising message," he said.

He got a brochure printed and began spreading his idea.

His first client was the Australian Taxation Office and he was a one-man band doing all the recording.

Twenty-three years on, his team of staff in Perth and Singapore number 81 and include a stable of voiceover

professionals, including former newsreaders and actors. They deliver company spiels in multiple languages in 20 different countries and have made Mr Illman a wealthy man.

For all his self-spruiking, Mr Illman says he rarely attends social events, preferring to stay home writing books on customer service and finishing an art piece which features 225 eyes.

"I'm intrigued by eyes," he said. "I have become passionate about photography and am spending my spare time taking pictures of people's eyes. I wanted to do something on a grand scale and have taken pictures of eyes from people aged three months to 94. It is a very fulfilling project."

Also keeping his overactive mind in overdrive is wondering what to do with a store room full of 45,000 giant white handers.

"I wanted to use them on a cycling race in Adelaide," he said. "I remember watching the Tour de France where they gave away green handers and all the punters were waving them. But you can't do it now because one rider got injured when someone leant over and a cyclist ran into one. So now I've got these things and want to do something with them."

Few would bet against him hatching a plan before the royal baby is born.

"Oh yes," he laughed. "Holding up a sign behind the couple showing off the newborn. That would be the gold medal in the publicity stakes."

We sponsored Shane for five years. Picked him up when no one else was interested. At that stage he was in the papers for negative reasons.



there was a boy asking me to put on the snow machine. I said, 'Every time someone donates \$20 I will put on the snow machine.' Then my wife told me to look behind the boy and I saw that his brother was in a wheelchair. I put on the snow machine and spent half an hour with him. Those are the reality checks."

The 51-year-old has had a few

stupid stunt. It was something that happened and I had to own up that I had done it."

Whatever it was, the incident spawned not only his successful company, but a luxury holiday home empire offering accommodation on the Gold Coast and in Lankein.

It also resulted in him being named National Young Business