

OWNER/MARKETER

Jim Wilson, *Phantom Billstickers*

Jim Wilson isn't your regular business entrepreneur. After a trailblazing youth hanging with bands and poets, supporting the arts through pasting up posters, and spending a decent amount of time lobbying councils for poster space, he never imagined his love for it would turn into the empire it is today. Now, the business is responsible for putting up street-level posters from Whangarei all the way down to Invercargill.

How did Phantom Billstickers begin in the early days?

Well I'd always been putting up posters ever since the late 1960s when I was booking bands and around about '78 to '85, I was booking the top venues in Christchurch ... and I managed The Dance Exponents [now just The Exponents] and so I was always putting up posters. I remember screen printing 1,000 A1 posters for Dave Dobbyn on my lounge floor and putting them up around Christchurch when Dobbyn first left The Dudes ... As soon as I started putting up posters I had all the arts organisations coming to me, asking me to put up their posters in Christchurch. So right back in the '80s I was putting up posters for the Symphony Orchestra, the Royal New Zealand Ballet and I don't think there's a major arts organisation in New Zealand that we don't put posters up for [today]. I always liked just going out in the middle of the night and putting up posters. I just loved it. It clears your head and it got you moving and you did something where you could see immediate results. So that's how I started really and right back then I started dealing with city councils and then you get stopped by the police and I claim that I've heard the words 'You can't put that there' more than anyone in the country. But I believed in what I was doing, so that made it easy.

How has the digital era affected Phantom?



We will be in digital media. We have got quite a strong Facebook page and we sent some of our guys to a digital media conference in Las Vegas this year ... And David Bowie once said it's better to be second at something, you know. So you watch what other people are doing, you watch their mistakes, and you learn from them and you try and get out there and do it better. And when we get into digital media we'll have different content than other digital billboards and bus stops that you see around town at the moment. Because we have a strong connection to the local music scene, we have a strong connection to the arts, we have a strong connection to the poet down the road who's trying to get heard. So we would incorporate that into digital media and I think that we would come across as, hopefully, being more real than just a digital billboard down there with an ad on it for a

Rocky Road ice cream. I mean we're happy to put up their posters as well but we always incorporate some of the arts into whatever we do.

So how did you go from that to making it into a legitimate business?

Well I started Phantom in 1982 and I sold it to another couple of guys in 1985 and I went and lived in America for a while. And I came back in 1992 and they wanted to sell it. And at that point in time what I saw happening in New Zealand was that we couldn't do them [put up posters] the way we used to because they were turning New Zealand into Singapore. The streets were getting tighter, the council would jump down on you quicker, the police were involved. At one time in Wellington we had Armourguard contractors taking down posters. And so I started intensely lobbying with

the city councils to put in poster bollards, legal space for postering. And at that point I turned it into a legitimate business. So I started working with city councils a lot more and I started offering the option of leaving the poster out there for a week. I'd give people a week's exposure and I could only do that if I started to lease sites and if I started to put in poster bollards myself. So we've put in a lot of poster bollards in Wellington, 30 or 40 we've paid for ourselves, and 60 or 70 in Christchurch which we've paid for ourselves. A friend of mine was running the Wellington postering company and he died of a drug overdose and I bought the postering business off his parents. So we were in Wellington, then we bought the Dunedin postering business and then the Auckland one. And the whole thing has been about making it legitimate and bringing it out into the daylight, like there's nothing to hide and like we are doing a worthwhile job for the arts and advertising agencies and anyone else who wants to use the medium.

How do you think you would incorporate digital?

[You need what] David Ogilvy once said is a 'unique selling proposition' and what our unique selling proposition is, is that we're on the street. So we would be putting digital signage on the streets and that's one thing that I'll be investigating when I'm in Vienna next week, and when I'm in Paris the week after. I'll be looking at how they do it and meeting with those companies. But I mean, digital media will leave an enormous footprint on this city in the fullness of time and we would be part of it, we would want to be part of it.

What do you think are the benefits of posters over something like a Facebook event page for promoting an event?

Well, a lot of people have a lot of trouble with Facebook. And I think [with] the events pages, once upon a time they may have worked. Inviting people to gigs and things like that but I don't think they work at the moment because there's so much saturation, there's just so much on Facebook now ... Why does *NZ Marketing* still exist? Because it's real, because it's there in front of you and that's what works really. The Sistine Chapel wasn't painted on a cell phone.

Where did the name Phantom Billstickers come from?

That name just incorporates everything about us. Somebody else gave me that name back in 1982 and it's just a fantastic name and it's enduring, I think. And you get some people [saying] when you travel overseas, and I put out copies of our café readers, or copies of poems or I give out my

business card and they see Phantom Billstickers. First off, they don't know what it means, secondly they start investigating it, thirdly, or perhaps first, they love it. It really captures people's imagination and that's where we come from. We come from the days of putting up posters in New Zealand where there were people kicking over each other's paste buckets and there were fights and there was people covering posters and then covering posters and then covering posters and then covering posters. And so you really had to do your poster run at five or six in the morning to be still up and I'd still be up when people went to work at eight in the morning. It was a great time, it was a lot of fun.

What's been your favourite Phantom marketing stunt to date?

Oh, I love the poetry [posters] and the Café Reader. I think the Café Reader is the best publication in New Zealand at the moment. I don't know, yesterday we had Anika Moa put up a poster on K Road and we're putting up posters for her tour nationwide and today we had some photos taken of people from George FM putting up posters for George FM and that'll be going up on Facebook, and just those things. We did some of The Lucky Taco's posters about a month ago, it was a fantastic campaign. The posters were screen printed so they looked very good, they were eye catching, Otis Frizzell does really excellent artwork. We get them all the time. Last year for New Zealand Music Month we put some kind of machines on posters that played music. People come to us all the time with these ideas and they want to be seen at a street level and it works for them and it works for us. There's just something that happens every week, and you think, 'Wow, that's pretty cool'.

Do you feel like you have maintained the early vibe of your business and keeping with those core values, or do you feel like you need to focus more on distribution?

What we say around here is that the core part of the business is flora for the concrete jungle and so everybody has got that in their minds as they go about their daily work and they try and transpose that to other people. Then maybe they forget and then maybe they come back to it. Because what you're trying to do is stay as authentic as possible and obviously we could make a good living just putting posters up there for soap suds, you know. But we try and keep the heart and soul of the business in it at the same time, the reasons why we came around in the first place. So even though you have got a reasonable sized business you're trying to keep it to that core function, otherwise you lose control a bit and it becomes something that you didn't like in the first place. ■

WORD WATCH

VEBLEN EFFECT

If it's expensive, irrational humans will place more value on it. And it's something all premium and luxury brands play on (and what many believe New Zealand should play more on). The effect is named after American economist Thorstein Veblen, "who first identified conspicuous consumption as a mode of status-seeking in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) in the late 19th century".

BLACKPHONE

"A modified Google Android handset impermeable to snooping thanks to its total encryption" that is "becoming a coveted device for the rich, powerful and secretive." Companies, individuals and governments are loving it, both versions have sold out, and 41 of the top 50 companies on the Fortune 500 are using them. The company, Silent Circle, reckons it's replacing Blackberry. See also: the Zero Phone, made by New York company NoPhone, which wants to become the world's biggest fake phone manufacturer. It ensures security by being a plastic rectangle in the shape of a smartphone that has absolutely no smartphone features.

RET CON

Short for retroactive continuity, a term that describes "the alteration of previously established facts in the continuity of a fictional work". Or, in the case of online publishers, sometimes the alteration of previously established facts in non-fictional work without letting readers know.

DECACORN

Unicorns (private companies worth US\$1 billion) are so 2014. And they're not actually all that rare anymore. These days it's all about private companies worth US\$10 billion, such as Airbnb, Dropbox, Pinterest, Snapchat, Uber and Flipkart. The phrase was coined by Bloomberg and it seems to have led to an outbreak of 'the Uber of X' syndrome, where companies try to piggyback off that company's success by applying a similar model to their market.