



Making It Stick

From its rock'n'roll beginnings in Christchurch in the early 1980s, poster company Phantom Billstickers has grown into a formidable nationwide operation.

Jim Wilson once found hitting the street to put up posters made a welcome break from his day job. As a band promoter in Christchurch in the 1970s and early 1980s, Wilson played a major role in a burgeoning local live music scene, bridging the gap between performers and venues and dealing with plenty of colourful personalities along the way. "I always just liked going out and clearing my head and putting up posters at night because it was easier than dealing with bands."

Today, that sideline has grown into a successful and expanding nationwide business that helps all kinds of artists and commercial clients take their message to the streets.

Wilson's first flyers were printed by commercial printers or on primitive office duplicating machines, but when new photocopier technology coincided with the arrival of punk rock, poster-making took off as a promotional tool. "Bands used to have a poster before they had a demo tape," he recalls. Bands often distributed their own posters sporadically in the dead of night but Wilson began to offer a bigger scale of campaign – and bigger posters than could be produced on a

typical photocopier. "I can remember screen-printing Dave Dobbyn posters on my lounge floor and putting up a thousand A1s all around Christchurch." Recognising the potential of the business, he founded Phantom Billstickers

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in 1982 and began to also pick up work from the wider arts world – organisations such as the Royal New Zealand Ballet, the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra and regional opera and theatre companies.

After a break from the business he bought it back in 1992 and has since grown it into a nationwide operation. "It's been onwards and upwards since then," he says. A growth in all kinds of arts activities and festivals brought more business, as did a lift in funding for the arts under the Helen Clark Government from 1999. Now Phantom puts up posters for all of the arts, writers, and film festivals. "Our core function is to enable Kiwis to express themselves."

Phantom bought out poster businesses

in Wellington and Dunedin to expand its reach, has employees in most provincial centres and has developed its Auckland business since Wilson shifted north in the wake of the Canterbury earthquakes. "Given the growth of Auckland it just made sense to make it our main thrust." That said, Phantom's national reach remains a major selling point. "People can come to us and say, 'Hey, we want to do a nationwide tour, these are the centres, give us a quote.'"

The company also distributes postcards, flyers, programmes and brochures into cafés and other retail outlets, with a network of more than 1500 dedicated flyer racks around the country.

Importantly, the poster-making that began as an unauthorised guerrilla-style activity, has become a legitimate part of urban environments, with local authorities often working closely with Phantom to improve streetscapes while retaining the colour and sense of activity that posters can bring. Leased and licensed poster sites mean that posters are displayed in high visibility locations and are guaranteed a week of exposure. Wilson sees posters as "flora for the concrete jungle" and is passionate about the heart and soul of

the communities Phantom serves. "I want to leave the streets better than I found them."

Purpose-built bollards – inspired by poster bollards in Vienna – are managed by Phantom under contracts with half a dozen local authorities; Christchurch and Wellington have about 60 each. Where posters have been seen as a problem for some city centres, "we can present it in a tidy format and in a way that works," Wilson explains. "We do all kinds of different things with the councils now."

The company has a site developer who also works with construction companies to manage the poster-making of walls around building sites, often within art-style frames. "That presents a format that people are likely to look at more," says Wilson. "I think those ratty walls, the way we used to do it, are well and truly over and done with."

Today, Phantom employs about 60 full-time staff and has broadened its business well beyond posters and flyers: "We're as much an outdoor advertising company now as a poster company," says Wilson. Phantom offers billboards and back-lit signs in car-parking buildings along with the established poster showcases. Plans are also being hatched for the delivery of messages through digital screens at street level. Wilson sees these investments in infrastructure and technology as critical.

While the company retains a strong focus on the arts, it also delivers campaigns for corporate organisations. The hundreds of clients it works with each month range from struggling bands to multinational phone and sportswear companies. It specialises in out-of-the-ordinary executions, such as putting herbs in boxes beneath posters for a cider brand or having cardboard "radios" playing music for a beer promotion during New Zealand Music Month.

The success of Wilson's business means he has been able to indulge a passion for New Zealand writing through not-for-profit 'poem posters' and a quarterly "Café Reader" distributed locally and in the United States, where he spends a lot of time. Many of his company's employees are themselves involved in the arts. "What I'm proudest of is the number of people we employ," he says.

BNZ has supported the company through the journey since the founder took over again in the 1990s. Back then, he opened a simple account at the Sydenham branch; these days, Phantom makes use of the BNZ Partners facilities in Auckland's Newmarket, hosting meetings in a conference room there. Wilson mentions an upcoming meeting with his BNZ Partner to discuss the Phantom's digital ambitions. "They've been very supportive of what we do."



Jim Wilson

Stepping up

BNZ Partner Devender Kapoor says Phantom Billstickers is a great example of a company that has evolved as it has grown into a national operation.

It has good governance, strong key personnel with a deep knowledge of the business and maintains effective disciplines, he says. "They also maintain good relationships and regular dialogue with their external professionals."

Profits have been left in the business over the years to fund growth, meaning Phantom has been and remains able to take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

"BNZ is delighted to be part of this company's story," Kapoor says. "We like to work closely with growing businesses to ensure they are offered the BNZ products best suited for their changing needs."

Phantom has chosen BNZ business credit cards as a way of easily monitoring spending. "Our Business First and Business First Lite Visa cards can manage and reconcile business expenses with simplified reporting, and BNZ's flexible payment options can help manage cash flow," Kapoor explains.

Phantom's Jim Wilson is also an advocate of BNZ's Internet Banking 4 Business (iB4B), which is suitable for small to institutional sized clients and which a 2014 Peter Lee Survey found was considered the number one online platform for New Zealand institutional clients.

Kapoor says many other BNZ tools are available to help businesses grow. BNZ Partners are always keen to help growing companies make the most of these products, he says, and – like Phantom – to embrace the disciplines around reporting, governance and planning that will set them up for success.

