

## STUNT KING

This daredevil promoter will stop at nothing to get his message across.  
Report: Jessica Gardner

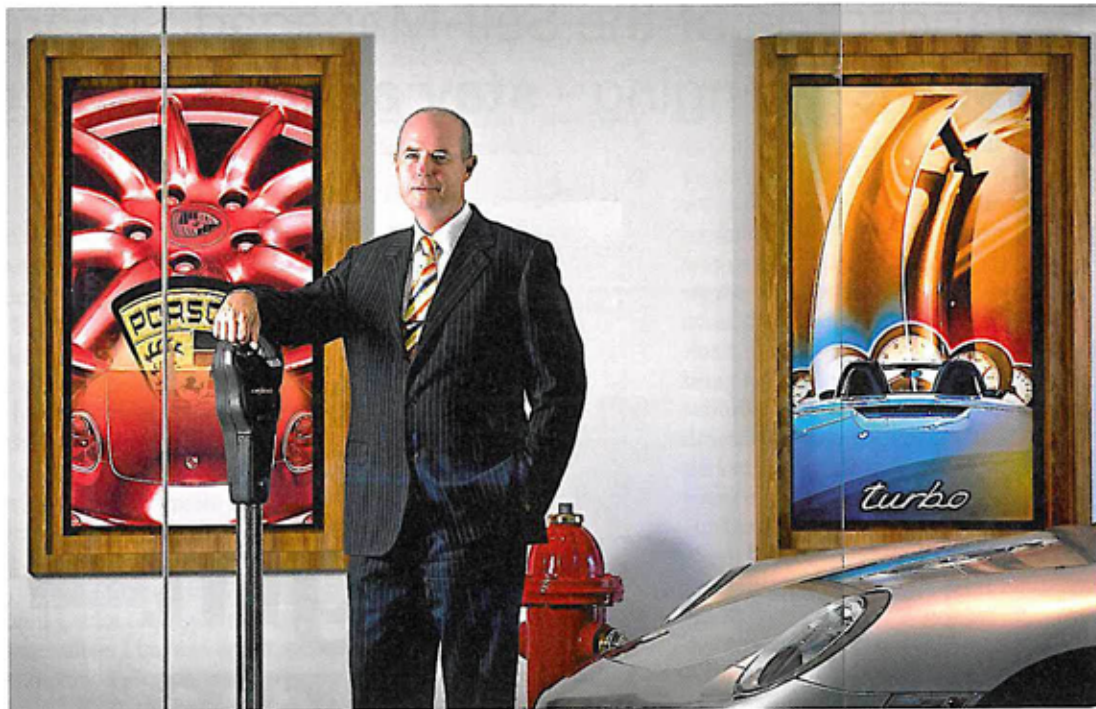
● Kym Illman appeared on the *BRW Fast 100* three times in the late 90s. These days he's still going fast, just sometimes off-road and most recently crashing into a paddock in Tasmania. Driving at speeds of about 190km/h in the Targa Tasmania rally in April, car enthusiast Illman misjudged a sharp left bend and flew about 35 metres off the road and out of the race. No one was hurt, but Illman and his car, emblazoned in logos from his business The Message Group, got plenty of attention.

The accident wasn't on purpose, but Illman is not shy and has pulled off plenty of stunts in the past to promote his business, originally called Messages On Hold.

Founded in 1988 out of Illman's two-bedroom unit in Scarborough, Perth, Messages On Hold created customised on-hold phone messages for businesses. To promote his business in the 90s, Illman paid young AFL supporters to sit behind the goal posts at West Coast Eagles and Fremantle Dockers home games. Whenever a goal was scored, they would madly wave giant, white, foam hands, with the Messages on Hold logo clearly visible.

Illman says his company has gained about \$2 million in free advertising by ambushing events such as the Sydney Olympics, AFL matches, Big Brother evictions and Seven Network's *Sunrise* program.

His stunts have been many and varied. In 2005, Illman bid \$2500 in an eBay auction to call an unborn baby girl messagesonhold.com.au. In the same year he secured the services of cricketer Shane Warne to record personalised



messages for his clients. At the time, Illman was warned the spin bowler was too risky, but in hindsight it turned out better than his other option - AFL star Ben Cousins, who went on to become a public relations nightmare.

Brand exposure meant that when Illman's sales teams were making calls, potential customers had heard of Messages On Hold.

"The first thing they would say is 'oh yeah, I know you,'" Illman says. "[When] you're known to them straight away, it takes away one hurdle."

Illman's business was not all opportunistic public relations. When Messages On Hold appeared on the *BRW Fast 100*, between 1996 and 1998, Illman estimates yearly revenue was between \$2.5 and \$4 million (*BRW* did not publish revenue figures then). He puts the company's early success down to a creative and dogged approach to sales. "We went out and found our clients," Illman says. "We didn't put ads in newspapers and wait for businesses to come to us."

Illman's team would pre-record customised messages before cold calling

**Ostentatious by design: Message Group founder Kym Illman makes it his business to grab the limelight**

### COMPANY

The Message Group

### FOUNDED

1988

### FOUNDER

Kym Illman

### CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Kym Illman

### REVENUE 2009-10:

\$12 million

### TRACK RECORD

*BRW Fast 100*: 1998

(ranked 98); 1997

(ranked 48); 1996

(ranked 15)

potential leads. They then had a stronger position to work from with a product ready for the client.

These days Illman's company has grown and diversified. He turned over about \$12 million last financial year, services clients in 20 countries, offering recordings in multiple languages and employs 80 staff. As well as the Perth office, he has an outpost in Singapore after acquiring a local on-hold message business in 2002. The Messages On Hold side of the business is still "the cash cow" that allows him to run side projects.

Those include Messagevision, a digital signage company, and Dream Holiday Homes, a string of luxury residences in Queensland and Western Australia rented for up to \$3000 a night. Illman says the properties "gobble up" cash but he hopes they will provide sound long-term capital growth.

Illman also started The Groove Gallery, a library of music he hopes to license for playback in businesses, such as restaurants. The inspiration for this business was the recent rise in licence fees paid to the organisation that collects artists' royalties. **BRW**

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