

Just Auto: just brilliant

Stuart Ridley
27 August 2010

Stuart Ridley talks to Ash Hunter of Just Auto about building a fortune being yourself — Forget the battle between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media. Print isn’t dead and online social networks aren’t kicking traditional storytelling to the curb. Ash Hunter’s Just Auto Network is building on his father Shayne’s legacy, helping motor enthusiasts buy, sell and dream in any medium they damn well want. A few minutes before our interview, Ash Hunter was in a business suit, fresh off the plane from Western Australia, where he’d finalised the acquisition of three automotive trader websites from Telstra.

Now he’s in overalls, sliding across the floor of his garage to show us the work he’s doing on his GT 350. There’s no duplicity: the Ash you meet in ‘business’ mode is the same guy motor enthusiasts chat with at events across the country or via his My Garage profile on his Just Auto website.



Pioneer with passion

Ash’s father Shayne Hunter did what plenty of business owners do: he found a way to build a career sharing his passion. Initially working in a spare room of the family home, Shayne launched a magazine called *Unique Cars* with a market-leading mix of classifieds, editorial and ads. He applied a similar business model to trucks, boats and bikes, building a stable that pioneered photo classifieds for collectible vehicles. Ash recalls his dad saying: “Advertise in black and white, dream in any colour you’d like.”

Magazines like *Unique Cars* helped niche markets expand across state lines. Years ago, most people’s experience of the buying, selling and dreaming of vehicles revolved around conversations with mates, and the occasional trip to a dealership or swap meet. By the mid-‘80s, Shayne’s photo classifieds-led Tradergroup titles were among the hottest properties in the market, resulting in an offer from the Packer-owned ACP that he couldn’t refuse.

While it certainly helped him provide more for his growing family, he missed the excitement of his chosen niche. He was soon driving the market again with Just Magazines, launching *Just Bikes* at the 1989 Australian Motorcycle Grand Prix, and outselling competing titles from the first edition. A pioneer in independent publishing, Shayne made the most of advances in publishing to give people who shared his interests what they wanted, how they wanted.

Classifieds + content + social networking = a new audience

While there have been versions of online communities for decades, starting with dial-up bulletin board systems, moving to newsgroups and then web forums, there wasn’t a friendly online home for the majority of Just Magazines’ audience.

That’s not to say people who love collectible cars and bikes have been slow to enjoy the internet – they’ve simply preferred meeting at real events and flicking through photos of awesome machines. According to Ash, that’s unlikely to change for the magazines’ core

audiences. What has changed is that Just Magazines gained new audiences thanks to the rise of online social networks such as MySpace and Facebook. Two years in development, the Just Auto Network launched late 2009 with a fresh take on social media aimed at people who want to 'buy, sell and dream' anything to do with collectible vehicles.

"By allowing people to comment and talk about the project at its different stages, it creates a discourse. That conversation that happens anyway in people's sheds - it can happen online" "It seems there's a small number of people using both," Ash notes. "From my point of view, that is absolutely awesome. We've just increased the reach of our marketplace dramatically. I want to make sure they feel good about consuming whichever they want."

This means that a person reading a magazine should feel great about getting the best possible magazine they can, he adds. And it should be the same for web audiences. "When we've got people accessing online, we make them feel great about using it. We adapt to ensure they get the right info that's easy to consume and they can contribute. At an event, we make sure people feel good about being part of it. At every point, we create more content. Then we put it in the same bucket and we push it to the right places in the right format. We launched the site six months ago. We haven't had any fall-off from print, but we've got huge numbers of people using the web now."

The iPad version offers greater opportunities to share photo and video content, though at this stage, Ash ponders: "Are we going to have \$#!%loads of people reading? I don't know." He believes it's about making sure the titles deliver what people want. "The web's cool when you can find anything, anywhere and everywhere. But sometimes I want to go to some reputable sources that give me what I want. They've pre-sorted what's out there. That's the great thing magazines do. So, are people who didn't grow up going to a newsagent going to say, 'Oh, I can look at magazine, it's an electronic portal of sorts. Do I like it? Can I consume it on the iPad'? Let's wait and see. I don't think it's the next One Big Thing. It's a combination of many points of distribution.

"We could turn into a marketplace where the classifieds become even more integrated, where by choice you can go in there and find the right things. The challenge is trying to find the right engine. You don't want to search through five million lines of text."

Rolling up garage doors across the nation

Before launching the Just Auto Network online, the best way to meet customers was at one of the many events sponsored by one of his titles, though as Ash notes, the events are more focused on showcasing finished vehicles than the works in progress filling garages across the country.

So the Network's My Garage members' section makes a whole lot of sense: now that more people are comfortable creating online profiles, they can share their passion with a tribe of new friends.

"The bit that is most exciting, that you don't see at events, is if you've got mates into cars or bikes and they're doing a vehicle up, you go to their place," explains Ash. "You go to the shed, have a beer, maybe help them do something with the vehicle. That's great if you've got a friend who's doing it.

"My Garage allows people to tell us what they're doing. They talk about their projects, they bought something, they painted something, they're changing a magneto on something else. So they're putting up photos, they're talking about it, and then someone will ask a question. And the cool thing is we're taking projects and putting that content into articles.

"We're finding that a project that didn't exist before in any of the other media has been created on the web. No matter where you come from, if you love collectible cars and motorcycles, by accessing this marketplace, everyone can talk. So My Garage is not just a My Garage within the website, it's hitting a lot more people in a lot more places."

Now that more people are having online conversations around community-generated stories, something as simple as a blog post can spark advertising interest. A recent post about a customer's difficulties in finding old Wentworth spanners (handy for working on older bikes and cars) triggered ad listings in print and online. Behind the scenes, the Just Auto team helps businesses serving the enthusiast market come to grips with using blogs to talk more about what they love doing, including the projects they're working on. There's a strong focus on sharing human interests, rather than simply pushing products. Many of the businesses who regularly advertise had web pages already, but hadn't changed them in a long time. By giving them easy-to-use content management tools, the Network helps them connect more frequently with like-minded people.

"With collectible cars, it doesn't matter whether you're going to an event, reading a magazine, hanging out in your mate's shed or you're online – you actually want to do the same things," explains Ash. "You want to keep the ties, you want to admire, you want to talk about what's been done or what's different. You want to talk about the romance of the vehicle and you spend all your time talking about the object."

The web section on projects is another connection point where anyone involved – be they a parts supplier, painter or mechanic – can show off their skills and explain the thinking behind their work.

Not everyone can actually come to your house and sit in the shed to talk about what you've done – but everyone wants to. As Ash explains, people have enormous pride in their vehicle projects, so it's not surprising they're jumping at the opportunity to put some photos up and start conversations: "If you're doing some work on a project, there's always someone who knows a bit more, who could give you some advice. By allowing people to comment and talk about the project at its different stages, it creates a discourse. That conversation that happens anyway in people's sheds – it can happen online."

Nett Magazine, September 2010 edition.