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PRINT POST 231239/6
ISSN 1322-6398

Barry Bull

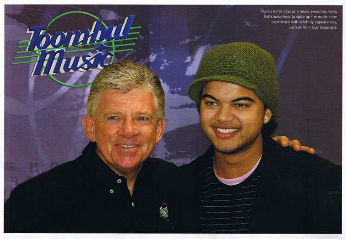
THE MUSIC MAN GETS TOUG[H] ON CUSTOMER SERVICE

IT'S ALL Bull

The music industry has been transformed by technology several times over in the past 20 years. Camille Howard talks to a self-styled music merchant who turned every change into a plus in the form of new strands in a career that goes on thriving when most people his age are retiring

MUSIC IS IN BARRY BULL'S VEINS. HE EVEN CALLS HIMSELF THE MUSIC Man, a phrase long since adopted by journalists, and at 63 he's still developing new goals and sharing the secrets of his success via books and public-speaking.

Bull's music career began in retail before scoring a job in the marketing department of CBS Music (now Sony/BMG), in Queensland, and he rapidly ascended to director of marketing for CBS Australia. While many would be thrilled with the opportunity to mix with celebrities of the rock world, it soon wore thin for Bull, who decided the time away from his family wasn't worth it. "As exciting and glamorous as this may seem, I was never home and I had a wife and young family." So, returning to Brisbane, he gave it all up to run his own business: the acquired Toombul Music store.



Thanks to his days as a music executive, Barry Bull knows how to spice up the music store experience with celebrity appearances, such as from Guy Sebastian.

Every substantial business model will be challenged by technology in some way, Bull suggests, so all businesses adapt with the times or risk being left behind. "The technology that was threatening us, which was the internet, was also the technology that was giving us opportunities." While technology, particularly internet downloading, eroded the core component of his business, it also offered new components—computer programs and navigational control systems they utilise for other parts of the business. The big winners are consumer electronics, and now, home cinema.

Electronic Interiors, the home cinema arm of Toombul Music, allows Bull and his team to apply their knowledge of home entertainment and music and video to the home, and this new strand now contributes a major profit to the business. "Now that business is very expandable," he says. "We install home cinema systems throughout south-east Queensland, just from our base in Toombul, and the average sale for that business is $50,000 to 100,000."

The extra offerings brought more attention to the store, with customers travelling to visit them. Then the awards flowed in. "My vision was to win a national award, and it took nearly 10 years to win it." In fact, Toombul Music won Westfield's National Individual Specialty Retailer Award three times. Topped off with a Commonwealth Centenary Medal in 2003 for his business achievements, the gongs added another point of difference.

> "The technology that was threatening us, which was the internet, was also the technology that was giving us opportunities"

Not only was the attention great for the store, it was great for Bull's next reinvention. "All this focus on one store in Brisbane got me on the speaking circuit." Starting with talks to other retailers in the centre, it wasn't long before speaking agencies contacted Bull to get him on board to talk about small business success, getting paid in the process.

And when he noticed all the good speakers also wrote books, Bull put pen to paper, publishing *A Little Bull Goes Along Way* in 2001, then *My Little Book of Bull* in 2002, and his latest book, *The Bullseye Principle*, due out around March-April this year.

EXPERIENCE v SERVICE

While many businesses have grown by opening more stores or franchising, Bull says his success came because he *didn't* expand. He had to look for other ways to build the brand. He says this, reinvention and diversification, is the only way for the retail music industry to survive in a climate where music sales have been declining between seven and 10 percent per year.

> "The business with a product or service I am going to choose, is the one which informs. Information is powerful"

While there will always be customers who want to visit the store to buy a CD, digital forms of delivery are increasingly eroding this tradition. Despite that, Bull puts a lot of thought into making the shopping experience special for his customers.

Relationships with customers are also key to Bull's success but he maintains this goes beyond customer service, beyond 'have a nice day'. "Customer experience has to replace customer service," he stresses. "In other words, what happens to your customers the moment they come in contact with your business to the moment they leave. What is that experience? If they want a CD, we find it for them, we may have to order it from overseas. It's about rewarding our customers with what they want."

Bull believes too many businesses are focused on price point, with disregard for service values. "A specialist like me is never going to win on a pricing judgement but we work on experience," he says. "The customer remembers the experience long past the price."

And because he only has one store, Bull says he can be sure his staff works to those values every day, beyond learning how to operate the point of sale systems and approach customers. "They're given this little culture about trying a little harder, smiling, offering information and creating conversation that leads to more business but also to customers feeling that we're here just for them."

Bull pays close attention to continual training and support for his staff, to ensure the team provide this experience. "We talk about that with every customer interaction. What is it that you did with that customer you just served that was a little more than you had to do?" And while this takes time he recognises it's an investment that more than pays for itself. "Our competition is flat out getting staff to meet the job description, but it's the way you teach and train that counts."

Similarly, staff wages reflect his desire to get the best from his team, but the rewards don't come free. "We pay a little more, and we expect a little more," he explains. "If we can have our people performing that little bit more every day, every week, every month, it's like compounding interest, and at the end of the year it's very bankable."

The real return on investment, Bull says, is measured by the number of referrals to the business. "Retention plus rewards equal referrals," he quips. In the home cinema arm alone, for example, a huge 90 percent of the business comes from referrals.

No matter whether you're a plumber, accountant, physiotherapist or retailer, Bull says the lessons in business are simple: "Know your customer, know what they want, when they want it, why they want it and where they want it. Spend time finding out what the customer needs, so you can tailor your offering. The business with a product or service I am going to choose, is the one which informs. Information is powerful."

Then, he says, retain each customer with a goal of keeping them for life. "If you can keep that customer for life, you have no further acquisition costs." He says too many businesses make the mistake of spending their time attracting new customers when they need to be taking care of the ones they already have.

Bull embraces his own mistakes as lessons to learn from. His biggest errors came from setting unrealistic goals, or goals with unrealistic time frames. But by failing to meet these, he was forced to sit down and more adequately plan his goals, giving the business more direction in how to achieve them. "A whole new set of business protocols that I was unconsciously searching for myself, fell into place." These ended up being the 'hit list' for his first book and principles he embraces throughout his life.

Bull knows there comes a time when a business owner, particularly in a family business, stops being valuable to the business in terms of what they bring to it. From music marketing whiz to retail legend to author and speaker, 63-year-old Bull can't see himself retiring, certainly not in the near future. What he does see is more reinvention in whatever form it may take, leaving the day-to-day running of store to his three children.

Even though not directly involved day-to-day with the business, all of Bull's current activities involve continuous brand building, carrying the bull further and entrenching himself more deeply as the music man. DSB

THE BULL HIT LIST

1. **Vision:** Bull didn't aim to be the biggest but the best.
2. **Goals:** he set goals with a realistic and flexible timeline.
3. **Difference:** celebrities came to the centre and drew more customers.
4. **Connections:** Toombul Music offers loyalty clubs; tracks purchases, and maintains databases of customer info so they know what customers want.
5. **Value:** Bull diversified his range to add more profitability to his store.
6. **Change:** embracing new forms of technology.
7. **People:** develop and retain key people—some of Bull's key staff have been with him for 25 years.
8. **Accountability:** the buck stops with Bull.
9. **No is negotiable.**
10. **Happiness:** it's the key to success, not the other way around.