

The Australian



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Try to make your passion a business

- Bernard Salt, Demographer
- From: The Australian
- November 19, 2009 12:00AM

THIS is a significant week for a reason that no one else will appreciate. It is exactly 20 years since I was first quoted in the national media on the subject of demographics. The story of how I got my start is an odd combination of luck and, looking back, naive determination.

In November 1989 I was 32 and had been working with the management consulting unit of a major accounting firm for six months. In the previous September I had walked into the managing partner's office and said I had an idea for a research report that might generate advisory work with the property industry. My idea was to draw on ABS data to produce a ranking of the fastest-growing municipalities in Australia.

I was so convinced of the appeal of this way of looking at information that I tabled a mocked-up version of a document that I had painstakingly assembled on my kitchen bench over the previous three months. I had an idea. I had a draft. I needed a vehicle. Here's where luck came in.

The managing partner at that time was a man by the name of Doug Carlson. For reasons that I still cannot fathom, Doug took one look at the draft, asked one or two questions, leaned back in his chair and said: "No, we won't pitch this privately to developers. We'll launch this to the media as a national research report. Oh, and let's get our PR firm involved."

I walked out of his office stunned. What had I done? What if it fails? How much does a PR firm cost? I soon found myself outlining my idea to specialists from the PR company Hill & Knowlton. They coached me in how to deal with the media: "Remember, Bernard, you are the expert. Just tell your story."

The real value of the PR firm was not so much in their coaching (which was nevertheless helpful), it was in their ability to conceptualise a press release based around the bizarre subject of demographics. They said they had spoken to their contacts in print, radio and television about the report and received "interest", whatever that meant. They even insisted on delaying the launch to allow the news of the fall of the Berlin Wall to recede.

My report was launched at 11am on November 17, 1989. I remember driving to work that morning almost sick with fear that I had manoeuvred a national media event that was going to flop. How had I managed to convince myself and others that the media would be interested in a ranking of the fastest-growing parts of Australia?

The launch was a stunning success. For seven hours from the time of the launch I was inundated with requests for interviews from journalists across Australia. No one had previously pitched the idea that there could be a "fastest-growing part of Australia". The Australian newspaper and others quickly jumped on the story.

I repeated my annual demographics report during the 1990s. By the end of the 90s I knew there was a market for a popular

book (The Big Shift) which I published in 2001. Other books, this and other columns, and speaking engagements followed.

In the early 1990s I was taken aside by an expert in public relations (not Hill & Knowlton) who said, "Bernard, we think you're over-exposed".

I thought, if I am over-exposed, then so be it: the media won't call and I'll stick with advisory. I wasn't perturbed by the thought and I'm still not. Whatever will be will be.

In the mid-1990s a person to whom I reported took me aside and in a well-meaning sort of way said: "Bernard, let go of this demographics thing. It'll never get you anywhere."

Initially I was shaken by this advice. But then, I thought, I enjoy what I do and if that leads to penury then so be it. I had accepted that I was "going nowhere with the demographics thing".

I think there are several lessons from my experience in commentary, the media and business over the last 20 years that may be of interest.

The first is that every young person now and then needs a Doug Carlson.

Doug is following my much-espoused baby-boomer retirement model: he plays golf and bridge in Noosa and still does the odd advisory job.

The second is that well-meaning advice from older mentors should not always be followed.

It was probably sound advice for me "to give the demographics thing away".

After all, by the experience and measure of the person mentoring me then, no one had done what I was proposing to do: make demographics popular and accessible to business and the community.

My third and final piece of advice for any generation Y (who reads my columns) is to persevere.

By persevere I don't mean for a few months until you get bored but for years, even when the remuneration is not what it should be, even when others tell you to stop, even when there seems to be no traditional measure of success in sight.

The only way you can persevere under these circumstances over this length of time is if you have developed a business interest around your passion.

Find your passion and set about making it your business.

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