



TRAILBLAZER

SHORT STORY ADVENTURES AND
PRACTICAL ADVICE ON BECOMING
AN ENTREPRENEUR.

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UNCONVENTIONAL LIFE

It was a stroke of genius when George Costanza looked at his life and decided, there and then, to do the exact opposite of everything he had done before; "Jerry... It's just not workin'." And with that, he decided to change everything. "Nothing's ever worked for me with tuna on toast. I want the complete opposite of tuna on toast... chicken salad on rye, untoasted with a side of potato salad and a cup of tea!"

The above scenario occurred in a Seinfeld episode and although I wouldn't say that I took SUCH extreme measures in my own life, I did decide to step out of my comfort zone. I took a look at what I liked in my life and where I wanted to be.

You see, my life consisted of following the rules set by my parents, going to school, getting a good education, getting a reliable job - in my case, working in insurance and working my way up the corporate ladder. For over nine years, I moved from rung to rung in my career in insurance, stuck in a corner office. Could I say that I was entirely happy? Well, I wasn't unhappy. I had a good work environment, good friends, was well paid, but I seemed to be getting older without creating any experiences that I could look back on.

There was a steady paycheck, a routine that I could live with, but something was missing. I think it was a sense of adventure.

I think my first foray into doing the opposite came upon reading the book "Rich Dad, Poor Dad" by Robert Kyosaki. He asked the question was everything we were told in fact a lie? Do we really need to follow the rules and the safe route in life?

It was exactly ten years ago when I decided to break the rules, take some chances and live my unconventional life, as I affectionally call it. It's about not following the herd mentality and I wish I had found the courage to do it sooner.

You see, when you've got a mortgage, debts to pay, it takes courage to go without that reliable paycheck.

I've had to get out of my comfort zone and think on my feet to create my own salary. I've been involved in a number of business ventures, from starting my own investigation company, to running an importing business, to becoming a cartoonist, running an entertainment agency and, finally, becoming a worldwide traveling entertainer.

It's been a journey in chasing freedom, following my passions and to live the life that I wanted. To set my own hours, to do what I wanted, when I wanted. To gain that same security that I had when I worked in an office, but also create some fun in my life.

I've now turned my business into an ongoing adventure. I've gone from working in a corner office at work, to performing in front of thousands at glitzy events around the world. And it's a great ride.

After a recent show in which I performed for 400 people all dressed in black tie and elegant gowns, a lady in her fifties came up to me and said "You have got to be the most unlikely person to be entertaining". "How so?" I responded. "Well you don't dress like an artist, you're down to earth and don't have an ego.. but your art was fantastic. And you don't act like a comedian, but your show was hilarious. You DON'T LOOK AT ALL like an entertainer (as she touched my paint stained collared dress shirt), but that's the best show I've seen in 20 years!"

It was probably the best compliment I've had and come to think of it, this lady is precisely the reaction I am looking for in life and in business. A big point of difference. **I want to be a trailblazer.** I never set out to be an artist. I wanted to create something entertaining and the medium is the artwork.

A trailblazer by definition is an innovative leader or pioneer in a particular field.

I think we all have it in us to 'blaze a trail'. It's about being different, giving things a go, living your passion and working hard to make it happen.

Let me now share with you some of the fun adventures I've had, some lessons I've picked up along the way and the journey I went on to become an unconventional entertainer. So come join me for the ride. Let's be trailblazers.

TALENT WITH NO SUCCESS

In 2007 I found myself sitting in the green room of Channel 7 studios in Melbourne, Australia. There were about 30 people in the room ranging from 5 years old to about 70. Channel 7 had flown us in for the first season and the very first episode of “Australia’s Got Talent”. They were hoping to emulate the success of the chain of “Got Talent” shows from around the world.

Looking about the place, there were kids getting dressed up in angel costumes, an older gentlemen playing the gum leaf, and a bunch of teenagers doing handstands. With no prior knowledge of the show I wondered to myself what on earth I had got myself into. I was already performing my shows in front of a corporate audience and really didn’t want to be seen in a bad light on national television with a bunch of amateurs. I had heard that the judge was “Red Symons” and having seen him on ‘Hey Hey it’s Saturday’ in the 1980’s and 90’s, I knew he was there to put down contestants (the US version is Simon Cowell). Anyway, we all sat waiting in the green room waiting for the executive producer of the show to brief us.

An Asian guy approached me – he was about 50 years and wearing normal clothing – a collared shirt and pants. He asked me “And what do you a-do?”. I explained to him that I paint really fast. We got talking about our different backgrounds and he explained to me in his broken English – or Engrish as some people call it, that he “makes a party trick.”. It turned out that he also performed professionally in Sydney for over twenty years, but only at Chinese events. He explained that business wasn’t all that good. I asked him for a business card, he had nothing. I asked him for his website, he had none. He offered me his phone number. How good could this guy be, I thought to myself.

Anyway, he offered to show me a trick and, with that, pulled a small metal ball from his pocket. It was about the size of half a tic-tac. He opened up his mouth wide and placed the small metal ball on his tongue. Now I am pretty handy with sleight of hand magic – I’ve worked as a magician at events and I know all about invisible thread, magnets and pulls that he could have used. However, with his hands behind his back, he then swallowed the ball.

At this point he opened up his mouth for investigation to show that the ball was indeed swallowed. A few of the teenagers ceased doing their handstands and joined me in looking into his mouth, searching for the ball. It was clearly gone.

The Asian guy then turned to me and said in his broken English "And of which hole do you want the ball to come from?". Despite the teenagers yelling out "Arse!" I took the safe option and thought I would trick him, I replied "From your eye". Looking like he had done this a thousand times he looked at me and said "And which eye, left or right?". "Left eye" I replied.

The Asian guy inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. He then brought his left index finger to just above his left ear. He made a motioning movement as he seemingly pushed forward the skin between his ear and his temple with his index finger.

Now I don't know if I was seeing things or not - but this day I could have sworn I saw a metal lump under his skin moving from his temple down to his eye socket. The Asian guy then made a blinking motion and, lo and behold that, little metal ball could be visibly seen in the corner of his eye. At this point he had captured the interest of most of the people in the room. The crowd went wild.

He leant over and the ball fell from his eyeball into his outstretched cupped hands. He was on a roll, and his little show was clearly not over. He looked around the room and walked over to a small coffee table. He emptied a bunch of minties and fantaes out of a small white bowl and came back to the crowd with the bowl.

Now most Asians I have ever met are pretty shy, but this guy was clearly quite the entertainer. He took off his shirt, exposing his bare chest. He then inhaled and made a weird Chinese noise, one like you may have heard in a ninja movie during the fight scenes!. He then placed the white bowl onto the upper part of his stomach and, quite miraculously, it stayed there.

By this stage the whole audience in the green room was watching him and he announced "Anyone can try to move the bowl". The only condition was that you could not stick your fingers underneath and rip it off.

One by one the teenagers had the first shot, they pushed downwards, leftwards, rightwards without even moving the bowl. Then it was my turn.

As I stood to his right, I had another guy in the green room stand to the Asian guy's left to act as a counter weight, so that I could really have a crack at it. I pushed onto that bowl as hard as I could. It was like playing tug of war- in reverse!. I pushed the bowl and the Asian and the other guy tried to hold still.

Despite me sending them both off-balance the bowl remained suctioned to the Asian guys stomach, it was absolutely amazing.

At this point the Asian guy made his weird ninja noise again and reached up casually and took the bowl from his stomach as if it was nothing. We were still all applauding as he put the minties and fantaes back into the bowl and the executive producer of the show entered into the green room.

The next day was the filming of the first show and there I was in the makeup rooms. Being bald, most TV shows pad my head down with some type of make up so my scone doesn't shine too much on TV. I don't mind, actually it feels relaxing – so here I was, sitting back, watching a TV monitor in the makeup room which was showing a live recording of what was happening on the stage. Out walked the Asian guy onto the stage.

He walked out in a traditional Chinese dress carrying a serving dish with eggs and some cups. He placed four of the eight eggs into holders so the eggs stood vertically in a square pattern. He did the same with the other four eggs. As the music started, he calmly took off his shoes and slowly balanced himself, one foot at a time, on top the eggs.

As he brought his second foot up, he was clearly seen to be standing with each foot flat on all four eggs. The audience stood up and gave him a round of applause, whilst my make up lady remained unconvinced. She said "Oh they must be fake, or they're hard boiled, or something". Knowing what this guy was capable of, I just smiled as one by one, the Asian guy broke open the eggs into the empty glass, proving that they were just normal eggs.

Immediately the make up lady exclaimed "That was unbelievable". "Yep" I responded "and you should have seen what he was doing in the green room!". She said to me "What was his name again?". Can't remember I said.

This may sound obvious, but RULE NUMBER 1: GET YOURSELF SOME DECENT MARKETING.

Word of mouth is fantastic, but without that business card from that Asian performer, I have nothing to show you. I haven't heard of him anywhere since. He was known only in the small Chinese community and has probably stayed that way. What a shame.

I've told plenty of people that story and I really wish I could show them a video. But all the talk in the world doesn't mean anything to him, because I cannot show them his website. I've searched for him on the internet and cannot locate him either.

It amazes me some of the other entertainers and bands that I come across that do not carry a business card and/or have a promotional video on their website. Crazy! Why would I hire you if you can't prove to me what you can do for me?

The same really goes for any occupation – let's take a landscaper for example. How would you hire a landscaper? Well, on your website, I don't just want your contact details. I want to see EVIDENCE of the work you have completed successfully, how about before and after photographs of amazing transformations. Give me at least 5 case studies.

I'll go even further – give me a time-lapse video of your project, along with a testimonial from your clients. Convince me that I have to buy from you. Give me a guarantee that you can do it quicker, quieter, without mess, without interruption. Give me the evidence, give me a guarantee and I would happily pay you a premium for your expertise.

You see, on the road to becoming a trailblazer, you firstly need to show me that you are the expert in your field and this is accomplished with essential marketing in place.

TREAT PEOPLE AS YOU WANT TO BE TREATED

A few years ago, one of my businesses, Red Faces Caricatures, won the contract for a bunch of caricature gigs around Australia in pubs and clubs for Suntory, a large alcohol company. For those that are unaware what a caricature is, it's a drawing of a person that distorts the noticeable characteristics of that person. The idea was that if people tried one of their brands, they would receive a free caricature of themselves.

The gigs were a lot of fun, we did over 400 venues from casinos, pubs, nightclubs and everywhere in-between. There were about 30 artists involved, however, my fondest memory was from a job that I personally did on a lazy Sunday afternoon in Newtown.

Newtown is located in Sydney's inner west, and is known for its diversity - restaurants, comedy spots and perhaps most of all, the lesbian and gay community. I rocked up at the Marlborough Hotel where they were promoting the whisky. I was ready to draw some funny faces.

It turned out to be just the right time – within five minutes the place was packed, it turns out that a girl was having her 30th birthday and had invited all of her lesbian and gay friends. Awesome, should be a busy afternoon!

Now I tell you, that afternoon, I was absolutely flat chat! I couldn't have wished it any better! They loved the whisky and they loved getting their 'free' picture drawn. You see, as a cartoonist I have a set formula of drawing couples. I'll draw the female on the left of the paper about half way down and I'll draw the male on the right of the paper about two inches above her. Having the heads at different heights makes for a more stylised drawing.

So I stuck with the same formula, albeit with some changes. With lesbians, I could often tell who was the 'male' in the relationship. Think Portia de Rossi and Ellen. You have the one person as the female lesbian – long hair, dress, a full face of makeup (ie. Portia) and then you have the male lesbian – short hair, more likely to be wearing jeans and converse shoes (ie. Ellen). As couples came up together to have their drawings done, I really couldn't believe just how easy it was to spot who was the female/male lesbian's in the relationship. So true to form, I would place the female on the left and the male on the right...

As I worked my way through the stack of drawings, my next in line was a female at the party. She had forked out the money for a drink which she didn't really want, but she wanted a picture of her friend "Sally" who was standing behind her. "No worries" I said, "have her take a seat."

As she moved out of the way, I saw who Sally was. Sally was about 115 kilograms (about 250 pound), dressed in something pink (sorry I can't remember), with big shoulders, thin lips and a blonde wig. I could clearly see that bluish tinge on her face, where "Sally" had just shaven – yes Sally was the first transvestite I had ever drawn.

Sally took a seat and in true typical female style said "Oh please be nice". Now how does one answer that? I thought for a second and replied "Yes maam". Anyway I got talking to "Sally" and asked what she (we will refer to her as she from now on). Turns out she drives a truck for a living. I thought to myself – of all the things you could do as a transvestite, this one is a truck driver.

Anyway the drawing went well. I was left with one problem that I had to solve before I completed the drawing. Usually on males I will utilise a pencil to indicate in shading where a beard is, I mean, you really could see the bluish tinge on her face. Should I put this on Sally? I decided to give the shadowing a miss and instead gave Sally pouty lips – I mean, every female wants pouty lips don't they? As a final touch, I placed a few flowers behind her ear.

I showed Sally the drawing – she loved it, she jumped up and shook my hand (a very firm handshake) and left with a big smile on her face.

In life and in business you have to treat people as you want to be treated. We are all individuals and no matter if you are Sally or the President of the United States, I like to think that we all 'put our pants on one leg at a time'.

Since this event I've travelled extensively for business. Regardless of your nationality, age, occupation, celebrity status or wealth you need to show that you do not have an ego – make it a rule that you always treat people with respect.

SUPER HERO KIDS

Every year I try and help out with the Variety Club. They support disadvantaged kids and have an annual Christmas brunch. Usually they have a few thousand kids at the event and so I go along and draw them. They also have a range of activities for the kids, usually a headline singer and some other performers like clowns, stilt walkers and acrobats.

If you have ever been down in the dumps or contemplated how tough things are, a few hours with these kids can turn it all around for you. The kids are basically in heaven here, they get all the candy they can eat, show bags and entertainment and the smiles from ear to ear can melt your heart.

We usually have some big queue lines because with a few thousand kids, there are generally only two or three cartoonists that are willing to donate their time at essentially the busiest time of year.

A few years back I worked with my colleagues Steve Panozzo a fellow caricature artist, and David Rowe, who works for the Financial Review and who is arguably the best newspaper artist in the country.

It is a touching sight, as many of the kids have Down syndrome, are in wheelchairs, some even operate them only with a deformed hand on a control or are pushed by their carer.

So we have a long line up of kids and in between drawings, I look over at Steve, his face shows a warm smile as he draws a caricature of the young boy in a cape flying through the air. I look over at David, he is drawing a young girl as a ballerina twirling on her toes. It should be mentioned here that both of the subjects that are being drawn and children in wheelchairs and will never have the opportunity to walk.

As the carer pushes the next child in the wheelchair in front of me, I decide then and there to draw every child as a super hero, because to live a life with these disadvantages, that is exactly what they are.

Every time I do this event, I walk away thinking just how lucky I am. It affects me deeply knowing that these children will never have the opportunity that a normal child receives. I know we all have to make our fair amount of money to buy the things we want, but to donate your time without conditions, will give you an appreciation of your life and is something we all should do.

So volunteer some of your time to someone less fortunate – it helps you appreciate what you have and it will be repaid to you in good karma.

SPEAK THEIR LANGUAGE

This one is another story from my China experience back in 2003. I was sharing a room with Steve, the Kiwi cartoonist and had just finished a gig with Joanne, somewhere in Tianjin.

It was about a week into the tour and Jo and I went back to our hotel at about 3:00pm to our respective rooms to relax for a couple of hours. Our working shifts were staggered and I knew Steve would be due back in about an hour or so.

I thought I'd have a quick shower and then do some sightseeing. As I entered the bathroom I closed the door behind me and locked it (as you do when you are sharing a room). The lock clicked in an unusual manner and I remember then trying to open the door again – to no avail. The door knob basically just swung 360 degrees.

There was no screws on the door knob and it was clearly busted. I tried to pull the whole thing off the door frame, no chance, I tried to kick in the door, no chance, I was clearly stuck.

Now luckily inside of this bathroom, in downtown Tianjin there was a phone next to the toilet. Great!

I picked up the phone and pressed the reception button. On the other end was the answer “Nee Hao” from a young female voice. “Yes this is Brad, I am in room 923, I am stuck in the bathroom, the door lock has broken”. “Yah” was the response. “Can you send someone up immediately”. “Yah” was the response.

Ten minutes went by with no sign of anyone. I rang reception again. “Nee Hao” answered again. “Yes I am locked in my bathroom – 9 2 3. Is someone coming up?”. To which there was silence following a shuffling of the phone. “Wey?” answered. “Yes this is Brad I am in room...” then there was more shuffling on the phone. Finally “Herro? Can help?” came onto the phone. “Yes I am locked in my bathroom – room 923, the lock is broken”. “Yes”.

Oh no.. this is hopeless, I thought. So I tried to banged on the door – “yes – I am locked in!” as I punched the door with my hand. “Yes” was the response.

Now when you are in a tight little hotel room, you start thinking stupid things; ‘I wonder how much oxygen is in this room?’.

I waited another twenty minutes before calling the reception again. “Nee Hao” answered. I just banged on the door and yelled “Help – I’m locked in!”. The phone was shuffled again to another person. “Hello? Wey?” was the answer.

Now here we are in some remote area in China, I’m stuck in a little hotel room, banging on the door and all I am getting from the reception guy is “Yes”. I mean, it’s not their fault that they can’t speak English, we are in their country. I just wish they didn’t answer “Yes” to everything without understanding.

Finally the phone was shuffled again to a male “Hello?”. “I a m l o c k e d i n t h e t o i l e t”. I said in the slowest possible way. “Yes sir, I will call maintenance” said the male.

About thirty minutes went by, when I heard some noise outside of my hotel room. It was somebody knocking on the front door of the room.

I yelled out – “I am locked in, I can’t answer the door!” to which I banged on the door again. Gees, I am locked in the toilet and they send someone up to knock on my door.

To cut a long story short, they finally entered into my hotel room and managed to unscrew the whole door lock from the bathroom. It was nearly 6:00pm when I got out, so I had been locked in for over two and a half hours.

Within ten minutes of getting out, Steve arrived at the hotel room with a couple of shopping bags. “So what have you been doing for the past couple of hours and why is our door knob missing?” he said.

In business you need to speak the buyers language. It’s like my example of being stuck in the hotel room – you can talk all you like, but if they don’t understand it, you won’t get out and in terms of business, you won’t get sales.

Make what you do clear and concise. I have a friend who is a cartoonist, caricature artist, speaker, author, master of ceremonies and now he also does two different entertainment shows.

You go to his website and it's an absolute mess. He is also trying to sell prints of his caricature drawings, his cartoons, as well as promoting all of these other 'services' he provides.

He redoes his website every six months and always asks for my comments. I've told him straight up – if I was a person browsing his site I wouldn't last ten seconds. I still have absolutely no idea what you do. As a buyer I want to hire an expert. The solution? Have multiple domains for your different work, make it clear to the reader or your prospect what you do.

Better still, concentrate on one thing only and only move onto the next one only when you are the expert – Don't be a jack of all trades, master of none.

'Jack of all trades, master of none' is a figure of speech used in reference to a person that is competent with many skills but is not necessarily outstanding in any particular one.

THE BEST LINE EVER

When I was working as a caricature artist, I tended to develop a number of standard responses. In fact it can drive you insane. I feel sorry for really tall people, I am sure they get asked the same thing on a daily basis "Wow, you're tall, how tall are you exactly?" and then this would be followed by "So, do you play basketball?".

Well as a caricature artist, like our tall friends, you get asked 2 questions which absolutely drive me insane:

1. How long have you been drawing for? To which my standard sarcastic response is "about 2 minutes". The smarter people recognize my humor and move onto question 2 whilst the remainder then ask "err.. I mean, when did you first start drawing?". Now I might then have a proper conversation or I might just reply with something like "Well, I started drawing in prison a few years back..." and give a sly grin.

2. So do you do this for work? This one can really get under my skin. Here I would be at a company conference dressed in a suit on a summers day in Sydney and some guy asks me "Do you have a real job?". "Nah I was outside busking, happened to be wearing a suit and I love drawing so much, that I thought I would just come and work for free" would be my sarcastic response followed by a wink.

So that's just a warning, if you ever get drawn, try and ask something original.

Then we come to the audience jokers. This is the scenario - you are drawing someone in front of other people. Someone from the audience pipes up with "Gees, you didn't have to make her nose that big!". Now I wish I had a dollar for every time that has happened.

Now I've heard a lot of lines but the best has to be the story from another caricature artist as he was drawing. The caricature artist was half way through drawing the face, when someone from the crowd that was gathered around him piped up with "Gee, you didn't have to draw his ass first!". Finally we got an original line.

THE COW STORY

It was a most unusual request: "So the final painting of the night Brad... what we want you do is... Well we want you to paint a giant cow!".

The event was the annual Queensland feedlot convention with about 800 people, and this was certainly an unusual request. "Yeah, no problem" I responded, as I began to wonder how I could paint this cow in four minutes, and more importantly, how on earth I could make it exciting for the audience.

It was certainly a busy time of the year for me and I had been planning a number of events around it. The same week I was painting a CEO in Singapore and then painting a female award winner, also in Queensland. With a few jobs on in the same week, it is a case of a bit of preparation, getting photos of the subjects for the portraits, mixing music for shows and generally working out how to add some sizzle to the show.

So a few weeks went by and I was planning the shows out. I had requested a photo of the CEO from Singapore and the award winner from Queensland and now focused my attention to the feedlot convention. You see, the client had a particular cow scene in mind. "These farmers know their cows, they want you to paint a particular cow with its markings, so I will send you through a photo now!".

Five minutes later the phone rang. "Hi Brad.. It's Tom from the association. I just want to confirm that you received the photo on the email". I quickly refreshed my email and the photo of the cow appeared. I clicked on the attachment to see a great big black and white spotted cow. "Great photo," I said jokingly. "What a great looking cow!". The phone went silent for a few seconds. "Well some people call her a cow!".

All of a sudden it dawned on me. I was speaking to a representative of the company that was giving the award to the female employee and not the feedlot association.

Afterward

So I did the painting of the cow and true to the event organiser's word "it went off". Even though I also painted Bono, Elvis and the CEO that night, the cow fetched over \$6,000 for a charity and was the most highly contested auction item out of all my paintings.

I actually learnt a lesson from this show and that is of customisation. If you can customise your product for the buyer, you will be more successful.

In my cow story, I initially thought that the painting of a cow was a ridiculous idea, even though I did agree to it. The fact is, is that the event organiser was absolutely correct – these farmers live and breath their cows and while it's not everyone's cup of tea, that is the painting that excited them. I also put on Australian country music whilst I painted the cow (Lee Kernaghan – Country and Western singer) and it was all about relating the show to THEM.

Since this show, although it takes me a little bit of extra time – I do like to customise all my shows for the audience. Doing this has taken me to Singapore (where I painted a building opening), Dubai (where I painted an image of the Dubai Creek Golf Club) and also to work for companies such as Mercedes (where I did a number of shows painting their very first automobile and their very latest automobile) and Wrigleys (where I painted a picture of an M&M!). I think if I had just an 'off the shelf' product, these opportunities would have gone astray.

So if you are in the service industry, make it specifically about them.

DON'T SHOOT THE CARTOONIST

On a balmy night back in 2005 I was drawing for a leading web based company (well one of the largest internet companies.. but I won't mention names) at a Christmas event. There were about 100 people in the middle of the CBD, at an open top bar. In true Christmas party style, the alcohol was flowing.

Now tonight, I was drawing on large A2 paper with a Masonite drawing board and a thick juicy marker and I've gotta say, I was in the zone. I don't generally see people different, but tonight everyone looked like a cartoon character to me.

One after one I peeled off hilarious drawings of the staff and clients. Some had humungous foreheads, some had chins that took up three quarters of the drawing pad. Soon the drawings started circulating and within an hour I basically had everyone from the party surrounding me. I had to sit down because people were standing on chairs to see who I was drawing and just who I was 'taking the mickey out of'.

As I finished a drawing of a guy with a massive double chin, that I had turned into a quadruple chin, people burst into laughter, laughing so hard that they were coughing from not getting enough oxygen. After this subsided and tubby moved off the chair, I could see that people were scared. The seat remained vacant, even though I had announced "Next victim please!".

You see, it's fine if you are just one on one having an exaggerated drawing made, but once you are in front of an audience, I guess it can be similar to being stripped naked. Every feature of the face is examined and basically made fun of and this was exactly what I was doing. I can certainly understand why people were scared, but you they knew what they were in for if they took a seat – it was for the entertainment of the audience.

It was time for my next victim and a few guys suggested that Carlos be drawn. It took a chorus of about 10 people to start chanting his name, before finally everyone joined in. The crowd all turned and it was like a parting of the red sea as Carlos stood there, obviously reluctant to be drawn. He was basically dragged by his arms by fellow co-workers into the vacant seat and this is when I got a real good look at him.

It was clear that they had sent the poor lamb to the slaughter, poor Carlos definitely wasn't the best looking guy. I think he was of Indian descent, he had a chubby face, a severe monobrow, basically one super thick eyebrow, that was just a continuation from one side of his temple to another. But what really stuck out was his nose. It was massive, like Gonzo from Sesame Street. Not only did it protrude, it was bent like a beak and they had set poor Carlos up for a flogging.

I introduced myself and Carlos shook my hand and then basically stared at me, without a hint of smile, almost knowing what was going to happen.

The moment was surreal, I remember having the whole audience hanging on every pen stroke. I started by turning the page landscape instead of portrait and drew a massive nose right in the centre of the page. This alone was enough to crack every one up behind me and for those who could see the drawing. Next I moved onto his mouth, having had his nose dip down I made it look like that part of his nose overhang his mouth. Once again, people cracked up and Carlos tried to see the drawing, which I had purposely slanted so that he couldn't.

Next came the eyebrows. I basically drew a large rectangle above his nose and colored it in black. Doing this, I had people behind me laughing so hard they were crying for not only did it look like Carlos, it had hammered him.

It was at this point that I decided that I wouldn't continue further. I mean, I didn't want to add his eyes and hair, I just kept it as a cartoon. I spun the drawing board around and the crowd burst out laughing. It was the sound of about ninety nine people laughing hard at once, the only person who wasn't laughing was a stone faced Carlos who basically pierced my eyes with his glare.

I unclipped the page from the drawing board and handed it to him. In one continuous motion of taking the paper, he ripped it in two and stood over me. People were still laughing and I really didn't know what to do. Before I could even wipe the smile from my face, Carlos grabbed my Masonite drawing board, held it with two hands in front of him and kneed it right in the centre smashing it in two. It was like he had turned into one of those Bruce lee opponents who broke the boards before Bruce would look calm and say "Boards don't hit back" before disposing of their sorry ass.

Immediately a bunch of Carlos' colleagues rushed at him to try and calm him down whilst the other half of the crowd seemed to be now laughing harder at what had just happened.

So Carlos walked away and the event representative apologized to me for his behavior. She immediately offered to pay for the drawing board and the night continued on.. Without me really doing any more exaggerated drawings.

Aftermath: The company held their next Christmas party exactly twelve months later in the exact same venue. It was like de ja vu.

Immediately as I entered the event, people came up to me talking about last year. "Remember Carlos from last year? That was hilarious, we can't wait for you to draw him again this year!". Yes the group was trying to set him up again, the mongrels!

After about twenty minutes Carlos came over and apologized for his outburst from the previous year. I mentioned jokingly that I only brought one drawing board this year and so we both agreed that he wouldn't be drawn again.

LEADING THE WAY ON CREATIVITY

Whenever I travel to Asia, my eyes open up to the different ways they do things. I am not just talking about how they can efficiently transport 7 million people around Hong Kong (a train every 3 minutes!), whilst Sydney struggles with just 4 million people (a train every 15-30 minutes!) in an area that is one and half times the size, it's their whole approach to everything. Specifically I would like to give you some examples within my industry, event entertainment.

My first foray into Asia came in 2008 when I painted Nico Rosberg (Formula 1 driver) at a RBS Formula 1 event at the National Singapore Museum. They had a few other pieces of entertainment that were fun - rather than having a bar, the bar staff were all young females in tight Formula One clothing on roller blades serving cocktails. They scooted around the floor of the Singapore Museum on their rollerblades serving the drinks. They also placed a real Formula 1 car inside of the museum and placed a simulator machine on a computer in the dashboard of the vehicle. They had Nico set his best time on the simulator and had all the guests trying to beat his time.

In an art themed event last year, of course they had myself the speed painter, but they also had guys walking around as the Mona Lisa with their heads and hands sticking through the painting. They also had models with a palette hat, complete with paints. The event teams are creative and, with so many events, they have to be able to capture the imagination of invitees.

Another example that comes to mind is shopping centers. In 2009 I was involved in a launch in 2009 of a new shopping centre opened in Singapore by Asia Malls. They invited me because they wanted something totally different to normal entertainment and to generate interest in the centre. The fact is, Singapore is definitely not short of shopping centers, it has hundreds - and browsing through them is like watching the first hour of the movie Groundhog Day (movie with Bill Murray). They all have the same stores, and the shopping centre that I performed at opened directly in the centre of 2 other large shopping malls.

During my last corporate show in Singapore in 2011 I saw 3 different acts in shopping centres – I went back there again to 2 of these shopping centres just to see the acts again.

You can bet that next time I am in Singapore (actually, next month), I'll probably visit them again, just to see if they have something different on.

What I am trying to say, is that in today's highly competitive world, YOU need to stand out. It doesn't matter what you are trying to promote, if you don't have something unique about you – it can be your service, your product, your guarantee, then like most businesses that start up, you will unfortunately fail.

Let me give you some examples of how common businesses have stood out and why I use their services:

My dentist: I have to say that I actually don't mind going to the dentist. A very personable dentist, he lays you back in the dental chair and above your head is a large LCD screen. He switches on the screen and always has the latest movies ready and gives you the choice on what you would like to watch. He puts these big earphones that completely muffle any noise from his dental equipment. A few years ago I was in the chair for about 30 minutes and was pretty disappointed he had finished so quickly, I was enjoying the movie!

My Post Office: After the retirement of old George and Wilma who owned my local post office for ten years a young ambitious owner (Robert) purchased the business. When I first collected a parcel, he confirmed my name and my post box number. The next time I walked in a few weeks later without prompting he said "Hi Brad, good to see you, I'll get your mail now".

After years of old George serving me, he had never once called me by my name. Within two weeks, Robert had memorised the names of the majority of postal box owners. I bumped into Robert at the airport a few months later and had a good chat with him about his business – he thought THAT was the priority and very first thing he would do before other exciting projects he had for the shop, like changing the layout of the counters etc. He became personable with all of his clients. He actively takes an interest in their lives – he remembers the name and one small detail about everyone. His sales have doubled.

The clown they call “COOKIE”

In 2008 I had the fortunate experience of performing in Fiji. The event was a festival in Suva, Fiji and was called “Showcase” – it was an annual event where Fijians from all over would travel to Suva to shop, eat food and watch some unusual entertainment.

The guy organising the entertainment was from NZ and was a clown called Cookie. He explained that he had been doing the Showcase festival for a while now and had brought in all sorts of acts from around the world including magicians, fire eaters, people on stilts etc.

Arriving in Suva, I was picked up by a van and taken to my hotel. Along the way the driver listened to Vita FM – a radio station that played the latest music. During the commercial break I heard the voice of “Cookie” as he encouraged everyone to come down to the Vodafone arena. As we entered into Suva there was a huge poster of Cookie also advertising the dates for Showcase.

After settling into the hotel it was about 11pm and I heard a knock on the door. This is where I met Cookie, without the makeup, of course! He is a down to earth New Zealander who loves his fishing. He has been a professional clown for years and he reiterated that he has performed at Showcase for nearly two decades.

Cookie explained to me that the Fijian audience are very different from the one back home – you have to use simple terms so that they understand what is happening and you have to basically work the audience and tell them what to do. They tend to be extremely quiet and sit in awe of the entertainers.

A few years ago he had a stilt walker in Fiji and a lot of the people thought she was born that way, ie. With very long legs, and felt sorry for her. Clearly this was a different world, as I was about to find out.

Cookie explained that he was quite well known in Fiji. The story goes that when Suva first opened the McDonald’s chain of restaurants in the late 1990’s the Fijian people were calling Ronald McDonald “Cookie”. I really couldn’t believe that a ‘clown’ could become this popular.

The great thing about being a clown is that nobody in public knows your identity. Cookie was the same, his real identity remained a closely guarded secret. When in role, he wore white gloves, his face was fully painted white and he had a bright yellow wig, so Cookie could have been anybody – Indian, Fijian or Caucasian. Cookie had his own changing room and only hung out with us in the media room, where nobody else was allowed.

The following morning we fronted up to the Fijian media in costume – we did a few radio interviews and then some TV interviews. On the way home, Cookie had our driver stop by the side of the road. He said, “Watch this” as he opened the van door and walked into the school. A couple of children spotted Cookie and they came running. Within five minutes it was crazy – there must have been at least 300 kids surrounding Cookie trying to touch him. It was absolutely out of control – I’ve never seen anything like it.

I sat in the crowd the following day watching Cookie perform for about 2,000 people. Watching the crowd I noticed the adults laughing just as much as the kids. It was almost surreal – Cookie would have the kids bow and using his big clown shoe he would kick them up the bum. It then dawned on me – these are just really simple people, the simpler your act, the better. No wonder he was a star – he didn’t need to do something amazing, he just brought his comedy to their level and they loved it. Cookie had it down to a tee, he would ‘speak their language’ using simple terms. Even his magic tricks – there was nothing too complicated there, making silks change colours and that sort of thing - but it was simple, clean and fun.

That night Cookie and I decided to go out for a drink. Well, one drink turned into another and seeing as we didn’t have to work until midday the next day, there was no pressure to come home too early. We got talking about magic and Cookie started showing me some tricks. Within a couple of minutes we had a crowd gathering.

Now I just remember being on the dance floor in some club in Suva, watching “Cookie” performing for a bunch of people. It happened almost in slow motion – he put into his fist a yellow silk and it vanished showing his palms empty. He closed his fist and brought out a bright red one. The audience went crazy!

It was then that I asked one of the females, had they heard of Cookie the Clown? Of course they had heard of Cookie, they answered. Cookie stood next to me as we revealed that the man they were watching was indeed the famous Cookie.

They all looked puzzled and funnily enough, didn't believe us.

This story goes to show that the sky is the limit. A clown can capture the minds of an entire nation. Cookie has built a reputation (firstly in New Zealand) and then around the world at being the best in the business.

Other opportunities presented themselves – he had a regular double page in the kids section of the Woman's Weekly, then came sponsorships, then came festivals. I don't think it is fair to say what Cookie earned in the past year – but let's just say my jaw hit the ground when he told me.

Become the expert and dominate your industry.

JUST DO IT

Back in 2008 I was one of four international acts to perform at showcase, Fiji's largest annual festival. To set the scene, the acts were all housed in vocative arena Fiji and the stage faced the stadium seating. During most shows there were two to three thousand Fijians crammed into the venue. It was a fantastic learning experience for me because until then I was still relatively 'green' in the entertainment world. Any nervousness that I had performing in front of large audiences quickly disappears when you perform two shows a day to thousands of people.

There was one situation though that had me on edge. We were fast approaching the conclusion of showcase when I received a knock on the door of my dressing room. It was from the festival organizer "Brad, today our interim Prime Minister Commodore Frank Bainimarama will be coming to the show. We really want you to do a picture of him during your show". Wow I thought, my first prime minister. "Absolutely" I replied "..and how about I do it all impromptu on stage.. I promise not to say anything out of line! I will call him up put him next to the easel..'

"Definitely not Brad!" the organizer interrupted. "You see, with all the political unrest here in Fiji, there is always the risk of an assassination attempt. He will be in the audience, right in the centre of the crowd, but please do not make mention that he is with us today... Oh and please make sure you do a good job of his picture, his bodyguards carry machine guns" and with that the organizer gave me a wink and left the room.

I have to say this was pretty nerve racking. With an hour until show time I jumped on the Internet and googled Frank Bainimarama. And there he was, mainly in military apparel. I quickly printed one out and setup for the show.

So my music comes on and I introduce myself to the crowd. There must have been more than 3,000 people in attendance but the weight of just one person felt like it was even more.

I jumped into it, better to get his picture out of the way first up. I had sculled about two energy drinks just before the show and was fired up.

In a bunch of nerves I started on the picture. I mapped out his facial features and it started to come together rather nicely. The music was pumping and I could hear noise from the crowd as they got into it.

I had nearly completed the painting when I had a mental blank.. What is the name of this prime minister again, is it bainorama or bananaroma. Either one seemed like a tongue twister to me and I think my face must have been pale as a ghost as I tried to recall the pronunciation. How on earth am I going to end this segment I thought.

I mapped in the Commodores military hat and turned to the audience "can anybody tell who it is yet". It was the sound of 3,000 people as they yelled simultaneously. The problem was that it just sounded muffled to me, some had yelled 'prime minister', some yelled 'banana' or something.

"That's right" I said as I pointed to a young Fijian boy in the front row motioning him to come onto the stage.

"Young boy, you were the first to guess who it was.. Now say nice and clear who the picture is of". The young boy stepped forward confidently and I put the microphone under his mouth "It is our Prime Minister Commodore Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama" now this I don't think I would have ever been able to pronounce (thus the rest of the world calls him "Frank") and somehow I managed to fluke a way of not even saying the Commodores name, it must have been my lucky day.

Following the show the audience cleared out and I spotted the interim pm sitting directly in front of the stage about 20 rows up. He was dressed just as a civilian but what I did notice were the two armed guards surrounding him with large machine guns.

As I approached they motioned that I was ok to speak to him. I shook his hand, he appeared to be a very nice man and told me he enjoyed my performance and I gave him the artwork from the show. It was an experience to remember.

My final thought is, JUST DO IT. There are no excuses to get out of your comfort zone and make things happen.

I certainly could have hesitated when I painted the Prime Minister and said "No" I am not confident, but opportunities often only come around once. You don't want to look back and think what you could have been or done in life.

Often people are only committed to change when something is forced upon them. I'm exactly the opposite, my family have often said that "I'm like a bull at a gate". (Definition: Like a bull at a gate – if you tackle a job very quickly, without any real thought about what you are doing, you are going at it like a bull at a gate).

Yes I agree that sometimes this is the case, I jump into things wholeheartedly – but without making mistakes you will never learn either.

About Brad Blaze

Brad Blaze may just be the fastest painter in the world. He has enthralled audiences across Australia, Asia, United Arab Emirates and The United States performing at large gala dinners with guests including government ministers, celebrities and the social elite.

At such events he has painted two prime ministers and some of the world's leading sportsmen 'live' at events including Tiger Woods (PGA Masters), Robert Allenby (golf), Sir Ian Botham (cricket), Shane Warne (cricket), James Hird (AFL), Cameron Smith (NRL), Nico Rosberg (Formula 1 Driver) and celebrities Eric Bana (Movie Star: Black Hawk Down, Hulk) and many more, raising over \$500,000 in the past year for charity.