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**BUSINESS HERO** | MAX WALKER

# Max internet result!

Sportsman, TV personality, architect, author and motivational speaker, Max Walker has had a colourful series of careers. He speaks to **Josh Mehlman** about how a website, online video and social networks are essential to his latest venture.

Photography Anthony Geernaert



Never one to do things by half, Max Walker has embraced the online world with gusto.

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**M**ost corporate leaders' biographies are as exciting as former Australian captain Mark Taylor's cricket commentary. They tend to go something like, 'John Smith was born in Adelaide. He studied management at Adelaide University and worked for 20 years as a manager at one large company before joining another large company as CEO. He lives in Adelaide and his interests include management and the Adelaide Crows.'

What makes small business people so interesting is they tend to have led more varied lives - but very few careers have taken as many fascinating and counterintuitive turns as Max Walker's.

**The many lives of Max Walker**

Born and raised in Hobart, Walker studied architecture at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, but then signed on as an Australian Rules football player for Melbourne Football Club. During his six-year, 85-game career, he also started playing cricket professionally, but couldn't sustain both games at once. He opted for the sport with harder balls and played 38 Tests and 29 One Day International matches for Australia. After working as an architect, he made the transition to cricket commentator. Following that, he co-hosted Channel 9's weekly sports digest show *Wide World of Sports* for 16 years. But that also couldn't last.

"You know, nothing does last forever," he says in his characteristic Aussie drawl. "Once you've had five broken noses, your hair goes grey and you're slightly big around the middle, no amount of makeup is going to make it work for you and they are going to give the job to a younger person. That's fine, as long you don't carry a chip on your shoulder and say, 'Poor me'. Life's like that."

Impressionist Billy Birmingham, in one of his 12th Man comedy albums, characterised Walker as having become slightly unhinged after losing his job at Channel 9 and going to increasingly desperate lengths - including hijacking the commentary box - to get back on the air.

To hear Walker talk about it today, he still feels the sting of being fired from Channel 9, but it provided the impetus for him to begin another whole new life.

"I was lucky: I had 16 years of hosting *Wide World*

*of Sports*," Walker explains. "Kerry Packer created an environment of innovation and creativity, and if it was a good idea and you were able to convince him, the next day you would be on a plane."

"When that era ended and James Packer put the broom through *Wide World of Sports* and many other shows, I was back on my feet again. I had to create a blueprint for what I might do with the rest of my life," says Walker. "I had to ask myself, 'What do I do well?' So I thought, 'I speak and I write', and that was the beginning."

Running his own business, after so many years in the dynamic television industry, was a rude shock.

"Working at Channel 9, I had all of these people around me," says Walker. "We had publicity consultants on a daily basis hooking into the world and just energising this juggernaut that went forward with the nine dots almost tattooed to my forehead."

From that heady life, Walker found himself in a situation familiar to anyone who has started up his or her own business.

"Suddenly you find yourself answering the phone, doing a business plan, doing public relations and actually out there doing what you do."

**Writing and speaking**

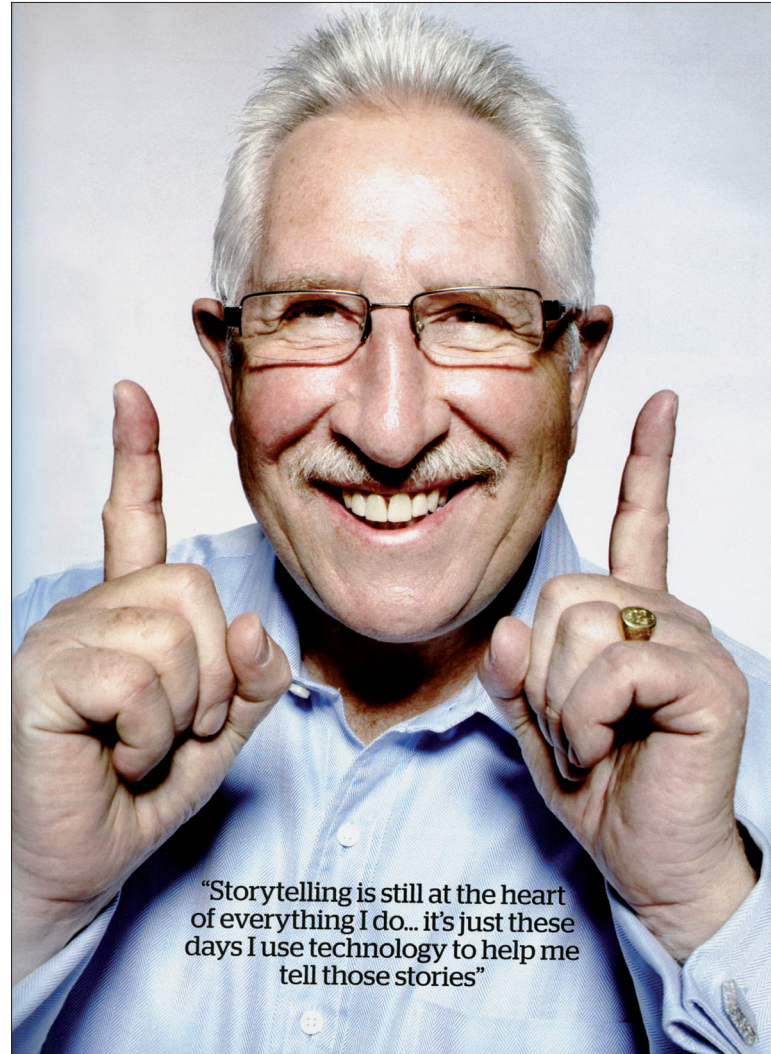
Ever since his cricketer days, Walker had a tidy sideline in book writing (yes, that's yet another career). He turned his knack for storytelling - inherited from his dad, who ran a pub - into a string of bestselling books. He continued to write while making the move into motivational speaking.

"I love speaking at corporate events and planning days," he says. "You get to sit in the engine room of some of the biggest and smallest companies in the world and you hear their thinking about the next couple of years in terms of strategy and changes."

"I love to talk about changes, opening and shutting the windows in the mind, getting rid of excess baggage, things that we've done over and over and over again and we only continue to do them because it's comfortable."

Taking his own advice, Walker decided less than a decade ago that he needed to make technology and the internet a major part of his business model.

"Maybe 10 years ago, I unashamedly wouldn't



"Storytelling is still at the heart of everything I do... it's just these days I use technology to help me tell those stories"

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Max uses short video clips to introduce each page of his website: "... right up front give a sense of what you're trying to say without being too verbose"

**Very social networks**

The first thing you'll notice on visiting Walker's website is Tangles himself talking to you in a one-minute embedded video. Each section of the site has its own video introduction.

"This is obviously an effective technique for Max Walker, who is his own brand, but would it work for someone running an online business that sold kids' clothes or lice remedies?"

"When you walk into a room and meet someone, somewhere between 20 and 90 seconds on, you have already decided, 'This person is a bit shifty' or 'I'm going to like this person,'" says Walker.

"So I figure, why not try to project some of your personality in an unscripted, spontaneous way? Why not right up front give a sense of what you're trying to say without being too verbose?"

Walker has also started to make use of social networking technologies.

"I love the viral marketing idea of YouTube and then I've got MySpace and Facebook pages because so many people are into them," he says.

"I go to corporate events and talk about transition and change, so I should be there myself. I need to know what Flickr and Twitter are, so I do."

However, he is the first to admit he lacks skills at the geekier end of the spectrum.

"It usually starts with a conversation between Elaine and myself... then we bring in the guys who take those ideas and build it into a website," he explains.

"It's no different to being an architect where you co-ordinate a whole bunch of engineers, builders and project managers. I haven't got the time to sit down and do the back end of this, but I've got a curious mind and I love being at the sharp end.

"At one stage I was going to do a totally hand-drawn website that the young kids would have loved. But I didn't, because I thought a couple of corporate CEOs who were planning to book me to speak would probably say, 'You gotta be joking, what, this bloke?'"

"I think the challenge for everyone out there is to be yourself in that shop front, in that website. Because the world is pretty much beige and it's bland and it's forgettable. In business, how do we get noticed? If we can answer that question and use technology to do it, then I would say, keep doing it."

have known how to turn a computer on," he says. "In architecture, it was all to do with ink on paper and the desktop computer. On TV, you're only as good as your ability to bring some ideas together and reorganize them straight down the barrel to camera."

Even his books, he admits, were handwritten with one of his much-loved Mont Blanc fountain pens. But he eventually realised the potential for online technologies to improve the way he worked and reach a new audience.

"Storytelling is still at the heart of everything I do," he says. "It's just these days I use technology to help me tell those stories."

"Seth Godin talks about being a purple cow - how do you become authentic? One of my favourite words is 'unordinary'. Unique. Real. So I've tried to put that energy now into my showcase which is the website, maxwalker.com.au. That's the first port of call now for most people that want to find out about me."

"If you take the television experience, the radio experience, the ability to stand up and speak with a marketing hat, and public relations, plus writing and being an entrepreneur, you try to put that all into one job and maybe even three years ago, someone like myself wouldn't have been able to do that. But now with [personal assistant] Elaine and a good team of website people, we have so much fun just creating."

Walker's two daughters, aged 17 and 11, and three sons from his first marriage also provide a useful focus group and technology expert panel.

"Between them, nothing is sacred so when they say, 'Dad, wake up to yourself', at least I listen," he grins.

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**"People say to me, 'Can you put it in an email?' But communication is a contact sport. Why not just walk around the cubicle or up the street and sit down?"**

**Multimedia Max**

Never one to do things by halves, Walker embraced the online world with gusto. He built an audio studio in his office with an eye to producing podcasts and internet radio. His next 'book' is likely to be a multimedia production with video, audio and graphics to accompany the text. He's looking into producing cricket- and/or business-related video content for mobile phone users in India.

"They sign on about 89 million mobile phone accounts every month in India, so there's 100 plus million a year going in," he says.

Even a Max Walker blog isn't out of the question. "I'm not sure how much of my time I could devote to that, but I wouldn't mind being the catalyst or throwing up the germ of an idea or two and staying engaged with a whole bunch of like-minded people," he says.

"I think the ability to create awareness for your brand, your service, your product through any number of those technologies is really exciting."

However, Walker has not embraced all online technologies with enthusiasm.

"As I say on my website, email is a copout," he chuckles. "If you graph how people communicate with each other, something like only 7% of that pizza pie involves the words. If you go with an email, 93% of the communication potential gets left on the table. When you throw in a bit of body language and tone, your emotional intelligence is going to be much more complete than capital letters and exclamation marks. Or maybe I've just got big fingers."

"People say to me, 'Can you put it in an email?' But communication is a contact sport. Why not just walk around the cubicle or up the street, or drive across town and sit down? Or at least just pick up a phone and talk?"

**Change is great!**

Walker's infectious optimism, which is apparent the moment you meet him, makes him well suited to the role of motivational speaker; he's practically a walking exclamation mark. His number-one message: you never know what's coming, but make the most of it.

"Sometimes you're in the lap of the gods," he says. "As it was in cricket and footy, the selectors take that

**Working with Max**

A word-of-mouth recommendation put Max Walker in touch with Asher Charles Dickinson from web design firm Design Wise Media.

"He was really in tune with the various social networking technologies," says Dickinson. "A lot of people don't understand what they're for."

"With YouTube, MySpace and Facebook, we've started creating a web of information where everything links back to itself, trying to show different sides of him and his personality and to grab as much of the web space as we can."

Walker is never short of ideas, Dickinson laments. "I have to slow him down sometimes, because he gets a bit hasty and gives me a lot of information at one time. He threw all the ideas he could at me and I took all the ones that were relevant to the site he was trying to develop."

One of those ideas was to use short video clips to introduce each page. "Max had a lot of text on his old site and unless people have the time, they're not going to read huge blocks of text," says Dickinson. "The idea was to use a talking head and shorten up the introductions on each page, then have a laugh to make the site a bit more personal."

decision out of your hands. They just get a biro and draw a big red line through M. Walker, see you later, career over.

"But I think the most valuable things that come our way are the unexpected, unpredictable opportunities that just sometimes arrive only because we slam a door shut."

Like many entrepreneurs, Walker is the kind of person who gets bored doing the same thing for too long.

"I know it's an old cliché, but I think unless you're growing, you're dying," he says. "It's not always a healthy idea to be locked into a five-year plan or 10-year plan, because things change. Health, injury, workplace, relationship, financial, car accident... Any number of things can impact on what happens next and you've just got to go with the energy and soak up new possibilities."

"It's pretty easy to mentally run into a cyclone mesh fence and get stuck and feel very vulnerable and frustrated. But being an architect in another lifetime has taught me to love a blank sheet of paper and get excited about the possibilities. With the right felt pens and coloured ink, anything can happen." #