



Centre stage

Co-founder of SMA Productions, Michael Falzon is a trailblazer in the corporate events industry and has further international growth in sight.

Story Holly Henderson **Photography** Andy Morris

‘YOU SHOULD CALL SMA.’ FAST BECOMING synonymous with excellence in the special events community, this simple word-of-mouth referral is what makes Michael Falzon most proud of the company he launched in 2002 with fellow entertainers, David Malek and Dale Burridge.

“Like any service industry, we listen to our clients needs, remain flexible, pride ourselves on excellent presentation and employ the best. Our approach is very much hands on,” says Falzon of the high standards that keep his clients talking. “It may be cliché, but hopefully SMA spreads a little joy in the world.”

Originally created to fulfil a niche and provide work for the three directors in the corporate and special event entertainment arena, today SMA Productions is a successful marriage of entertainment, business and art that has instigated standing ovations from Sydney to London, and now, New York.

The company’s philosophy of ‘entertainment by entertainers’ is thriving in the world of corporate events. Event organisers look to Falzon and his team for world-class, high calibre performances that add a unique edge to otherwise predictable agendas of speakers, facts and figures. Many of the performances have translated to an extended audience, going on to become sell-out shows at casinos and on the international concert stage.

The Rat Pack’s Back, String Diva and Opera by Disguise are just a few of the original productions that have seen the SMA brand go from strength to strength in an industry notorious for its fickle nature, in which success is often fleeting.

Falzon’s background as an actor, singer and all-round performer has landed him the lead in musicals such as We Will Rock You, equipping him with a working knowledge of the industry. The

developments in his individual career mean that Falzon now has the luxury to be discerning with roles – a fortune for a performer – and he is conscious that such fortune is afforded to him off the back of SMA’s success.

“Without SMA I’d definitely be working in the entertainment business, but almost certainly without the flexibility in making choices I have now,” Falzon says. “Because of my business, I can say ‘yes’ to the good roles that come my way.”

An ensemble cast

It is a beneficial arrangement for Falzon the actor, while Falzon the team leader invests every available bit of his time and effort into maintaining the steady growth of SMA. His offstage role as team leader is diverse, focused largely on marketing and PR, with much of the time spent working via laptop and mobile from any given corner of the globe as a ‘roving ambassador’ for the company.

“Initially, timing was our main catalyst for growth. There was nobody doing what we do in the UK and the challenge of taking our product to international markets was immediately appealing. We considered too the opportunity to aid sales in Australia through establishing an international brand,” Falzon says. “Of course, there was also the desire of wanting to create more turnover!”

Having now generated an annual turnover of around \$1.5m, Falzon advises that leadership during a period of growth requires unwavering patience. “Sometimes your eyes are too big for your stomach and you want to do more, more, more,” he says.

“It’s frustrating when you have to slow down and take your time and travelling a lot means I’m not often on the ground with the many of the people I work with.”

Profile

Entrepreneur's diary



Michael Falzon says...

I love being an entrepreneur because...

There is a thrill in initiative, of creating a business. And there is risk. When we started this business with our own personal capital, we became entrepreneurs. But true entrepreneurship is being able to do it again!

My favourite entrepreneur is...

Looking at small businesses in Australia one really can't go past Graeme Wood and Wotif.com – started in 2000 and recently recorded a half-year profit of more than \$17m. I wish I bought shares when it listed.

My favourite brand is...

I hate to admit it, as I love local coffee shops and the pride with which their owners operate, but our chairman, knowing I hate Starbucks, gave me a copy of *The Starbucks Experience* to read. Its very first principle is 'Make it your own' – simple. I couldn't agree more.

It would make me proud to hear...

Our name thrown about in a 'you should call SMA' kind of way – this between people in the corporate and special event community. Any time event directors need entertainment, the SMA brand is becoming synonymous with quality and any referral makes us very proud.

Before I started SMA, I wish I knew...

Perhaps a little more business-sense, but one is always learning. It's no different with my personal career – I've had some great breaks and press, yet never studied. On-the-job training is invaluable.

► By delegating much of the work he can't do to a team of seven staff spread over two offices in Sydney and London, Falzon is free to set his sights on the bigger picture: SMA's future abroad.

Currently developing the right model for SMA International, Falzon is using the recent launch of two shows in the UK to increase revenue to fund third and fourth operations in Asia and the US.

"Trends in special event entertainment are always changing," Falzon explains. He highlights the necessity of foresight in planning for the future. "Indeed, SMA has tried to set such trends and we're often flattered by imitation!"

Maintaining relationships

SMA adopts a flexible and empathetic approach to the unique challenges of employing performers and contractors in the entertainment industry. This approach enables Falzon to provide staff with a platform of inspiration and support, subsequently creating mutually beneficial working relationships.

"We provide work for great actors, singers and musicians to entertain hundreds of thousands of people around

organisations [to ours] restrict such trade of freelance performers, which is ludicrous in such a challenging industry!"

He says they provide encouragement and support for any career choices of individuals. "And make it clear they can always come back," he adds.

Maintaining this nurturing environment via skilful communication and open-mindedness, Falzon ultimately credits the members of his team with the outstanding productions that continue to build on SMA's achievements. He explains that other people have always played an integral part in the company's success to date, particularly as business gained momentum.

"Interestingly, not long ago I realised I had learnt more from those around me who weren't getting it right," Falzon says. "Of course, one learns most from their own mistakes – and coming from an acting background into business, there were many!"

He says that bringing in an outside chairman – "a dispassionate voice of reason" – has been integral not only to SMA's growth, but to guiding the board and strategising. "One strategy was to keep pricing competitive, while at the same time raising product standards."

Falzon admits he's been lucky in the sense that he has not received any bad business advice to date – "touch wood!" – but says that during a couple of points in SMA's short history he has felt the effects of a lack of business advice.

"In the past, we have tried to do too much without proper planning," he says. "But I am a firm believer in creating your own luck. Most good ideas just work."

Falzon cites patience, communication, foresight and charisma as the leadership qualities he has found to serve him well during periods of chaotic growth.

However, like many young people, Falzon used to think success meant making lots of money. Now adamant that success lies in work-life balance, or "earning enough money to have a life", Falzon emphasises the importance of seizing opportunities.

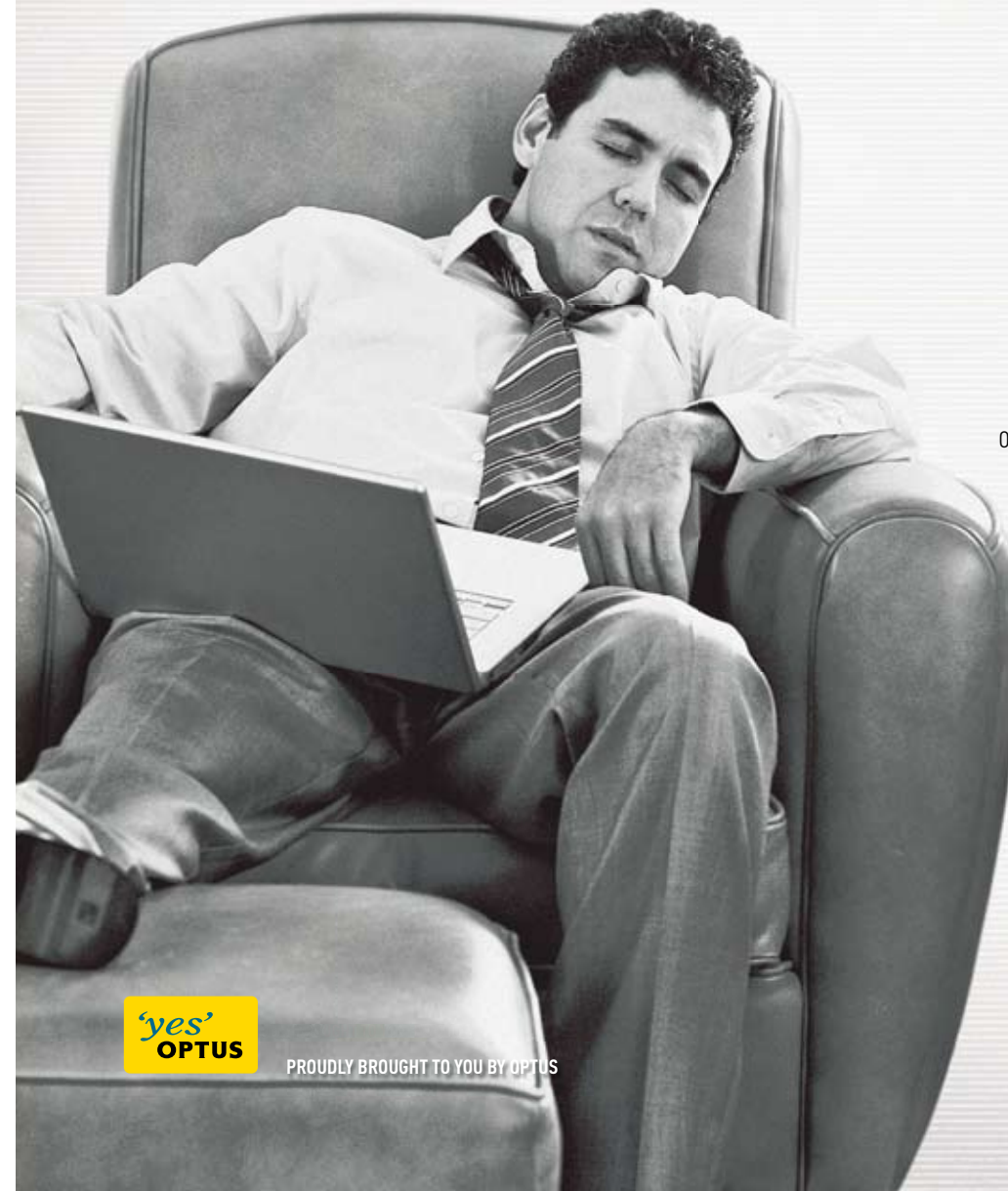
"There are no real failings in one's own business, only lessons to learn and recognising any missed opportunities."

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the world. We try to ensure that the quality of our shows keeps our performers interested and happy, and we recently reviewed our agreements with contractors to provide better fees and conditions across the board," Falzon says.

"All our performers work under a non-exclusive contract basis, while similar

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