

Question 1: The Business

Q1.1 A brief history of your business. Please tell us:

- how, when and why your business started;
- your business location (s); and
- an overview of your market(s), products and/or services.

Q.1 THE BUSINESS

1.1 A brief history of your business

In or around 1985, I recognized a need for various Aboriginal outstations in the Utopia district of Central Australia to be serviced for basic food and general supplies. At this particular time I had served over a decade with the NT Police Force in various communities and towns across the breadth of the Territory. For a number of reasons, my interests in the Police Force were waning.

I “tested the waters” on my rostered days off and felt that I could make a successful business with what I had in mind, so I bought a twin cab truck and gave it a go. Word of mouth brought me more and more invites by Aboriginal people to visit other outstations. After 12 months, I bought Mbantua Store (a small general store in Alice Springs) and combined the businesses. This proved very successful as well.

The purchase of Mbantua Store brought with it new challenges and expenses. Apart from the non-stop customer related duties, I had to find time for all the administration jobs, plus staffing the shop.

In addition, there was a small Aboriginal art section in the shop. Something that I had no idea about, or, at the time, had the slightest interest in. Unbeknown to me, this was to change!!

With the Store, Aboriginal people started bringing in small carvings, boomerangs, spears and other mostly wooden implements for me to buy. Supply was much more than demand, but I usually always bought it and boxed it away. There came a time that I had to address it, even though I was working around 80 hours a week on the Store’s business.

After experimenting with a small gallery in Adelaide, I decided I would prefer to be located in Alice Springs where I could monitor it directly, so on the 01.06.1992 we leased a 90 square metre shop at 71 Gregory Terrace, Alice Springs and, with one employee, opened it as Mbantua Gallery, Alice Springs.

At this time, our Store was buying considerably more artworks, including of course, paintings. I had also employed a full time financial officer, Lyall

Zweck, who relieved me and my wife of much of the administration side. Lyall had at the time of his employment completed approximately two years of an accounting degree. (Later completing his degree with the business giving him one day off per week on full pay to study).

The Gallery sales were not huge, but enough to sustain us and increase our staff to two members. My own role at this time was still very much hands on customer relations at the Store and the bush run, as well as overseeing the Gallery and a Roadhouse at Elliott (which I also owned). My wife also ensured that I had Saturday afternoon and Sundays off to be a husband and father to our children.

On the 31 August 1995, I bought the block of shops where the Gallery is located and soon after we expanded into the adjoining shop and doubled our Gallery space. At this time, I was firmly recognizing that I was in a very strong position to create a good healthy art business. I knew that I couldn't do it if I remained hands on at the Store. So, in mid 1996, I decided to completely re-structure the staffing. I opted to disengage myself from all hands on duties at the Store, and re-located myself into an office in the Heenan Building (which was part of the original purchase) and adjacent to the Gallery in Gregory Terrace. I titled myself General Manager.

I employed Kevin Rucioch as our Store Manager (who does a wonderful job to this day) and an additional two other people. All told, an increase of around \$100,000 per annum in wages without a substantial increase in income.

At this point, it was clear that we had lot of artists that wanted to work; we had an excellent rapport, understanding and relations with Aboriginal people. We had good premises, we had experience in the ups and downs of the art business, we had an administration department, we had financial capacity and a lot else going for us, but we didn't have sufficient market demand!

We had to decide what we wanted to do. Did we want to retail, wholesale or both? We decided both. To do both well, we had to become more professional in our format. And in relation to the wholesale customers we had to be clear on what we could supply, and then we had to find those customers. We have now done all of this and as a result, we have an excellent wholesale customers' base of different galleries and dealers world wide.

Over the past few years, we have amongst other things that are mentioned later in this submission:-

1. Built new administration offices, which service 5 staff members;
2. Expanded the Commercial Gallery floor space from the original 90 square metres to approximately 660 square metres;
3. Built an upstairs connecting Cultural Museum of approximately 440 square metres;
4. Purchased a nearby Warehouse in Elder Street, Alice Springs and

converted part of this into a magnificent Gallery which houses many much larger paintings designed for corporate type clients plus built two large work rooms;

5. Introduced a video and photographic section to the business;
6. Built a base of some 250 Aboriginal artists who paint for us on a regular basis, and also provide other products such as carvings, artifacts and beads when required;
7. Initiated a "We'll visit you" retail side to the business where we visit many of our Australian database members;
8. Initiated a similar type arrangement in the USA and England;
9. Introduced a similar program, where our wholesale manager visits galleries and dealers throughout all of Australia on a regular basis;
10. Initiated holding private dinners and talks on art and culture in the gallery outside of normal working hours. This is still in its infancy, but to date we have done so with a group of approximately 20 American and Canadian retired members of the Young Presidents Organisation. (To be a member of the YPO you must be a CEO or equivalent of a Company that turns over a minimum of \$6M US per annum and have a minimum of 50 staff). We have also held the same with a group of some 30 Queensland Art Gallery guides as well as visiting interstate and overseas journalists whom the NT Tourist Commissioner regularly directs to us.
11. Built strong ties over the past 12 months with Taylormade Tours, Abercrombie and Kent Tourist Company and ;
12. Recently created The Mbantua Gallery Foundation. This Foundation's primary objective is to employ - to begin with - one sports officer, to work amongst the young in the Utopia region of the NT. Our target will be to raise a \$1m over the next few years and invest much of it, so that a sports officer will forever be employed for the region.
13. We have also recently created the Mbantua gallery Cricket Academy. This is wholly sponsored by Mbantua with myself as head coach. This is based in Alice Springs and open to indigenous and non-indigenous youngsters. It has the full support of Cricket NT. And has the capacity to evolve into something special.

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