

We've all heard the cautionary phrase 'walk before you run', but Fred Schebesta turned that on its head when he founded online marketing agency Freestyle Media. **Sam Gopal** reports.

The freestylin' formula.

My university days were a heady blur of ear-splitting hangovers, missed morning lectures and rushed deadlines. In short, they were nothing like Fred Schebesta's university days. While I was scraping myself off the union floor, Schebesta was completing a bachelor of commerce and preparing to found one of Australia's most successful young online marketing agencies, Freestyle Media.

After offering to build a website for a neighbour, Schebesta quickly realised the business opportunity in front of him. "I had always thought about building a company and I didn't want to work for anyone else." At just 22, most wouldn't know where to begin, but, as Schebesta explains, his age was always an advantage. "Although you have less experience than everyone else, you're not tapered so much and you have the energy and passion that people love and are attracted to, and which gets them to work with you. This translates to an advantage when you want to win business."

A key part of Freestyle Media's rapid success story has been Schebesta's approach and strong entrepreneurial personality, and along the way he has also taken advice from those that have inspired him. "[Marketing regular Michael] Kiely taught me how to direct market and run a business in a marketing environment. This was a key thing as it repositioned us from a web development company to an online marketing agency." Once repositioned, Freestyle Media was ready to grow as an online direct marketing agency.

Determined to push growth, Schebesta is candid about his far from textbook approach. "I'm not a big planner, which leads to a lot of problems, but I make my mistakes fast so I know what not to do." Trial and error helped him quickly learn to unlock the door of some



of the bigger clients, and once inside Schebesta was ready to make himself comfortable. "First, you have to understand how they work by sitting on the inside. Second, you need to learn how to approach them, be it cold calling, emails, mail. You have to be prepared to do absolutely anything to get in the door. Third, once you have a client, stick with them. As their career progresses, follow them."

And Schebesta isn't afraid of breaking the mould when it comes to approaching these key clients. "I send letters with a teabag paper clipped to the top saying, 'Let's get together for a cup of tea.' A director I work with

pitched to a guy in an elevator as we were going from one meeting to another. He got a phone number and email address, which is all he needed." Freestyle Media's combination of tenacity and creativity helped it to sign its first major client, Laser Sight, and after that it became easier to grow and attract more high-profile companies.

In 2006, Schebesta's hard work and innovative approach landed him the coveted ADMA Young Australian Direct Marketer of the Year award, and vindicated his decision to change from a web development business to an online marketing agency. This move helped

Freestyle Media stand out from the cluttered web development market and cemented the company's brand identity firmly in the marketplace. "To build a website is just one component. To strategically build a site to deliver a result and to talk the language of marketers allows us to reach the bigger clients. Having a niche expertise in online direct marketing is what everyone knows us for."

This marketer acknowledges, however, that simply being known as an online direct marketing niche business is not everything. You still need to be able to deliver time and time again. "There is a big demand for online marketing knowledge; people want to know how to deal with online business rather than simply be presented with ideas and theories. They want to see examples of what we've done so we put a lot of time and effort into our own websites and blogs. Our online marketing speaks volumes in attracting clients, such as Virgin Broadband."

Although Freestyle Media now counts McDonald's Australia, Acer Computers and Fuji Xerox amongst its clients, Schebesta still places great value on every big client win and takes nothing for granted. "Persuading a big

client to trust and work with you involves a huge amount of effort. Sanitarium was a massive win that made Freestyle Media. Without that we wouldn't be on the map – there wouldn't even be a map! These days, people usually call us, but we still choose our battles. Events are interesting, working with partners and channels. They make margin and you make money, and together everyone gets a client."

Schebesta still loves the buzz of the online marketing industry and clearly believes in his own company. "It's so quick, you get results fast. The best thing is that you're at the coal-face of the company, not at the backend waiting for everything to happen. Good marketing leads to good sales, which leads to good business. In terms of new clients and profile building we are owning our niche. People enjoy and like what we do; our marketing is working."

But this rise and rise story of a young marketer not backward about going forward has a twist in the tail. At the peak of its growth curve, Schebesta sold Freestyle Media to Q Ltd, a move that now sees him in unfamiliar territory, but typically upbeat. "I've never

worked for another company before, so it's a good opportunity to get under the hood of other companies and see how they tick and work. It's a consolidation of management, knowledge and expertise.

"Other industries won't grow as fast as the online agency industry will grow," he claims, "and, although we were doing well, there was still room for growth, but we needed more backing and firepower to crank it up." Once again, it seems that the sale was the right way to go for Freestyle Media, as it has just begun working with another large client, 3 Mobile.

Although he now regards himself as a bit of a grandfather in the industry, Schebesta still has much to look forward to and achieve, and is a firm believer that you make your own luck in this fiercely competitive business. "Although I have a short attention span, it wasn't until I focused on the one business that it really took off. If you plough through and persist on the one thing then you create your own luck and it happens." **M**

Fred Schebesta's blog:
www.onlinemarketingsydney.com.au