

Phil McDonald, managing director of rising agency George Patterson Y&R, had asked two years ago whether a cooking show hosted by three portly, wordy, le-aged blokes would be a blockbuster, he'd have had them certified. Now he's had rooms and breakfast in bed prepared and d by his eight and 12-year-old *MasterChef* sons. "And they were good!"

one ever went broke underestimating the of the Australian public – and its taste for *erChef* is insatiable. A cooking reality show doesn't even allow viewers to vote has n records. A peak audience of 5.7 million e – more than one-quarter of the nation – watched the finale on July 25, up 4.1 million last year.

colossus forced the election debate out of time and gave Ten Network stellar ratings avenue growth (up by 21 per cent for the 1 to \$402 million). Momentarily blast- are those who thought the era of the media event was over, that fragmentation ne spirit of the age.

brand is riding high and on its coat tails her food and hospitality industries.

ting experts have put the earnings from roduct placement and merchandising at \$100 million for the brand itself, while sponsor Coles has reported sales spikes of 1400 per cent for ingredients featured in

previous television shows that crossed over and became brands in their own right – notably *Big Brother* about a decade before – *MasterChef* has substantial cross-market appeal. Age, gender, ethnicity and religion are no barrier to becoming a fan. Families are coming together to watch the show – many are forced to by their fanatical tweensies and teenagers.

They are not all wannabe chefs. What gives? *MasterChef* is feelgood TV (after the dog-eat-dog voyeurism of *Big Brother*) and it nails the cocooning trend that was turbocharged by the global financial crisis. But there is something more subtle about *MasterChef* that is chiming with social, cultural and demographic trends. "Managers and marketers tend not to look beyond the surface, the actual ingredients of a success, when in fact they should be stepping back and trying to understand [its] form," Deakin University marketing lecturer and blogger Paul Harrison says.

Understanding *MasterChef* is vital to any business seeking to grab some cravatted-magic for its customer appeal and internal operations. "It's become a phenomenon, no doubt, because it has tapped some key cultural trends of our time and brought them to life with slick, commercialised production," McDonald says.

### Episode 1: Escape the grind

The first lesson of *MasterChef* is that it's

# MAKE IT WITH MASTERCHEF

way success:  
je Patterson Y&R  
ging director  
icDonald



Here are six secrets that business can steal from the smash-hit television series. First surprise: they have nothing to do with food.

Report: Gina McColl

COVER STORY

narrative arc is not really about learning to cook – it's about escapism, a fantasy of packing in the daily grind and following your passion. This has implications for business in how it attracts consumers and in its internal operations.

"Therapy" is how IBISWorld chairman Phil Ruthven describes the show's appeal. "It's the joy of being creative." It's not the chore of making three meals a day but experimental, even indulgent. Ruthven denies it's part of a move to a DIY culture, pointing to the long-term trend to outsourcing – takeaway and restaurant meals, car washing, child minding.

entertainment; tax returns – as irreversible. "In fiscal 2010, the average household will spend \$25,000 on activities that people used to do for themselves in 1964," he says. "There will never be a move back to DIY en masse. When people do [DIY], it's for a hobby, therapy, not a big or permanent thing." He singles out the tourism and health industries as particularly well placed to exploit this appetite.

McDonald identifies *MasterChef*'s appeal as part of the "tree-change" mentality. "There's a fatigue with big city mortgages and a desire for what is perceived as the simple life," he says. "No one has the gumption to do it – but they like watching other people doing it." Businesses looking to cash in need to realise that this is not about facilitating a tree change, just indulging the fantasy. "Packing it in and making

cinemas for people? For 60 minutes, that and like a good idea," McDonald says. Success can leverage this nascent longing in nations. Ruthven thinks the tree-change thing is strong among peripatetic lion Y (age 9-28) who stray with a single ear only two or three years. "Keeping this group happy at work and in their buying is one hell of a bloody challenge," he says. Employers, this may mean offering leave-ice or sabbatical programs that allow take a break to pursue what they love. can be disruptive and costly to an tion. Some experts think the longing to a vocation can be harnessed without cost even cut overheads.

ania for *MasterChef* shows that people are attracted to the intrinsic rewards of a ear than extrinsic ones such as money, Turner, local head of the human s division of international consultancy says. Many of this year's *MasterChef* nts were accountants, lawyers and from th-status occupations. "These people 'pared to jump from well-paid roles to irding roles with all the intrinsic positive s of doing what you love," Turner says. league Olivia Tsen, a senior associate in apital at Mercer, agrees. Organisations 'arn from this, she says, and ask their urnalists what excites them and what they

Reality TV to real life:  
Entrepreneur and host  
of *The Apprentice*  
Australia, Mark Bouris



would do if they could do anything. "Technical skills can be learned if the passion and desire to learn is there, irrespective of experience and formal qualifications," Tsen says. "Trying to find the right fit for [that] person in the organisation – that's how you get true employee engagement."

## Episode 2: Yes you can

Dovetailing with this is the second main theme of the show: learning by doing. The contestants

worked in teams and individually and were closely mentored by the judges and some of the most famous names in the international and local restaurant scene. But it was also part of the show's popularity, as viewers could use the program as cooking tutorials (which they then put into action by heading to Coles for the ingredients, or Sunbeam for the appliances).

It is a successful way of selling and encouraging brand loyalty that many businesses have already embraced. Ted's Cameras and Bunnings are two chains that offer courses as part of a way to drive not just sales but loyalty. Rather than going to hardware giant Bunnings for a piece of two-by-four, you go to become a carpenter; you go to Ted's not for a video camera but to become a filmmaker.

It's a doctrine that serial entrepreneur and reality TV veteran Mark Bouris has been following for some time. The former Wizard Home Loans chief had the Donald "You're fired!" Trump role in a local version of reality series *The Apprentice* last year. In his current financial planning empire, Yellow Brick Road, Bouris says he finds "educational" opportunities – reality TV, newspaper columns, free seminars – the best way to recruit customers as well as franchisees.

"It costs me nothing and it's an efficient way of giving advice for free ... without looking like hard selling," he says. "[I] talk to one group, they talk to another – it's the power of compounding."

In his days at the helm of non-bank lender Wizard, he used TV ads but says his current methods are more subtle and effective. "From spending \$10 million a year, now I'd be lucky to spend \$500,000 with a far better return – far more qualified inquiries in terms of franchisees and customers."

*The Apprentice Australia* also reinforced how important learning-by-doing was for a company's operations – it led Bouris to change his human *Continued on page 24*



res practices. In the show, contestants vied for a chance to work with Bouris at Yellow Road (three of them now do). What the ises and role play showed him was that far important than skills and experience were nality, character and ethics, he says. became a social experiment for me [and] it warding experience," he says. "We now ay a lot more rigour in how we recruit e - take a more personal point of view, at tone, people's body language."

like other competitive reality shows, ing *Australian Idol* and *Dancing with the* there is no "nasty" judge on *MasterChef* ears people down. Instead, criticism is constructively. "People say 'thank you' they're told to leave," the director of ch at management consultancy GSG, Cuddipp, says. He believes this may have thing to do with the show's popularity. It's ng lesson for managers everywhere to be like mentors. "When someone has failed or performing, don't belittle them, tell them e letting themselves down."

n says access to inspiring mentors was a award for *MasterChef* contestants and nces - and that all businesses can learn this. "If you have thought leaders in the isation, you should be capitalising on that," ys. "That's what top performers and young e like: they want to learn from the best. If an offer that, it's a huge drawcard."

### ode 3: Cool collaboration

tion tests, signature dishes and pressure vere another motif of the cooking show. vity is in vogue, the managing director of gy and innovation at ad agency DDB y, Leif Stromnes, says. "People expressing reativity is becoming important and cool,"

## ow your product placement

re is an old chefs' with Woolworths' 28 per cent, Macquarie Group analyst Greg Diring says. said the fruit on the Woolworths' "fresh food before slicing in it people's slogan is a big part of its dominance and the *MasterChef* campaign may become one of the weapons Coles has long sought to puncture the fresh aura that Woolies has created. (Yet both supermarket giants combined still share only half of the total fresh food market) Diring says the arrival of managing director Ian McLeod from the United Kingdom meant heavy

he says, citing Twitter, Facebook and Mac users' endless appetite for new forms of expression.

The coolest companies in the world - Apple, Google - are cashing in on this trend, Stromnes says, and are perceived as creative themselves. But any company can look at how *MasterChef* leveraged its power through social media and learn to let its customers be creative with its brand. "The spin-offs - the forums, the fans of *MasterChef* sharing their recipes on Facebook - allow people to participate," he says.

This participation forms a kind of "ecosystem" that sustains the brand. "The big learning [for companies] is to let consumers collaborate," Stromnes says. "Not just passing on content but participating with the content - blogging, even producing content itself."

Innovation expert Rowan Gilmore agrees. "As viewers, we like to feel we're an insider to the product or service," the chief executive of the Australian Institute for Commercialisation, which consults to business, governments and research organisations, says. "With *MasterChef*, we imagine ourselves consuming at the end but we've been privy to the entire innovation, seen how it's put together, how it's assembled, so as virtual consumers, we feel ownership."

How can other industries involve consumers in the creation of a product or service - known as "open innovation"? Gilmore uses tourism, with its multiple discrete operators, as an example. "They could work more closely together, create novel value chains and involve consumers in packaging them - so that the consumer anticipates it with delight before the journey's even started."

### Episode 4: Smarten up

Despite its mass appeal, *MasterChef* isn't dumbed down - it is upmarket, technical and full of jargon ("cloches", "Romesco sauce", "plating

Let people participate: Head of strategy and innovation at DDB Sydney, Leif Stromnes

up"). Yet this is not a turn-off for audiences. One possibility is that the specialist vocabulary works to create a bond among fans.

Deakin academic Paul Harrison, who writes a marketing blog, tribalmisight, believes tribalism is vital to the appeal of reality shows "about groups getting on together, liking each other, and yet competing". This may be key to its appeal as fans collect chef lingo like football cards as badges of their passion and belonging.

*MasterChef*'s rarefied yet popular appeal is similar to British TV export *Top Gear*, now in its 33rd year of production and reported to have turned over £24 million (\$42 million) in 2009. *Top Gear*'s three dorky-but-erudite hosts rave about torque, horsepower and drag co-efficients without fear or favour. It's the V8 version of *MasterChef*'s confit, sous-vide and julienne.

Comments on a blog on the British *Guardian*

successful for Coles is our ability to have all the ingredients well priced and stocked in Coles, miraculously on the night they appear [on the show]."

A brand's appearance within a show must be hammered home by other means, Ricketts says. With Coles and *MasterChef*, as well as the Coles-branded pantry and challenges filmed in-store, it was the ads featuring chef Curtis Stone with the slogan "To

cook like a *MasterChef* cook, shop where a *MasterChef* shops". The success or failure of product placement lies

discouraging of specific grocery items, emphasis on quality fresh food at lower prices, then the final stroke - using *MasterChef* to show third-party endorsement. Diring believes Coles will boost its fresh food sales by 20 per cent this year but warns there are no silver bullets in the supermarket war. "Retail is a long-term proposition where consistency is paramount," he says. It has also taken Coles a year to learn how to deploy the *MasterChef* firepower. "Last year, what happened was they would cook pork belly on a

in further engaging the target audience, Daniel Leesong, chief executive of The Communications Council, says. "If you run some promos, such as a competition leading up to the event, you can get much more buy-in and recognition from that sponsorship."

Sunbeam supplied all small kitchen appliances to the *MasterChef* kitchen for a fee. Chief executive David Jackson was keenly aware that to extract the most value from the sponsorship, Sunbeam would need to do more than drop off some blenders at the production

*MasterChef's* refreshing diversity did not end there. While its terminology was resolutely French, its approach was not bound to an old-world hierarchy. "Fine if you like a lot of butter and cream," the judges scolded one hapless contestant, before praising another for great use of Pandan leaf. This is modern, multicultural Australia – but not self-consciously so.

"[*MasterChef*] held a mirror up to Australia – it doesn't jar or get extra interest, it's just who we are now," McDonald says. But he stresses that the contrast between *Nine* and *Ten* reflects the brand identity of each. "*Nine's* brand is all about the history of TV in Australia and the most successful TV personalities, while *Ten's* is all about youth culture," he says.

Tsen, an avid fan, thinks *MasterChef's* diversity is more significant than that. "[It] demonstrates that if you do come from a different background, it can be a strength and competitive advantage," she says. "Business can learn from this by using [staff backgrounds] to win more business, align themselves with modern Australian consumers."

The show is also a good example of gender diversity. "*MasterChef* is about talent, performance, confidence," Tsen says. She points to Victoria Police's use of a "blind" recruitment and promotion process as a practical example. All applicants must address performance criteria on paper, with no names or gender included. "They've increased females in leadership roles without specifically going after that market," she says. "Business has a lot to learn."

## Episode 6: What's next

*MasterChef's* wave may have crested. It has reached iconic brand status – but this is no guarantee of longevity, Cudlipp says. "Brands can come and go fast," he says. "Look at MySpace – it came and went in four years."

The spin-offs – *Junior MasterChef* is in

production – risk exhausting the brand's popularity, while the intense product placement and brand leveraging will flip from novel to cynical at some point. In that case, business may be too late to ride the *MasterChef* wave – so what's the next big thing?

Before retiring, veteran TV producer Neil Balnaves was executive chairman of Southern Star, which co-produced *Big Brother* in Australia. He believes that product placement will migrate from reality shows to drama and soaps. "Brand placement, subliminal advertising and branding cut into a show is already becoming a whole business itself overseas," he says. Balnaves is putting his money where his mouth is, investing in two start-ups in the United Kingdom that are developing methods to measure the impact of this embedded marketing.

McDonald thinks lifestyle and demographic trends will dictate the next cultural wave but that reality TV will endure. The changing dynamics of the family and the ageing population may prove fruitful ground, he suggests. Life after 50? Single dad versus single mum, step parents versus marrieds, working parent versus at-home, first versus second marriage? "These are other trends content creators could tap into," McDonald says. "People like to see how they might be able to change their life and watch other people do it first."

He points to the advantage Coles has snared by spotting the potent combination of trends in *MasterChef*. "The earlier you jump on, the cheaper it is."

Finally, a word of caution from trend-watcher and editor of media and marketing site Mumbrella, Tim Burrowes. "Many of the qualities [that make *MasterChef* successful] feature in other shows that have failed to resonate," he says. "Just like Hollywood, in TV, nobody knows anything." **BWW**



why *Top Gear* is so successful

two compelling explanations:

vicariously"; and "people

think all about cars and feel

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## 5: Face the future

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and Foxtel iQ that allow

viewers to skip

conventional advertising.

About 1.9 million

viewers tuned into an

average *MasterChef*

episode but the price for

this audience is high.

Coles is reported to have

paid \$3 million for its

package and Wiadrowski

says \$1 million would not

be an unreasonable

starting point.

So where does this

leave companies trying for

product placement without

huge budgets?

The chief executive of

Kaleidoscope Marketing

and Communications,

Alan Riva, says many

movie production houses

won't charge for

placements if they can get

promotion out of the deal.

"This is where product

placement is heading,"

Riva says. "One of the key

areas for films is in pre-

promotion and getting

people intrigued and

interested in the trailer

before the film comes out

so they get burns on seats."

For example, credit card

companies looking to get

their cards in the wallet of

a movie star can offer their

member list. "If AmEx

approaches the film