

The ego industry

In the media and entertainment industry, what comes first - the ego or the success? Do you need an inflated ego to make it or is arrogance a hindrance to hitting the big time? **Brooke Hemphill** speaks to some of the biggest names across the industry to find out.

Is arrogance a tool that must be used in order to get by in the media and entertainment world and if so, is it something that develops over time or are those with a propensity to ego inflation the ones drawn to the industry in the first place? Do most within this high profile field start off on an equal footing, forced to navigate the challenges of industry recognition and, in some cases, fame all the while resisting the temptation to turn into complete monsters?

These questions must have been far from front of mind for a young Merrick Watts when he began his comedy career performing stand-up routines in various pubs around Melbourne. Success, fame, and the delicate balancing act of self-belief and arrogance were yet to enter his life. For now, his focus was simply to entertain an audience.

"As a comedian it's imperative to be confident of your ideas and execution," Watts says. "The first few gigs where you stand up in front of an audience and tell jokes that you've written yourself, it's one of the hardest things to do. If you don't have the confidence that you can do it, then you won't be able to."

After cutting his teeth on the pub circuit, Watts and comedy partner Tim Ross landed a job with youth broadcaster Triple J. In 2001 the pair moved to commercial radio as the hosts of breakfast for the newly launched Sydney arm of radio station Nova. As the show's ratings increased, so did their public profile. So too, at Merrick's admission, did his ego.

"I would describe myself as having been arrogant. I've always had the largest ego in the building - particularly during my time at Nova," Watts says. "It wasn't like I had anybody else challenging me. We were always held in very high esteem there. I'm sure there were lots of times that I would have been seen as completely arrogant and I reckon at times I was."

Dr Jeremy Adams, a registered psychologist

specialising in performance psychology, explains that success and confidence are intrinsically linked - it's only when the person's perception of success gets out of hand that over inflated egos develop.

"Self-confidence tends to grow based on previous success or your perceptions of previous success," Adams says. "In lay terms, someone who has a large ego would have an unrealistic sense of self belief - confidence beyond what's demonstrated by their past successes."

While radio presenters and on air talent seem most susceptible to ego inflation, it's a sentiment that rings true across the business - from film to advertising.

Media personality Steve Vizard, who became a household name in the 1980s fronting various sketch comedy shows including *Fast Forward*, produced by his production company Artist Services, says: "In this business, creative collaboration is the business and creative collaboration is an environment where everyone's ego can be accommodated."

"The hardest thing about this business is finding the line between confidence and arrogance," says David Nobay, creative chairman at advertising agency Droga5 Sydney. "We've all ended up on the wrong side of it at some time."

Nobay says that youth often breeds arrogance, or at least it did in his case. "I was promoted at a stupidly young age and partly they were giving me a piece of rope to hang





I've always had the biggest ego in the building – Merrick Watts

myself because I was so arrogant. They made me the group head to see how clever I was but also to make a lesson out of me.”

New Idea magazine editor Kim Wilson, who meets performers at every stage of their career, agrees. Arrogance, she says, is more likely to be seen when dealing with up and coming talents. “They think that’s the appropriate to behave but really, it’s mostly bluff and bravado.” Wilson sees an element of “faking it until you make it”.

Michael Gudinski, founder and CEO of the Frontier Touring Company,

recalls running into a young and largely unknown band in London during the early 1980s. “One of them said to me they were going to be the biggest band in the world,” Gudinski remembers. He chuckled to himself on the way back to his hotel room, amused by the performer’s self-assurance. The band was U2.

In the film world, director Jonathan Teplitzky says: “I haven’t met that many monsters but the ones I have met are usually the wannabes instead of the ones actually doing it.”

At a professional level, Teplitzky, director of *Burning Man*, *Gettin’ Square* and *Better Than Sex*, says the filmmaking process is far too complex to allow for giant egos. “There are too many hurdles and too many issues to deal with to think you can sail through on arrogance.”

It’s a point television writer Kris Mrksa reiterates. “The necessity to collaborate, the fact that’s just not optional, means that for most of the creatives I’ve worked with, an ability

to submerge their ego is kind of a necessity, otherwise they wouldn’t survive very long.” Mrksa, who has written for some of Australian television’s greatest commercial and critical successes including *The Secret Life of Us*, *Underbelly* and *The Slap*, says: “Working as a writer in TV, if you had a rampant ego and were very precious about your work, took criticism badly, or thought that your own opinion was always right, you would be out of a job in no time.”

Michael Chugg, music and entertainment promoter and executive chairman of Chugg Enterprises, says that despite working with some of the biggest acts in the music industry, from Coldplay to Robbie Williams, this couldn’t be more true. “It’s very much a people’s business and you have to have good people skills. One of the reasons we are so successful is that I try to treat everyone the same.”

But while many in the industry talk about checking your ego at the door, others say it’s actually a vital tool to get ahead in a highly competitive market.

Radio and television presenter Jason ‘Jabba’ Davis says: “If you haven’t got your own ego and you’re always relying on other people to blow smoke up your ass, you’re fucked. You have to have a certain sense of self-belief that you’re going to make it at whatever cost. Arrogance is a tool used by a lot of people to get their needs met.”

In Davis’ time as a host on subscription TV’s Channel V and top 40 countdowns across the radio spectrum, he interviewed a variety of local and international performers. “Most of the international people I encountered weren’t very down to earth,” Davis says. “They’re caught up in their schedules and their personal assistants and their itineraries and their fans.”

But that’s not to say Davis himself was immune to the side effects of being in the public eye. “I put a lot of credit into being on television. I’d walk out of filming, I’d walk down the street and think people were looking at me and they were like ‘Hey, there’s that guy off TV’ but of course no one was. I was arrogant. You need to get your humility from other aspects of your life.”

Davis thinks many people who enter the industry are looking to fill a void in their lives. “Most people are drawn to show business because of something lacking in their upbringing. They need the attention that an audience can fulfill.”

“Lots of people who are very arrogant - outwardly arrogant - are very insecure,” Watts adds. “They’re insecure of their talents and their positions.”

Talent manager and agent Kevin Whyte, whose clients include Watts, Wil Anderson and Judith Lucy, says while this may be the case, our industry is not the sole domain of arrogance and ego. “Creative people aren’t any more prone to arrogance than anyone else. If you’re predisposed to be unbearable, your choice of career won’t make a hell of a difference.”

For on air talent like Watts and Davis, and others exposed to the public spotlight, there are two ego-feeding factors to consider – success and fame.

Director Jonathan Teplitzky says: “99.9 per cent of people’s point of view of the film industry is celebrity culture.” Teplitzky says although the media portrays the film and television industry in a glamorous light, the reality is hard work and long



Teplitski: Celebrity culture has little to do with filmmaking

hours. “Celebrity culture has very little to do with what we do.”

Celebrity agent Max Markson, who deals daily with both success and fame, describes the media and entertainment world as “egos gone wild”. Unsurprisingly, like most of the people interviewed, he is unwilling to name names. In terms of navigating success and avoiding ego inflation,

Markson says: “It depends on the individual and how balanced they are. Everyone handles it differently.”

Actress and presenter Georgie Parker, who shot to fame in the classic Australian series *A Country Practice*, says, “No-one teaches you how to deal with success and the fact you’re in people’s homes and they feel like they know you.” Parker was 24 when she became a household name. Acting, Parker says, is a peculiar profession. “You have to have a thick skin but at the same time be humble. It’s a constant contradiction.”

Industry stalwart Wendy Harmer started her media career as a journalist but it was her decision to get into stand-up comedy that would lead to nationwide fame and an 11-year stint hosting breakfast radio on 2DayFM.

“In breakfast radio, when you’re rating well, you have access to

“A lot of people think fame and success in the media is an escalator that goes up and up but it’s more like a rollercoaster.”

– Wendy Harmer

everything; A-list invites, interviewing the stars, hanging out with important people – I got to fly first class to the Oscars,” Harmer says. “You start to think it’s all about me but it’s not. It’s about the job. Wait and see when you leave the job and all that dries up.”

Psychologist Jeremy Adams says this is one of the greatest dangers of being

in the public eye. “Anyone who is a celebrity is mostly a celebrity because of the job they have, whether they’re an actor or presenter or CEO. It’s very easy to confuse that job with the person so keeping the two separate and understanding you’re still a human being and that the job can go away and you can lose everything is crucial.”

During her 30-year career, Harmer has seen the perks of success come and go on more than one occasion as well as her ego take a beating in the media.

In 2002 Harmer scored the gig often referred to by the media as ‘the poisoned chalice’, the figurehead of Australia’s night of nights - hosting the Logies. Harmer’s performance was torn to shreds by the media and she says: “After the Logies, that was my lowest point. A lot of people think fame and success in the media is an escalator that goes up and up but it’s more like



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Photography Peter Barnes.



Markson: Everyone handles success differently

a rollercoaster. You just have to try and stay on for the ride.”

Harmer has been in the game long enough to see the threats to those in the spotlight and pinpoint where the problem arises.

“The danger is if you start to believe what people say about you in the public sphere, whether good or bad, if you hand over all the approval to people you don’t even know.”

From a psychological point of view, Adams says: “When people become very successful, others want to be around them and the people they attract tend to put them on a pedestal so they never get challenged, they never hear the word no. As a consequence they lose touch with reality very quickly. We evaluate the reality of any given situation based on information that comes in to us and if all the information says this is reality, that you are wonderful, you can’t do anything wrong, we love you, then that’s your assumption about reality, even if it’s flawed.”

The fall often comes after high profile people who have surrounded themselves with ‘yes’ people are exposed to criticism. “They haven’t been inoculated against it,” Adams says. “People in a normal situation deal with criticism on a regular basis and will hopefully learn how to deal with that. If you’re in a situation where you haven’t been criticised for a long time, when someone does criticise you, and it’s widely spread, then it can be very difficult to deal with.”

While this may sound like a vagary of fame, CEO of media agency UM Mat Baxter says the ‘yes’ person culture is just as common in his world. “That happens at ad agencies with creative teams and talented strategy teams,” Baxter says, although he feels the prevalence of social media and the two-way nature of today’s media, especially the advertising industry’s online publications, have reduced the buffer for negative feedback.

A man familiar with the effects of



Harmer: After the Logies was the lowest point



Chugg: People tell me I have a monster ego



Parker: No-one teaches you how to deal with success



Adman Sean Cummins: you’ve got to have less confidence and more discipline

online criticism is Sean Cummins, CEO of creative agency Cummins Ross. In 2011, Cummins found himself at the centre of an online debate driven by critical anonymous postings from members of the advertising industry. Whether it was that experience or the result of being in the industry

that’s the only weapon in your armoury, then it’s one you may only use once or twice. The next time you’ll be shooting yourself in the foot with it.”

Cummins stresses that confidence alone won’t get a creative far. “You’ve got to have less confidence and more discipline. This is not an industry

“You can play that ego card once or twice but you can’t do it long term, particularly in multinationals, particularly when you have to be collegiate.” – Sean Cummins

for almost 30 years that has made Cummins question ego, he doesn’t say, but he is quick to shut down the stereotype of the arrogant adman.

“You can play that ego card once or twice but you can’t do it long term, particularly in multinationals, particularly when you have to be collegiate or when you’re in political environments,” Cummins says. “If

where confidence alone answers all the problems because you quickly find when you’re given a brief that if you don’t have a fundamental creative habit or a discipline, your confidence can go the moment one of your concepts or ideas is rejected.”

Baxter agrees. “A lot of creatives view their ideas as their children. It’s almost a parental love that comes from



Harold Mitchell has seen ego take control of people to their detriment

giving birth to these ideas.” Knock the work and you are essentially knocking the person and that can have a far-reaching affect on their confidence.

Kris Mrksa says this also applies to writers. “Writing is very personal and you feel like you’re putting your baby out into the world. For it to then be called ugly and criticized is a dreadful thing to experience. If I’m teaching writing classes to students wanting to get into TV, the first thing I say to them is you need to toughen up.”

It seems confidence, and sometimes a little arrogance, is essential for protecting a creative idea.

On the creative process of creating an ad, Cummins says: “If I’m confident about an idea, there is no way a director, a photographer, an actor or anyone involved in the process can knock me off course. But if I have one little doubt or someone’s come in and gone, ‘have you thought about doing it like this?’ and you’ve gone, ‘oh God, I didn’t think about this’, if you’re not absolutely resolute in what the idea was then it’s going to turn out to be one of those ads where you go, ‘gee, I thought we had a good idea and it’s all just faded away.’”



Sandilands: an example of using arrogance as a tool?

Mrksa says this sort of crisis of confidence can ultimately be the death of a creative project. “If you don’t have confidence in yourself and you don’t have confidence in your ability to sift through all the comments and criticisms and pull out the stuff that works for you, you end up with a script that’s written by committee.”

Director Jonathan Teplitzky says the same rule applies for directors. “Film directors need to take responsibility for their project and once you approach it that way, you need confidence and ego to carry you through what is often



Brett Howlett: Australians need more self-belief

a difficult task. Very few films come out well when they’re directed by committee – it needs someone that is in charge.”

While a robust ego may be an essential tool for many in the media and entertainment industries, the challenge is keeping it in check.

Vizard says there is ample opportunity for those in the creative business to be brought back down to earth. “The creative business is a business of constantly throwing up ideas, having someone challenge your ideas and having them beaten into a pulp. That’s not a problem with the creative process, that is the creative process.”

“It’s good to be confident but you don’t want to get to the point

where your arrogance begins to hurt people, particularly the people you work with,” says Merrick Watts.

“You have to have an active process,” Wendy Harmer adds. “What are the real values I aspire to? You have to go back to touch that stone on a regular basis or you spin out of control.”

At the most extreme end of the ego scale, many of the people *Encore* spoke to have watched arrogance become the undoing of the talented.

Media agency boss Harold Mitchell, who has been in the industry for several decades during which time he developed friendships with some of the country’s most influential and powerful media identities including Kerry Packer, says: “Many times I’ve seen ego take control of a person to their detriment. They always make the wrong decisions.”

Overly inflated egos are common, Michael Gudinski says, when artists achieve success quickly. His peer

Michael Chugg says: “I’ve seen a lot of acts crash and burn because of it. They have a bit of success and all of a sudden they know how to do it all.” The know-it-all attitude, Chugg says, is most common behind the scenes as managers and those around the artist allow the success go to their heads.

Culturally, Australia is known for its ‘tall poppy syndrome’ - our tendency, as a nation, to cut the successful back down to size - a notion



Hamish and Andy go out of their way to be relatable



that comes up often when discussing confidence in the wider industry.

Psychologist Adams says: "It's a cultural failure for Australians. It's unfortunate that we have a combination of hero worship but then as soon as we feel personally slighted in any way by that person, they may have not succeeded in the way we expected, which was unrealistic, we slate them."

Brett Howlett, executive creative director of Sydney arm of ad agency Ogilvy, has just returned home after a stint in the US. He says: "In America, there's so much self belief it's kind of annoying. Aussies are great at championing a battler but as soon as someone wins they'll have a go."

Merrick Watts feels the tall poppy syndrome is a defining factor for many performers. "People like stars brought back to earth every now and then. Australians like to see humility and a kind of attitude that they're like me. But not always. Recently, we've seen lots of people who don't necessarily have that sort of humility in common with their audience do quite well."

Wendy Harmer concurs with Watts'



Is Paul Henry's arrogance rewarded?

While the public respond positively to a woman's sharing of modest human milestones such as pregnancy and marriage, she cannot see audiences being accepting of a female in the media boasting about her collection of Chanel handbags or an extensive property portfolio.

While a larger ego comes with the territory at a certain point in the career trajectory, over time, a sense of humility starts to creep in.

Promoter Michael Chugg says: "People tell me that I've got a monster of an ego. Maybe. Until about eight



Hugh Jackman - the most humble man in show business.

David Nobay, who says his ego once got him fired from his own company, adds: "You become less arrogant. When I look back at some of the stunts I pulled in my early 20s, I wouldn't hire me. When you get older you realise there's a big life outside this office. One of the things I'm focused on these days, maybe to offset the sins of my youth, is, as an industry, to be more generous."

Even Merrick Watts, despite his recent return to radio with a gig hosting Triple M's national drivetime feels the sands of time have eroded his whopping ego. "In the past I've probably been arrogant where as now I'm more receptive to listening to other people's ideas."

From the outside looking in, New Idea editor Kim Wilson says: "Most of the celebrities and high profile people at the top of their game are fabulous to deal with." She, like many in the industry, gives the example of Hugh Jackman, universally considered to be the nicest man in the business.

But perhaps audiences don't want nice or humble as the continued popularity of Kyle Sandilands, indicated by his show's ratings, or the recent hiring of controversial New Zealand TV personality Paul Henry as



Kim Wilson: those at the top of their game are great

the host of Ten's upcoming breakfast program, suggest.

Sure, it seems as if a high level of confidence is required to make it but the real characters of our industry, the ones that get people talking, all seem to have a common trait – a sizable ego.

"When I first started out in the mid-80s, advertising was full of characters," Ogilvy's Brett Howlett says. "There are fewer big egos today because they're not pandered to by management. It would be nice to get a bit of the colour back."

As Jason 'Jabba' Davis rightly points out: "This business would be pretty fucking boring without a massive, healthy dose of ego." ❖

"When I look back at some of the stunts I pulled in my early 20s, I wouldn't hire me. When you get older you realise there's a big life outside this office." – David Nobay

view and says there are two ways for on air talent to appeal to listeners – either play the role of "humble Joe" or project a persona the audience can aspire to. She cites the example of John Laws with his golden microphone and lavish holidays or Kyle Sandilands and his mansion, versus Hamish and Andy who staged their Caravan of Courage tour with the aim of highlighting just how much they are like their audience.

For female presenters, however, Harmer says the roles are more limited.

years ago when I decided to start spending time in Phuket and embraced Buddhism and gentleness of belief and faith. I think I've managed to put my ego aside but, again, there are circumstances when you do need to wield it sometimes."

Advertising's Sean Cummins says: "Early on in advertising I stopped letting my ego and my vanity get in the way of the idea and I started becoming a seeker of the truth rather than an inventor of artifice."