

Hang on, we'll be with you SHORTLY

Nobody said raising a family was easy. Similarly, running a business is no walk in the park. Your average Joe might say putting the two together is a recipe for disaster. However, Kym and Tonya Illman aren't your average Joes! BY BEN CORK.

WORKING from the spare bedroom of his Scarborough unit, Kym Illman established Messages On Hold in 1988. He hired his first employee, Tonya, in 1990 and married her in 1995. Together, they have transformed the embryonic venture into a global success story.

The company provides businesses with the promotional audio productions you hear while waiting on hold at more than 8,500 sites around Asia-Pacific. More than 750,000 people, throughout 14 countries, listen to Messages On Hold's productions every day at organisations like Travelink, Laubman & Pank, Chubb, Tip Top Bakeries and Cathay Pacific.

Last year, Kym and Tonya invested \$2.4m in a new production centre in East Perth, WA. This 1,600 square metre building houses 50 full-time and 22 part-time staff. In 2002, they purchased a similar company in Singapore where they now have a marketing office to handle sales queries from all over Asia.

So, how does a husband and wife team like the Illmans manage to juggle a growing company and a growing family?

It is, says Kym, a question of balance. Both he and Tonya hold senior positions within the company – specifically, Managing Director and Administration Manager. And while Kym is engaged in a full-time role (save for his Wednesday afternoon golf game), Tonya divides her week evenly between work and home. Two days are dedicated to looking after their boys, Tyler (4) and Jayce (2), while three half-days are spent concentrating on the business. It's a split that seems to work. By dividing her time between work and the children, Tonya's passion and enthusiasm for both remain as strong as ever.

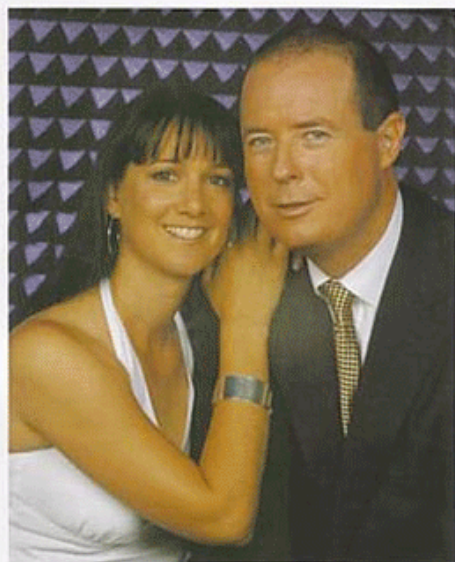
But does working alongside each other take the excitement out of their relationship? "On the contrary," says Kym.

Hands on role: Kym Illman has gone from strength to strength with Messages on Hold.



"How many couples complain about having to listen to boring work anecdotes about their partner's work environment?" For Kym and Tonya, each is naturally interested in the other's stories, since they share a common focus. In fact, their conversations can be very constructive in solving business-related problems.

"We're constantly analysing the company, discussing ways to solve challenges that pop up day to day," explains Kym. "With two heads working on a solution, both at work and at home, the answers come quicker and easier!" And while Kym and Tonya spend much of their day putting out fires in the office, the fire in their relationship is stoked by the stimulus of their career.



Team work: Tonya and Kym have found the balance between business and family.

Kym believes they are more "animated, truthful and intense" with each other as a result of their working relationship. As in any harmonious union, one complements the other. If Kym is a raging hurricane, Tonya is the calm at its centre. While he concentrates on endless new ideas and opportunities, it is she who executes them with planning and patience – the yin to his yang.

While the strong bond between the pair often leads to mutually-agreed decisions, it did prove something of an obstacle once the business started expanding. Letting new decision-makers into the management structure was a difficult experience for the pair.

"We obviously shared strong views on certain areas of the business and there really was no-one else around to question them," recalls Kym. "Then, all of a sudden, you have new blood questioning those decisions and forcing you to reevaluate the way you think. It's a bit like having a stranger showing up out of nowhere and joining you at the dinner table every night. You have to learn to accommodate their tastes."

The trick, according to the Illmans, was letting the new management team inside their circle of trust – in essence, welcoming them into the family.

And, as is typical of Kym and Tonya, it wasn't done in halves! MOH's General Manager, Kimly Davies, was asked to be the godmother of the Illmans' first child, Tyler.

Indeed, the philosophy of seeing their business as a sort of, extended family is at the heart of their success. Kym admits that he could run his business with fewer staff, making it leaner and more efficient, but as he says, where's the fun in that? "After you reach a certain level of success, it's not about the money any more," he said. "It's more about building something you and your staff can be proud of, almost like a little community. It's very much focused on growth and creation, the human side of things."



Attention grabber: Sales boom when you get the message across.

The growth of Kym and Tonya's immediate family also changed the way they did business. Four years ago, Tonya gave birth to Tyler, and then 2 years later, Jayce was born. Parenthood was always going to be something of an eye-opener, but it helped Kym develop professionally as well as personally.

"It definitely aided me in understanding my employees a little better," Kym admitted. "Now when one of my staff asks me if they can take the afternoon off to see their child in a play, or compete at a sports day, I'm happy to oblige. I see that both the parent and child really get something out of it, whereas, before my kids were born, I might not have realised this as readily."

And what about his own offspring, Tyler and Jayce? Does Kym see them becoming part of the business in the future? "Certainly, it would be fun to have them helping out if that's what they wanted to do," he mused. "It's a fair few years away yet but I'll definitely be here for them should they want it. After all, there's no way I'll be retiring anytime soon. It'd be like leaving my wife and kids." **OO**



Marketing: Kym knows the value of promotion.