

# Advertisements with a big future

Cameron Cooper | *February 27, 2009*

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**FLYING over Brisbane's international airport, it is hard to miss the end result of Ian Mayfield's flourishing business initiative.**

Using revolutionary robot-controlled technology, his Gold Coast company GrassAds has created what is reputedly the world's largest advertisement -- it measures 9000sqm and is larger than a football field.

Designed for a duty-free company and the Brisbane Airport Corp, the ad features the words "Shop Buy Fly" and dominates turf near the tarmac. Passengers can see the graphic, which was produced over three days, as they arrive and depart.

Mayfield and his artistic robots, nicknamed Druitt, are transforming the outdoor events sign-writing sector and have already made sales in-roads into sports stadiums and the lucrative US golf circuit.

Grass signs are typically created using costly stencils that have size limits and can only be laid on flat surfaces. By contrast the Druitts, the product of about four years' research and development, weigh about 10kg and are small enough to carry on planes. They store complex graphics and navigate the outlines of the final image on to the grass before painting begins.

Mayfield, an entrepreneur formerly involved in the sports turf industry, and business partners Craig Molloy and Matt Johnson are filling a niche in the advertising market after noticing some years ago that traditional stencil production techniques were clumsy and often produced poor results for sponsors of sporting events.

"We had looked at golf tournaments and felt that a lot of the time the sponsors weren't being represented in a way that was good for the course or for the company," he says.

"We set about to see if we could make it a fully automated process."

The Druitts give clients speed and flexibility.

"The big difference is that we don't need to predetermine size or where it is going to go," Mayfield says.

"When we're on site (we can) check whether it's a golf tee or fairway and change the size to suit the area.

"And we've also just recently developed an erasable paint that we use, which means that after the event is finished we can actually remove that from the area and it can be ready for another event." Able to quickly draw multiple graphics at a site, the robot also reproduces logos more accurately than stencils. Mayfield says seven years of development and trials are now paying off.

"When we surfaced for air there was so much enthusiasm for it. We did know there was a market there, but without the product you couldn't really understand how big the market would be."

He says the technology has opened up new markets that were not viable before, including large sites such as Brisbane Airport. In the past, such outdoor ads were mainly targeted at events broadcast on television.

"Original techniques were only good to use on television, but we do a lot of events which aren't even televised because the economies and efficiencies make it worthwhile for our customers."

Through a relatively simple marketing campaign, which has included small-scale advertising and venue education, Mayfield says GrassAds is building an enviable client list, including Coca-Cola, Jaguar and Schweppes.

"We don't lose many customers once they understand what we can do."

The latest phase has been to focus on brand development and to gain a much broader spread of customers.

"We've probably kicked it up about five gears in the last six months," Mayfield says.

With expansion comes the need for more cash. Mayfield has called on the expertise of some prominent business minds through the Angels Institute, a networking forum that facilitates the development of new business ventures.

Bringing in business angels was not a decision he made lightly.

"We certainly didn't want to start raising capital for the company and cause problems because it was rushed or not done properly."

Those now investing and advising GrassAds include the founder of the Angels Institute Rick McElhinney and former Brumby's Bakeries CEO Michael Sherlock. Nine other investors also have an undisclosed shareholding in the business.

"It has been a very good thing for us," Mayfield says. "We did that about 18 months ago and, while the initial capital was not very much in itself, it came with business knowledge and background. It's given us the ability to test ideas and just really analyse what we're trying to do and where we're going."

Armed with this advice, GrassAds has set up an office in Orlando, Florida, and is considering licensing and franchising deals to build the business. Mayfield is confident the brand will thrive despite the international financial crisis.

"Like everyone, we're paying close attention, but we're still seeing active growth. We help our customers.

"The efficiencies are good for them and our work is increasing because in most cases we are actually creating revenue streams for our customers."