

Newcastle Herald Weekender cont...

COVER
STORY

OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE

Jerry Seinfeld and a Newcastle financial institution have workshopped a situation comedy way, way out of left field. NEIL JAMESON asks the stand-up standout why . . . and how much.



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Had Jerry Seinfeld possessed the super powers of his hero Superman, it would have been simple.

He could have flown faster than the speed of light to Newcastle, NSW, performed his stand-up routine on the footpath outside a suburban branch of the Greater Building Society, knocked back a few beers with the crew and been back home in time for breakfast with the wife and kids.

He's good, but he ain't that good.

Instead, he took a limo from his nine-hectare East Hampton estate, down the Montauk Highway – past the house where George Costanza suffered that cold swim, in the general direction of the Rockaway dunes from where Cosmo Kramer belted a bucket of Titleists into the Atlantic – for the relatively short journey to Cedarhurst (pop: 6000).

There, wearing a smart suit, he appeared in front of the cameras outside a mocked-up Greater branch for the day's shooting. Next day, he did it again until the crew had enough in the can for not just one television commercial, but an entire campaign. You might have caught some of it on television this week.

The king of comedy couldn't come to the 'Castle, so they took the 'Castle, or part of it, to him. They built a branch in New York.

Let's stop right there. What we're talking about here might well be the advertising catch of the year. Jerry Seinfeld, one of the world's most in-demand A-listers who has only rarely lent his name to a commercial product, blows right past the Fortune 500 list to strike a deal with a business headquartered on the corner of Beaumont and Tudor streets, Hamilton, Newcastle, NSW, Australia. Now, just take a moment to think about that.

But it doesn't stop there. Called upon to explain this phenomenon, Jerry agrees to just one interview. You guessed it – *Weekender* scores the scoop.

When he phones us from New York, duty dictates that we ask him the obvious: How much? It's a question we'd already put to the Greater's marketing people. They weren't saying what it cost to recruit the world's wealthiest comedian, but here's a few clues: in 2008 Bill Gates was said to have paid him \$US10 million to work his magic for Microsoft, we're told the comic recently knocked back twice that to appear for another multinational, and his fans know he passed on an offer of \$US10 million an episode to do just one more series of his mega-grossing *Seinfeld* which raked in almost \$US270 million in its final season alone. The Greater's marketing man, John Dwyer, is more than ready for the question and, whipping the old "commercial in confidence" swatter from his belt, puts it out of its misery.

"Let's just say we didn't pay anything like Microsoft," he laughs.

As Elaine Benes would have said: "Get out of here!"



COMIC RELIEF: The Greater's marketing man, John Dwyer, and none other than Jerry Seinfeld on set in Cedarhurst, Long Island.

"Why did Jerry Seinfeld accept our offer? Because we were bold enough to ask."

So, it couldn't have been about the money, could it? But, we still have to ask Jerry. We tread softly.

Weekender: "This might be just a wild guess on our part, but we're thinking you did it for a whole lot less than the Microsoft campaign."

Jerry: "We don't think about money too much these days. I like to do things because they feel right."

We'd been tipped off he was courteous by nature and we're hoping that his natural goodwill has been topped up by the fact that Jerry's New York Mets have just snapped a disastrous losing streak by beating the Dodgers 5-4 the previous night.

Jerry (laughing): "You're really up to date. The internet is a wonderful thing. That's what I was doing last night – I was up watching that game on TV."

Back to business. In his dealings with the Seinfeld team, John Dwyer drew the impression that the financial consideration was not top of the list.

"I think he was taken by the creative. We invited Jerry to be Jerry. He liked the proposal because it allowed him to be himself. My guess is that some of the big approaches set out telling him what they want him to do. That's not his go. He had a large input in the scripting. And who is going to say 'no thanks' to Jerry Seinfeld if he offers to help you out with the script?"

"That's normally what I do," the comedian confirms.

Allowing Jerry to be master of his domain, doing stand-up on Cedarhurst Avenue, was irresistible.

There he was with microphone and familiar stool cracking up the locals with his trademark observational humour while the cameras rolled.

According to the man himself, the Aussies had a flying start. Jerry harboured a positive take on all things Australian.

"I have a very warm feeling about Australia," he tells *Weekender*. "I was down there in '98 right after the show went off the air and the response from the people I met on the street, in the restaurants, everywhere was so special I felt kinda close to them."

"The only thing I don't like about Earth is they put Australia a little too far away, otherwise I would love to make it part of my touring schedule."

As far as coups go, this one was right up there. With no disrespect to anybody, the facts speak for themselves.

The Greater is a top 500 Australian outfit, a mutual with \$4 billion in assets owned by its members.



The tale of the Greater and the great comic goes back to last year when the business opened discussions about a new campaign. Dwyer, the brains behind the society's concept of a free holiday for home borrowers, suggested they go for a big name – shoot for the stars.

"We decided that having a celebrity was going to be good, providing we found the right person, somebody who would be in synch with the brand," he explains.

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COVER STORY



CREDITS DUE: Jerry Seinfeld harns it up for the Greater ad shoot in downtown Cedarhurst, USA. Opposite page, the *Seinfeld* cast.

"We came up with a short-list and Jerry's name was right up there.

"The research showed he was perfect."

Dwyer contacted Seinfeld's Los Angeles-based agent Christian Carino and manager George Shapiro who spoke to their client. Back in Australia, everybody knew it was a long-shot.

But then, Shapiro got back to them with the news: "Jerry would be pleased to do it."

As the comedian confirms, here was an opportunity for him to reconnect with his Australian audience.

"It's hard for me to get there, so I thought, 'Hey, this is a great way I can do some of my stuff for my friends in Australia, and the Greater seemed like such a nice business, everybody associated with them was nice.'"

Dwyer: "We're still pinching ourselves. We had him on the top of the list but, in reality, we thought he was untouchable. Talk about right place, right time."

In comedy and marketing, timing is everything. With his new reality show, *The Marriage Ref* in production, and organising the *Seinfeld* cast reunion for HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Jerry was busier than Larry the Cook during rush-hour at Monk's Cafe.

Shapiro told Dwyer: "Look, if you're going to do this, it's going to have to happen in America."

Having finessed the details via a meeting with Carino, the Greater's negotiators flew to New York, met with the Seinfeld team in his suite of offices 55 floors above the streets of Manhattan, and closed the deal.

Realising Jerry wasn't coming to Australia

any time soon, the Australians, including Greater chief Don Magin, followed up their New York meeting with a four-hour drive to catch the comedian's live act.

Location research settled on four possibles in New York state, each within driving distance of Jerry's home. Ultimately, they chose Cedarhurst because its main drag looked most like the main street in a typical Australian suburb.

In an abandoned health food shop, next door to the local Haagen-Dazs ice-cream

closed for two days and 132 Nassau County police officers, led by Detective Michael Bitsko, on hand to see things ran smoothly.

"The people were lovely, so helpful," Dwyer says. "They virtually closed the town for us."

If the Australians bore any trepidation about working with a big star, Seinfeld's agent had already put them at ease.

Dwyer: "He [Carino] said to us early in the piece: 'If you manage to pull this off you're going to find Jerry and his people the nicest folks to deal with.'"

"It's hard for me to get there, so I thought, 'Hey, this is a great way I can do some of my stuff for my friends in Australia'."

parlour and across the road from Vandelay Industries (not really, we made that bit up), set builders got busy constructing a replica of a Greater branch, complete with ATM. May 11 and 12 were scheduled as the shooting dates.

There would be some cosmetic adjustments: the colour of the road marker paint was Australianised, the US-style parking meters removed and local traffic signs covered up or altered, cars parked on the street had to be pointing in the right direction. To achieve these results the US crew worked off photos of Australian streetscapes.

When Mayor Andrew J. Parise learned the greatest living Jewish comedian was shooting a commercial in his strongly Orthodox Jewish community, he arranged to have the town

He was right. On landing for the session Jerry strolled over to say hello to a bunch of Cedarhurst schoolkids including Avi Schwartzblatt who offered the plaster cast on his broken arm for the comedian to sign.

It seems everybody in town was happy to bask in the glow, including a local columnist who billed himself as The Legendary Danny Odoul of the *5 towns Jewish Times* and tacked on to the funny side of Jerry fronting at a faux branch.

"What kind of meshuganeh decides to film a commercial at a bank without free coffee?" scolds Danny. "So, I snuck him over to Cap One . . . then headed next door to Oh Nuts for some raisinettes and off we went to sit on the bench outside and devour our nosh. Jerry told

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me that much had changed on The Avenue since the last time he had visited back in the 1980s."

And you wonder where Jerry gets his material?

CBS News sent Emmy Award-winning journalist Scott Rapoport out to cover the appearance of "comic royalty" in a village where one local told him that it was cool because "nothing ever happens in Cedarhurst". Rapoport popped the mic under John Dwyer's nose and asked the Australian the more-than-\$64 question: "How much did Jerry cost?"

"Ten dollars fifty and lunch money as well," he quipped.

On the pavement, Jerry was warming up the crowd with his observational take on Australiana.

"I have 72 shows next week out the back of Bourke. Good seats currently available... in fact, all seats."

In chatting to the comedian, *Weekender* ruminates about this curious match – international A-lister who (we're told) fields 50 approaches a week via his agent and knocks all of them back, finds amid the mail this overture from an incredibly worthy but relatively modest suitor from the other side of the world.

In New York, where the damage of the global financial crisis lies all around and trust is a commodity in short supply, it is indeed kismet.

Jerry: "Well, that's the sort of thing that I like. I feel more comfortable in these kind of situations than I do with the bigger guys. I

didn't know about them [the Greater] before, but I've been investigating it and it's quite a remarkable relationship they have with their customers."

Weekender: "Is there a salient lesson here, Jerry? Maybe if New Yorkers had invested their money with the Greater rather than Bernie Madoff the world would be a better place today?"

Jerry (laughing): "That is absolutely for sure."

Meanwhile, John Church, whose agency still retains a significant stake in the Greater's marketing activity, is dining out on having been the warm-up act for Jerry Seinfeld.

"I told them I'd do it for half the dough," he jokes. "I guess if you've got to pass on the

baton, it might as well be to comic royalty."

With his company involved at the back end of the deal, Church has an educated view of where the credit should fall.

"It was very much John Dwyer's baby," he says. "He's a great believer in the wow factor. But [executive officer] Don Magin deserves credit. He could have said no. Instead, he ran with the idea."

At the campaign launch, Magin offers the best answer as to why the comic king hooked his star to their business.

"Why did Jerry Seinfeld accept our offer? Because we were bold enough to ask."

Hopefully, their customers will be laughing all the way to the b... building society.

THE BOLD AND THE BOUNTIFUL

"If awareness is a measurement of success, this one's got very high awareness."

Todd Sampson, CEO of Leo Burnett, Sydney, and panellist on ABC TV's *The Gruen Transfer*, has been gauging reactions to the Greater's Seinfeld coup. Referring to the national news coverage, he suggests: "The value of the PR alone will start to reap returns on the cost of attracting such a high-profile star."

"My understanding is that this [the Greater] is a business that's been operating in Australia for 60 years, but we'd barely heard of them. Now, everybody's talking about them."

Sampson says the practice of international stars doing campaigns outside their own countries is not new and can be very cost-effective.

"Lots of US stars including Woody Allen and Mel Gibson have done one-offs in places like Japan," he says.

With the client paying for regional rather than global rights, the talent cost is much lower than, say, what Microsoft would have had to pay for its international campaign featuring Jerry Seinfeld (pictured above).

"There is the possibility that the star overshadows the brand. The risk is that all people will be talking about is Jerry Seinfeld and not the content of the commercial," Sampson says.

But on brand awareness alone, he offers, the campaign might already be a winner.

