

## **Phillip Jones: A new kind of specialist**

By Amanda Hardwick

Phillip Jones is a person who appreciates an individuals' capability to contribute to their community. Unlike sportsmen for instance, who have their ability to contribute foisted upon them in the form of speed or good ball-kicking ability, and unlike those content to watch the world move around them with a 'small fish in a big sea' attitude, Phillip recognizes his own potential to benefit his community. He is one of many in a new generation of Canberran's who see below the surface of Canberra - 'as empty and barren as it can be at times" - and is helping Canberra to realize its full, untapped potential.

Phillip is the founder and director of 'Schmooze'; a prominent Canberra professional networking firm. Launched in 2003, 'Schmooze' describes itself as the 'Networker's network'. It has over 800 email subscribers, and represents over 320 organizations spanning both the public and private sectors. Phillip insists that 'Schmooze' is unlike any other Canberra network, for the most part due to its decidedly un-corporate, friendly, informal approach. Even first glance at the name 'Schmooze' (which Jones attributes to a 'light bulb moment') sets this network apart from others. *"Creative people should get it, in that line of work they should know what schmooze means, and it becomes sort of an in-joke as well, a bit tongue-in-cheek, and it sets the tone from the start"*. The corporate identity bolsters this friendly, somewhat cheeky style. The bright pink typographic logo in curvy 'studio 54' style lettering is decidedly anti-corporate. *"I expected something very structured and corporate-y...And then it's pink!"*

Phillip describes 'Schmooze' events as 'corporate parties' of sorts. He has abolished the often-discriminatory process of nametags; which at these events frequently lead to avoidance of certain names or companies due to pre-conceptions. At a 'Schmooze' event, the connections you make that evening are all up to chance. 'Schmooze' member Ruth Winchester, who was introduced into the network by a friend who also works in a law firm, says she has made a

number of acquaintances through 'Schmooze', not to mention *"getting her face in the City News!"* According to Ruth, *"Schmooze gives marketing and PR professionals an opportunity to socialise and network with people from their own profession in a relaxed and friendly setting"*

In 2005, Phillip branched out to form the Young Professionals Alliance, a non-profit network that brings together a wide range of organisations and individuals within the ACT.

Membership is limited to those between the ages of 18-40, with the goal of furthering the long-term professional interests of young professionals in the ACT region.

Phillip founded both 'Schmooze' and the YPA for one simple reason; there was a massive gap in the Canberra market. Many would think there was a gap with good reason; that Canberra's size hinders such endeavors, and networks like this would have a much easier time in Sydney or Melbourne. Phillip insists this is not the case, citing the 'intimacy of Canberra' as a key to the networks' success. *"It'd be difficult [establishing in Sydney] because it'd be very difficult to make a noise and get attention".*

A lot of Phillip's success' can be afforded to the hospitality one finds in Canberra; his first sponsor was popular Canberra nightspot Hippo Bar, who offered their venue to host Schmooze events. *"People are falling over backwards to help you, because they believe in the city, and there's a whole bunch of people who live here who believe in the long term viability and the future of the city".* Advertising firm CRE8IVE are one such company with this generous hospitality and willingness to assist, donating approximately \$40,000 worth of skills to develop Schmooze's corporate identity.

*"I always describe Canberra as an introspective city, its like an introvert – it doesn't say much on the surface but there is a whole lot going on inside of it – and that's Canberra in a way that I think it has everything you could possibly want, but it's all below the surface – until you know where to go or what circles to mix in you'll never find out".*

Phillip attributes his decision to return to Canberra after several years of travel to the 'enormous quality of life here'. Without the bother of commuting and travel involved with working in larger cities; where it takes you two hours to get home from work everyday, he believes this excess energy and time saved allows Canberran's to have what he deems 'a double life'. And Phillip is a perfect example of someone leading this double life, but in his case it's more like a triple...and its not stretching it to say a quadruple life. 'Schmooze' and the YPA are just two of his three 'hats'. He also has a day job, a consultant 'to whoever wants [him]' in addition to the time he spends on 'Schmooze' and the YPA. He also has a healthy social life – as one would expect from the head of a large business based around socializing – including the recently formed 'Urbane Poker Crew' which sees he and friends getting together for poker games topped off with a glass of wine and a nice meal, and a long list of interests including travel, nature and wine collecting. And last but not least, a comfortable home life, with wife of two years Edwina – a museum curator - and shaggy dog Harry.

This multi-faceted-ness and versatility appears to have always been a part of Phillip's life. His upbringing in a military family had him on the path to join the Navy. He moved from Kiama to Canberra to finish his Year 12 studies, before going to the ANU to pursue a broad range of studies, including Political Science, Comparative Religion and Philosophy. He was prepared to finish up his 2<sup>nd</sup> Semester at the ANU when at the last minute he opted to turn down his offer to join the Navy and instead embark on what was going to be a 'brief life education' spell of working in restaurants. Instead this brief period turned into quite a substantial one, one that led directly into the gregarious profession he finds himself in now. *"I was going to be an officer, but at the same time I've got this other part of me that's studying comparative religion and philosophy – the humanist side – and the two were kind of torn, and at the last minute the humanist side of me won".*

Below the outgoing, social surface however, Phillip appears to be quite the conundrum. He is a self-described introvert, yet his profession revolves around conversing, cajoling and (I can't resist) schmoozing with other people. This collision of extrovert and introvert create an interesting paradox. Phillip's 'nirvana' as he puts it, would be – when he is finished with 'Schmooze', YPA and any other endeavors he may undertake – *“to live the part of the country gentleman, you know, I'd have my dogs and my horses and this beautiful house, with a view of the mountains, probably 40 minutes out of Canberra, away from the world, but connected to it, with a life of culture and books and ideas, and reflection...”*

Despite this contradiction, Phillip appears to have a profound sense of clarity and self-awareness. Though he has no formal qualifications, Phillip is extremely well traveled and has a wide range of expertise. He refers to the book 'An Intimate History of Humanity' by French philosopher Theodore Zeldin as a 'catalyst' in his life. Zeldin theorizes that in today's generation of individual specialists, there is a need for a 'new kind of specialist, who brings these specialists together'. *“That's kind of where I 'fit in' in many ways, I have a very varied work life, and quite varied work experience, I can relate to lots of different types of people, I can speak their language, and I can understand where they're coming from, so that enables me to build some bridges, between professional worlds, as well as you know individuals, so I just play to that strength I think.”*

Phillip's spirituality also plays a large part in shaping who he is; becoming a Buddhist in his early twenty's after experimentation with many religions in his teen years. Phillip draws particular attention to the Zen expression: *“before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water”*. He relates this to his strong desire to contribute to his community, and places great emphasis on earning and deserving rewards.

In another life Phillip would be a photographer, an architect, or a Buddhist monk, and he certainly - like most of us I dare say - has those moments where he wishes his life had indeed taken a different direction. The day-to-day risk or 'the high-wire act' of his volatile profession is the most difficult part of his life; knowing if something was to fail he would have no formal qualifications to fall back on. But for Phillip these moments of doubt are greatly outweighed by the positives, which he says are little things, like someone congratulating him on a successful event, someone telling him they would never find a network like this in Melbourne, or simply feeling a room buzz with the vibe of everyone having a great time.

Although a very organized man – both the YPA and 'Schmoozes' plans are mapped out for the next year – Phillip can not say where he sees himself in 10 or even 5 years time. *"There's no way I could of foreseen what I'm doing now 3 years ago, so couldn't say what I'll be doing 5-10 years from now"*. In the short term, he looks towards a large YPA fundraiser for Breast Cancer hosted by the Canberra Centre in the coming week, something he hopes will put the YPA on the map, and broaden the relatively new associations horizons. He also looks forward to December. Why December? *"In December I can relax"*. He will be taking a much needed break from both organizations, and he hopes to use the time to find the 'headspace' to pursue other interests, such as writing poetry or a novel. He looks to the end of next year in possibly handing over the reins of YPA to someone new, and Schmooze? *"Schmooze I'll keep going as long as I want to, it'll never become a fulltime job I don't suspect, I probably don't want it to"*.

So is there any end to this tightrope act in sight? *"I can't see myself being retired, 55, 60, 70 even, I think those days are long gone, and we'll always have to work, in some way, and I think its good for your health and life, to be engaged in a world where you've got to contribute in some way"*. Chop wood and carry water indeed.