

DARING TO BE DIFFERENT

Boredom, dissatisfaction and a belief that there had to be a better way to practice law led Michael Bradley, managing partner of Marque Lawyers, to create his own legal nirvana. He speaks to **Claire Chaffey**

Give respect. Be bold. Have fun. These three rules are the founding principles and enduring mantra behind Marque Lawyers, and when talking to founder and managing partner Michael Bradley, you get the distinct impression that the last of the principles is firmly at the forefront of how things work at Marque.

For one, the office bears more resemblance to a chic Melbourne café-cum-artist's studio than your average corporate work space (complete with a woodpile and faux garden affectionately referred to as "The grassy knoll") and the radio tunes blasting through the firm's colourful open plan arrangement have understandably – on more than one occasion – had new clients wondering if they had caught the lift to the wrong floor.

Marque is unapologetically a firm which is everything it wants to be and nothing it doesn't, and which – since its inception in 2008 – has thumbed its nose at the way law is traditionally practiced and proved that non-conformity in the legal world is far from fatal.

Marque is decidedly different, and for Bradley, this result could not be more satisfying – or deliberate.

"It's been almost embarrassingly good fun. You shouldn't have that much fun at work.

We've just been having a ball," he says.

"It's such an interesting exercise to start a firm from scratch and do it in a way where we have completely ignored how things are done. It has been wonderful to have the opportunity to reinvent every aspect of practice in a way that makes sense to us."

Marque is the brainchild of several disillusioned Gadens lawyers – led by Bradley (who was Gadens' managing partner) – who thought there must be a better way to practice law – more human and enjoyable – than what is traditionally the case.


And for Bradley, a very clear understanding of what he didn't want in a law firm made configuring Marque surprisingly easy.

"[I had a] growing dissatisfaction with law, the way it's practiced, the way firm's operate. I didn't really enjoy being a lawyer," he says.

"I had real problems with the way law firms are conventionally structured, the way they remunerate and progress, and the way people are valued and treated."

Bradley thus decided the easiest way to escape these problems was to create a new and ultimately unique firm – something which was initially daunting. "We thought it was a ridiculously ambitious and risky thing to do, but the worst that could happen was heroic failure,





so we decided to give it a go," he laughs. "It has proved to be a lot easier than we thought."

The result is a firm in which offices are strictly out (employees are rotated every six months so as to avoid "bay envy"), social interaction, relationship building and self-deprecation are compulsory (along with the footy tipping competition), noise and bustle are encouraged, and performances are measured on skill and relationships rather than financial targets or the number of billable hours you clock each day.

This last point is particularly important to Bradley, who rates the dominance of timesheets as one of several fundamental flaws in the legal business model, and sees them as a significant cause of the gloom plaguing the profession.

"It's just a horrible way to work and an awful way to think about yourself and measure your own value. Nobody likes it. You won't find a lawyer who actually enjoys filling in a timesheet," says Bradley. "You end up measuring success by reference to time units, regardless of how you have spent that time. That's not why any of us studied law."

The problem, says Bradley, is that timesheets are part of an extremely efficient business model and one which is deeply entrenched in the industry. But the success of this model, he adds, comes at the expense of employee satisfaction. "It's a really ... spiritually unsatisfying existence. It's basically inhuman," he says.

"It drives behaviours and attitudes which are really dysfunctional. It's not designed to make people happy. It's not the way we operate in our normal lives. It's just a deeply, ultimately depressing, way to operate."

But other firms, says Bradley, are reluctant to change because of an inherent conservatism, a fear of non-conformity and what he calls a "collective wilful blindness". "There is this dread-filled inertia. Time costing is so easy. It is such a good business model because you can't lose. Nobody wants to give it up," he says.

But change is coming, says Bradley, and ignoring a faulty model is unsustainable, especially with a new breed of lawyers moving through the ranks. "There are challenging times ahead, particularly with the younger generation which is less tolerant of not getting what was advertised. Continuing survival of firms is, to a large degree, supported by the endless flow and supply of graduates. You can keep plugging them in at the bottom of the machine but that tolerance level is diminishing and that translates into increasing difficulty in hanging on to them," he says.

"It's very cynical ... to just not address what is an obvious problem, a fundamental problem, that there are so many people in the one profession who are unhappy. Every firm should be looking inside itself and saying, 'Why are so many of our staff unhappy? What's wrong? Do we need to fundamentally address how we do business?'

"I know a lot of people disagree with that completely, but I am a very interested observer from the sidelines, and very happy not to be in it."

Being in the sidelines of a market which Bradley predicts will soon see some significant implosions suits Marque down to the ground, and its success as a proudly alternative law firm is evidenced by the fact Bradley has - on numerous occasions - turned down offers of a merger or significant lateral additions to the firm.

"We've been presented ... with a pretty constant flow of opportunities to expand, people interested in joining us with their practice. It has been ... quite challenging responding to that, because we have knocked back a lot of opportunities to grow fast and therefore make a lot more money," he says.

"It has been really nice to have a vision to fall back on, to measure those opportunities against and say, 'Why do we want to do that?' We can make rational decisions by measuring them against what we were trying to achieve in the first place."

And for those at Marque, that vision is crystal clear. "We are not suggesting that we've found the perfect model for a law firm, but it's the perfect one for us," says Bradley. "It's very simple. Give respect. Be bold. Have fun. That's all you need. We measure everything we do against that simple proposition. We won't do anything if it isn't fun. What's the point?"