

# THE CAMPAIGN FOR RECOGNITION

**I** MAGINE RUNNING A CAMPAIGN WITH A YET-TO-BE-DETERMINED DEADLINE FOR A PRODUCT STILL IN THE WORKS. SEEMS FAR-FETCHED BUT THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT THE TEAM BEHIND THE RECOGNISE CAMPAIGN ARE DOING IN THE LEAD UP TO THE REFERENDUM TO CHANGE THE AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTION. THE JOINT CAMPAIGN DIRECTORS TANYA HOSCH AND TIM GARTRELL EXPLAIN THE MASSIVE UNDERTAKING

WORDS: BROOKE HEMPHILL

**Tim:** The Australian Constitution has two problems – no recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and there are still provisions that allow for racial discrimination. There have been calls for a long time for that to be dealt with. That started to pick up pace towards the end of the Howard government and has been picked up by successive governments. It's now starting to get close to the point of having a referendum to change the Constitution. That's what the Recognise campaign is about: raising awareness and starting to build the case for change ahead of the referendum. We're pretty happy with the progress of the campaign to date. We've been around more than two years and in that time we have managed to lift awareness from roughly 20% of the population to the mid 30s.

It's a good lift but we've still got a long way to go. And that's happened without a large advertising budget. We've signed up about 222,000 people to the movement and since May 2013, we've taken the campaign on a 'Journey to Recognition' that has covered more than 25,000km's by foot, bike, 4WD, kayak and paddleboard across Victoria, South Australia, the Northern Territory, Western Australia and now Queensland. We've involved 162 communities and spoken with more than 14,000 Australians at 197 events.

**Tanya:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are central to the campaign. So many things have been proposed by committees over the years that make people more cautious about what they jump in to.

In order to reach the Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people we rely on existing networks. Our cultures are really diverse; we're not all the same and all of these people want to feel like their voices are being heard.

We are confident most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people see this as a good thing. There's always going to be some undercurrent of cynicism about where this is going. Is this a ploy to try and distract us from other conversations, rights agendas, etcetera?

**Tim:** Even though the campaign has been going for two years, it's still reasonably early, so our target is very broad. In some ways, it's like a preliminary brand building exercise. We're just getting it on people's radar, getting them

positively inclined towards it because the model, the changed Constitution, is still being nussed out. I've worked on lots of election campaigns but this is new for me because there hasn't been a referendum since 1999 and that was pre social media.

I'm trying to think of a marketing example. It's almost as though all of the automobile companies got together to run an industry campaign about why cars are important. Later on, there's the car you are going to think about. We're the sales department in a way. We don't design the car.

**Tanya:** We don't decide the model. That's not our job. But we do have to help people understand it and promote it and convince them.

**Tim:** At the moment, we're getting people to understand the concept: why is this important for the country, why is it important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? Then we'll move to the second phase when there's a model and the question becomes, 'Are you going to vote yes or no?'

**Tanya:** We are now moving towards a time when different commentators are going to start canvassing their ideas about the perfect model, and that's probably going to be a time where we see tension start to emerge.

With any type of indigenous development work there is an expectation. I've lost count the number of times I've heard non-indigenous people say to me, 'Well, if you lot could all just agree, then you'd actually get the result.' As I often say, my family can't agree where to have Christmas lunch,

so I don't know how you get a really diverse population to all agree on any one thing. It's an unrealistic expectation.

There's a strong sense among Blackfellas that it's important to know the views you're bringing to the table, if you get the privileged opportunity to do that, are reflective of what your people are saying, thinking and feeling.

**Tim:** That's where social media is good. Pre-social media, you had to think about how to have people's voices heard. You would have to rely on some sort of TV or cinema ads. With social media, we release interstitials of people who have been on the journey. Most of them are Aboriginal people talking about where they are from and what it means to them. The challenge, of course, is that everyone's voice can be on there.

**Tanya:** Facebook is something Blackfellas have been doing without technology for years now. It works really well having a place where people can come together.

**Tim:** The campaign's Facebook page is one of the biggest in the country. It's got about 146,000 likes and a lot of engagement. Our digital team is really good at picking great images that hit a spot. One of the top shared was a photo from World War II of the first Aboriginal commissioned army officer Captain Reg Saunders talking to one of the white men in his unit. We put that out on Remembrance Day saying, 'It's time to recognise Aboriginal contribution to the military service.' It had about 20,000 likes and 4,000 shares.

We don't have the funds for a big TV or cinema ad but when you think about it, a channel that has 140,000 plus viewers is starting to become a pretty decent channel.

Because our marketing budget is limited, we try to leverage relationships and other audiences. One example is the AFL indigenous round. The AFL came on board and we part sponsored the indigenous round. Telstra strongly supported our involvement promoting Recognise on the brand's website and the AFL also skinned its site. Toyota gave up the centre circle for the Recognise logo.

The AFL made a 30 second TV commercial with Adam Goodes and Michael O'Loughlin. They ran that during the game but Channel

Seven then picked it up as a community service announcement and it actually got a run during the Grand Final. That's a classic example of how brands are jumping on board and we're building a coalition of companies, marketing people and sporting codes. And there's strong Aboriginal involvement. And these are not sports people that are told by their management 'stick the t-shirt on and go like that mate'.

**Tanya:** We ask anybody who wants to do this to be properly briefed because knowing there will be moments where it gets pretty heated, we don't want anybody then stepping back and saying, 'Oh, I'm not sure if I do support this now because it's all a bit too hard'. There are so many companies where people don't want to not get this stuff right. They don't want to step into something and find, 'Oh, Blackfellas don't want this and here we are being white saviours and it's not actually helping'.

**Tim:** Our main advertising agency is Lawrence Creative, which is part of STW. We've also got Mark Textor and Andrew Laidlaw from Crosby Textor, the market research company. They're very well known in the political marketing world. Mark Textor has been the pollster to successive conservative prime ministers. We use Red Bean Republic for a lot of our digital stuff and have worked with indigenous design agency Gilimbaa.

**Tanya:** This is all quite new stuff to me but I wouldn't imagine that groups like this would sit down too often and have a conversation about taking into account Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural perspectives.

**Tim:** We don't have a lot of ads but we have a cinema ad that Val Morgan assisted us with. It's not like our agencies go away, do their stuff come back and say, 'Here it is.' Tanya's in there with me developing the basic concepts, the strategy behind them and giving the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective because these ads are going to have to cut through both audiences.

**Tanya:** Just because I'm one of the senior indigenous people in the organisation doesn't mean I'm just talking to Blackfellas. There's a true collaboration and learning that's taking place between all of us as we try to navigate this pretty difficult task.

**Tim:** There hasn't been a successful change to the constitution since 1977.

**Tanya:** This is a hard thing to land and there's a really sophisticated approach being taken by a lot of our stakeholders.

You've got to get the vast majority of the nation on board – a double majority – to get the referendum to pass and that rarely ever happens.

People are being really clever about stepping through some of these things.

**Tim:** We're narrowing down to a date for the referendum. The Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader are talking about making it no later than 2017 and there are a number of organisations and people pushing for it to be done at the next Federal election.

From our research, it's pretty clear that the Aboriginal opposition will be very small. It will be vocal but very small. The biggest hurdle in any referendum campaign is apathy and people not understanding what it's about. There is a segment of the Australian population that's still pretty old school and racist. That's a problem people like Adam Goodes can testify to.

If you look back at previous referendums, the no case has often been, 'If you don't know, vote no.' In 1988 there was a raft of referendum changes put up by the Hawke government. They all went down and the generic campaign against them was, 'Don't know, vote no'. So that's actually our biggest enemy – lack of knowledge and apathy. There will be people who do that again. They'll dress it up in all sorts of palatable forms but I predict there will be people with long standing hang-ups about Aboriginal identity and culture and that's where they will head.

**Tanya:** There's a confidence and a fluency in this organisation about having hard conversations that typically, if you don't have them, really get in the way of progress. We can't afford to do that here and so we don't. That is part of the work. That is one of the things a lot of people don't have to do on a daily basis, but we do.

**Tim:** That's going to be reflected in the campaign and in the change to the Constitution so the nation's got to have that conversation as well, which is pretty significant.

**Tanya:** This has the potential to help this country turn a corner on a past we've struggled with. ■