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Justin and
Sarah Montesalvo

BUILDING A HAPPY CAMPER COMMUNITY

The immediacy of social media that lets passion shine through has been a key part of the success strategy of premium camper trailer maker Patriot Campers.

 Sylvia Pennington



Sharing the journey with camping enthusiasts on social media has played a key part in the runaway success of Queensland camper trailer manufacturer Patriot Campers.

The company's premium Australian-made trailers retail for between \$40,990 and \$59,990 and have amassed a following of almost 100,000 fans on Instagram and Facebook.

The venture had its genesis three years ago when Patriot founder Justin Montesalvo and a mate found themselves sketching their dream trailer design over a few beers, on a Christmas camping trip to Queensland's Stradbroke Island.

"We had bought a couple of camper trailers, the best on the market at the time, but they were too long and too heavy to take off road easily and they just didn't suit what we wanted to do. So we got talking about what we'd do differently," Montesalvo says.

Back home, he spent the next three months turning their wish list into a blueprint for a compact, modular, tow-anywhere trailer with all the comforts and conveniences of a 'big rig'. Built during downtime at his Brisbane sheet metal fabrication plant, the prototype was ready to be put through its paces by July 2014, on another Stradbroke trip.



DISCOVERING SOMETHING SPECIAL

"The trailer was never meant to be a commercial product – I was building a camper trailer for me and my mate, that was it – so it had no branding and no name. But we were getting stares and honks all the way up the highway," Montesalvo recalls.

"We pulled onto the barge and went upstairs to have breakfast and when we came back down there was a group of 20 or 30 people around the trailer and a couple of guys underneath it, poking around, going, 'What is this thing?'"

"That's when it clicked – that we'd definitely got something."

That 'something' ended up coming to the attention of the editor of *Camper Trailer Australia*, who asked to review the trailer and suggested Montesalvo enter it in the Camper Trailer of the Year 2014 competition.

After carrying off first prize – "the judges were blown away, the whole industry was blown away" – and taking several orders at a trade show, Montesalvo decided it was time to go commercial.

HITTING THE SOCIAL TRAIL

Fast forward two years and Patriot Campers has morphed into a thriving enterprise occupying a 2,000 square metre premises and employing 32 staff. Montesalvo has plans to not only increase production capacity and shorten assembly times but to expand into new overseas markets.

With a tiny marketing budget and no experience, Montesalvo and his wife Sarah have become self-taught social media aficionados, sharing their business adventure and promoting their trailers to fellow lovers of the great outdoors via Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

Patriot was a paid Facebook advertiser for the first six months but the business's rapid accumulation of fans soon made the expenditure unnecessary.



"I've never marketed anything before but the social media traction for Patriot has come from the fact that we've kept it real."

Updates are posted every day or two – frequently enough to stay tight with Patriot's community of campers but not so often that they feel the company is being rammed down their throats.

"Sarah and I are the only people who control our social media," Montesalvo says. "It's been successful so far because we've become the faces of the brand. I've never marketed anything before but the social media traction for Patriot has come from the fact that we've kept it real."

"We put up photos from our own camping trips, we promote when things go wrong as well as right. It's real life stuff and people can see that we live and breathe it."

STAYING ON TRACK

Keeping it real doesn't mean anything goes. Patriot aims for a family-friendly vibe and risqué photos, ripe language and innuendo are off limits.

"We do put a lot of thought into what we post," Montesalvo says. "Everything's got to be G-rated. We're very cautious about appealing to everybody."

The immediacy and intimacy of the social channels allow the family's passion for their products to shine through in a way traditional advertising just can't.

"I can't wait to get here every morning and I think that shows through with everything we do. People meet me when they come to pick up a trailer and they say they feel like they already know me – I get it all the time now."

A NAB business customer, Montesalvo says the advice and assistance he's received have helped the business thrive.

"If I need something I speak to our account manager," he says. "He's a great support and can help me with not only our banking matters but can also put me in touch with specialists from across the bank to help with our investment needs." **61**