

# Hark, Herald the angel

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*Picture:*                      *JEREMY*                      *PIPER*  
Man with an attitude: Justin Herald.

**Justin Herald turned attitude, as in bad, into Attitude, as in brand, and made a fortune. Now he's decided to let the rest of us in on the act — for our own good. By Steve Dow.**

This is the story of a fashion empire built on \$50.

Seven years ago, high-school dropout, former K-mart management trainee and practising Assemblies of God Christian Justin Herald was told by a woman at his church that he had an attitude problem. Herald might well have shrugged this attack off — "she was one of those people that got offended," he says, "and, actually, I believe, enjoyed being offended" — but something about her words spurred him into action.

He was 25 at the time and had no money in the bank, but he suddenly had a plan. Borrowing \$50 from his brother Dean, Herald bought four plain T-shirts and set out to find a printer prepared to do a short order of his favourite personal slogans. "I don't have an attitude problem, you have a perception problem" was one of them; "When I want your opinion, I'll give it to you" was another.

Knowing a good gimmick when he saw one, the printer Herald found said he'd do the run for nothing, provided he got all his future business. Herald agreed.

The next Sunday, Herald and three of his mates sat in the front row at church. They were wearing their brand new T-shirts, in clear sight of the woman who had so publicly flayed him. Before the day was out, Herald had been inundated with orders from fellow Christians for the shirts.

Today, Herald's Attitude brand of clothing and related lines — women's wear, kids' wear, skateboards, sports bags and boxer shorts among them — are sold in more than 2500 stores across Australia. (The original T-shirt printer, incidentally, didn't get rich with Attitude; the demand for product soon outstripped his ability to keep pace, and he dropped out of the picture.)

The business is now run as a franchise, of sorts. Herald still owns and oversees the operation, approving designs from the comfort of his lounge room, and there are expansion plans for the Attitude line into Canada, Europe and Fiji this year. But he sees himself as a "branchiser"; he helps people set up stores selling his brand of clothes, but says he doesn't take any franchise fees in return.

Herald knows it was not the cut or the fabric that propelled his line to high brandname recognition. It was, as the name suggests, the attitude — "positively sarcastic", he says, rather than simply rude, and very much in line with the Australian sense of irony.

"If I was to do it now I don't think I could honestly do it all that well, because now there's a million clothing labels out there," he says. "When I started, it was only me and another company called No Fear, which was American. They were slogan-based. I saw what they were doing and I thought, 'Yeah, that's pretty cool'. But it was very ra ra. And Australians aren't ra ra, they're very sarcastic, they're very tongue in cheek. And we hit it where people's heads were at, and I was saying what people were thinking, I suppose."

Given that it's the sloganeering that defines the label, it's little surprise that this is also at the heart of Herald's new side career. The son of bible college principal Ivan and his wife Pauline has decided to climb into the pulpit of publishing and share his secrets with the world. The motivational book he has written is called, naturally enough, *Would you like Attitude with that?*.

In Herald's how-to-do-it primer, he tells us that while he made his own millions from fashion in five years, others should not expect overnight success.

Huh? Herald, sitting on the rooftop garden of his publisher's office — the sun shining hard on his smooth, shaved head — pauses for just a split second before expanding on this point.

"I'm talking more about people expecting to have their home paid off and have a nice car and a multi-million dollar business in a year," he says. "I never expected that, because money wasn't my motivator. It was more, 'Oh shit, we've made money along the way; isn't that fantastic?' I'm the first one to say I was quite lucky, but I had to learn to manage that luck."

His motivation, he says, was to control his own life. But he does admit to having wanted to own a nice car. "I've actually reached my ultimate car (a BMW M3). I'm stuffed now. I might have to go to boats or something."

Herald won't let on exactly how much he is worth. He owns just one house, in plain old suburban Castle Hill in Sydney's north-west. His wife, Vanessa, is a full-time homemaker, though he would encourage her to join the paid workforce tomorrow if she wanted to do so. They have two daughters, Jade, 12, and Brook, two. His best mate is a crane driver, who pulls Herald down to size whenever he thinks he is behaving like a "wanker".

It has to be said, though, that 32-year-old Herald has a disconcerting habit of referring to himself in the third person, as in: "People either get along with Justin Herald or they don't. There's sort of no middle ground. That's just unfortunately me."

Today, Herald is dressed in a crisp white-collared shirt, jeans and white sneakers. He's wearing designer sunglasses, a subtle neck chain, a couple of bangles. It's all, he says, a bit of an act. He's dressed for the photographer; normally, he's more a T-shirt kind of guy.

Herald hasn't had it all his own way. He's often found the attitude (that word again) of Australian retailers hard to understand. "The unfortunate thing in this country is it's the retailer who would rather take an American product over an Australian product," he says. "I've been into some of the bigger buying companies, and they've said, 'Oh no, if you were American, we'd take it'. Same design, and I'd say, 'Well, let's just pretend!' They're the ones that stop the public seeing some of the product. And that's why I aimed my product at the public, not at the retailer.

"I'll give you an example. One of the major retailers, I sat down with the buyer. He was 19 years old, had a pair of orange shoes on, and he was telling me what he did and didn't like about my product, and how it was or wasn't trendy, and I'm sitting there going, 'You're wearing orange shoes'. Like, straight up, 'You're 19, so you've got no idea', and then I said, 'Well, you can piss off', and I got up and walked out. I'm not going to be dictated to by some little peckerhead who's got no idea. I thoroughly enjoyed telling him to piss off."

Does he ever resort to aggression? In the book he recalls how his first impulse was to "belt" two businessmen who attempted to rip him off. "Oh yeah, I'm an emotional person," he says. "I love an argument. Some people get shocked, but I say, 'Well, why the hell do you think I called it Attitude in the first place?' I was just astounded (by) the number of people who would rip you off. And I've met most of them, I think. But now I can pick them a mile away."

In the same spirit, Herald is more than happy to "spring clean" friends who no longer improve his thinking. "Well I don't ring up and say, 'Oh, hi, it's Justin here, you've just been spring cleaned'," he says. "I'm just a bloke who grew up in Katoomba, so there's nothin' special about me. I seem to get a lot of hangers-on, and I used to enjoy that because I used to think they actually did like me. They didn't. They just liked what I could supply or provide or help them along their way.

"There's people around that, just because you're successful, you've got to do something for them. And if you don't, you're a prick. Well, I'll just be the prick then."

But Herald is prepared to help others (just so long as they don't expect that help). He sounds positively evangelical on the subject, in fact. "I've started to evolve where it's about other people now," he says. "There's nothing better. That gives me a bigger buzz than driving my car."

His blunt nature, he says, complements a strong work ethic based on fairness. This is in line with his version of Christianity. His minister father encouraged him as a child to challenge common orthodoxy. He may still rebel against authority, but only where he sees it as being hypocritical or uninformed, as in fellow churchgoers telling him how he should live his life when theirs are imperfectly lived. Church, he quips, is there for guidance, not to dictate, and would be "unreal if there were no people in it".

He prays to God — in order to express thanks for his success, not to ask for it. "Maybe this is bigger than me," he says. "Maybe my calling is more to help other people through my success. So far as I'm concerned, you're not successful until you help other people reach their goals."

In the book, Herald writes of the teacher who bluntly told him that, because he was the disruptive class clown, he would end up on the dole, or dead.

Ten years later, Herald was out shopping with his wife when they bumped into the teacher. Despite the intervening years, the teacher, who had not heard anything about Herald's success, decided to speculate about how his bald ex-student had probably got nowhere, as per the earlier classroom prophecy.

Justin Herald couldn't help but smile at the teacher, and the grin lasted long after the man had walked away.

The teacher had been wearing an Attitude T-shirt.