

# STRIVE STRIKE IT RICH IT RICH

HOW DO YOU TURN A PART-TIME JOB INTO A MULTI-MILLION-DOLLAR EMPIRE? **SHANE CONROY** TRAVELS THE ROAD TO SUCCESS WITH TWO 20-SOMETHING ENTREPRENEURS WHO DID EXACTLY THAT.

BARELY IN THEIR MID 20s, CHRIS RYAN and Adam Rockett sit at the helm of an \$11.5 million mobile telecommunications empire. Working part-time in a liquor shop just five years ago, these two high-school mates from Brisbane own Strike Group Australia, a mobile phone and accessory wholesaler now selling to more than 72 countries worldwide and servicing international clients including British Telecommunications (now BT Group) and Singapore Telecommunications (SingTel).

Having built the business from \$300,000 to \$11.5 million turnover in less than four years, Strike Group Australia has recently become one of only two authorised LG distributors in Australia. On the trail of other exclusive distributorships, it's only the beginning for this home-grown company.

But it wasn't all beer and skittles for the entrepreneurs. Originally chasing very different careers, Ryan and Rockett started on the ground floor.

"When we left high school, Adam was

doing computer science at university, and I was studying teaching," Ryan says. "We realised those careers weren't really going to get us where we wanted to go so we started our first little business, which was wine distribution, of all things."

Working in liquor shops, they garnered the attention of vineyards when they set up wine tastings for distributors. Impressed with their enthusiasm, winemakers approached the boys with their first business proposition.

However, with little business experience, they found themselves out of their depth.

"It was terrible, we were 18 and really green," says Ryan. "We were working in bottle shops and saw the opportunity to bring some wine up from the Barossa, and also from South Africa."

While juggling the growing demands of the business world was proving difficult, they were eventually delivered an opportunity through one of their wine contacts when they discovered he was looking for a partner in a telecommunications opportunity.

"We were buying wine from a client in South Africa and he asked if we knew anyone involved in mobile phones. We said no, but it prompted me to have a bit of a look into it," tells Ryan.

And look into he did. Beginning with a modest investment, Ryan and Rockett purchased around 3,000 mobile phones from Hong Kong and sold them in South Africa – in their first step on the highway of international wholesaling. Pulling together the initial deposit from pouring beers at night, the pair says trust was the key to their success.

"We also got paid in advance from our [South African] client because they knew us and trusted us," Ryan says.

"Once we got that, we paid the supplier and were in business. We were 18-year-olds high-fiving each other thinking we were the biggest legends in the world," he laughs. "We must have made about \$9,000 from that deal, after sweating our backsides off for the previous year."

Building on their initial success, Ryan and Rockett were quickly snapped up





by a Hong Kong telecommunications company where they spent six months setting up an international wholesaling division. It was during this time that they consolidated their knowledge of the industry and prepared for the development of their own enterprise.

"That's where we really cut our teeth," Ryan explains. "If we hadn't gone to Hong Kong, we'd still be a two-bit operator not doing it right. I think the most important thing we learned while we were over there was the importance of having a good team around you."

Flushed with confidence from their time overseas, Ryan and Rockett headed back to Aussie shores in 2001 to launch Strike Group Australia, an international mobile phone and accessory wholesale company dedicated to establishing a professional image in the marketplace. Little did they know the business would make them millions in just a few years.

"In the international wholesaling business, we decided there was a real space for a company with a professional

**Names:** Chris Ryan, 25, and Adam Rockett, 26.  
**Company:** Strike Group Australia.  
**Industry:** Mobile telecommunications wholesaling.  
**Roles:** Founders and CEOs.  
**Estimated worth:** From \$300,000 to \$11.5 million in just four years.  
**Background:** Working in bottle shops, these two high-school mates branched out into wine distribution before breaking into the telecommunications industry, scoring a contract in Hong Kong and ultimately establishing their own business.

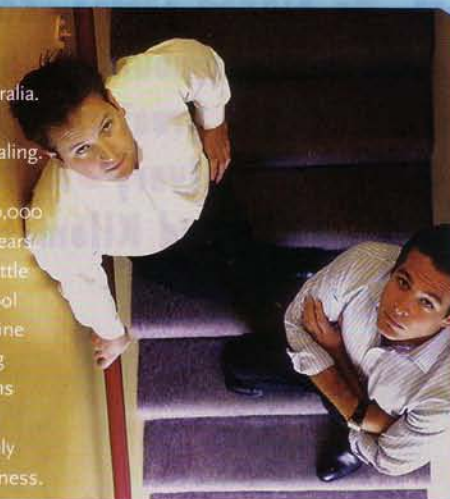




image and great logistics," Ryan says. But establishing a presence in the marketplace would involve careful marketing and an aggressive approach in meetings with top executives in the industry. "Initially it was quite nerve-racking, as young fellas, meeting with the 2IC of SingTel," he says.

Still only in their early 20s, this meant a period of tough talking for the duo. Striding into boardrooms full of senior managers and selling themselves took a good dose of guts – and the careful consideration to always present a picture of confidence.

"It was terrifying! For the first year doing it, we were dealing with some very seasoned players and we were still

standard, rather than being thrown into the deep end and having people assume they know things they don't."

The company also prides itself on recruiting only the best people for the job. Applicants are asked to perform a number of different tasks, complete personality profiling and take a skills test. When the HR process is finished, the field has usually been narrowed down to just one or two people who best suit the role.

"Rather than a selection process, it's more like a deselection process," Ryan says. "Our recruitment ads are always geared towards the culture of the company to attract the right people."

With a strong team and dedicated



“The strength of our business is our human resource systems, and the way we look after our team.”

reasonably green," explains Ryan. "But we put ourselves out of our comfort zone and learned quickly."

As important as good marketing is to a fledgling business, Ryan says it's the team driving the business that makes it a success. Meeting the needs of clients from countries as diverse as England, China, South Africa and Germany requires a talented team, and the 12 full-time staff and four casuals currently employed by Strike have been selected for their communication skills above everything else.

"The strength of the business is our human resource systems, and the way we look after our team," Ryan says.

Such a commitment to their employees is demonstrated in their '30 Days to Greatness' program. A training system for new recruits, each employee is given a task to learn each day which is specific to their role. The idea being that at the end of 30 days, the new team member will be up to speed and possess an understanding of the business and the industry.

"Having that structure is a great tool for everyone in the organisation, because we know that after 30 days the new team member will be up to

leaders at the helm, Strike Group Australia is in a good position to continue its meteoric rise to the top. With LG on board, Ryan and Rockett are set to keep expanding their domestic business and are now working on attracting other exclusive distributorships. Sticking with its outward focus, Strike Group Australia will stay true to its goal to offer a good price and great service to its clients.

"We want to continue to focus on offering the right price and getting the product to the person as quickly as possible without any headaches for them," says Ryan. "And as we continue to build our distribution line, the business will also keep growing."

Away from the office, Ryan and Rockett have more than enough fuel to continue their journey that's led from the bottle shop to the boardroom.

"Adam and I sit down together normally at Christmas time, or at the end of the financial year, and just have a quiet beer together and reflect," Ryan says. "It's amazing, there's been a lot of hard work, and some luck as well. But basically, when our chances came, we just took them and it's worked well for us." ■

#### CHRIS RYAN'S TOP FIVE TIPS FOR BUSINESS SUCCESS:

1. Get a great team around you.
2. Be proactive, make a decision and follow it through.
3. Be ethical, it doesn't matter how much money you make, it's more important to feel good about yourself and what you're doing.
4. Don't be afraid to take big steps, even if it puts you out of your comfort zone.
5. Always listen to yourself.

