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Stuart Ridley 26 Jul 2013

Married soon after a world adventure, Ruth and Matt Gallace founded Rebello Wines on Matt's family farm eight years ago. Rebello first tasted fame with its 'Strawbellini' — a strawberry wine that won gold along with the likes of Veuve Clicquot at an international show — and is now bubbling with the success of its Cheeky Rascal cider.

Sunny Ridge, the Gallace family farm on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, started as an apple orchard two generations ago, with strawberry patches between the rows of trees. But Matt Gallace's dad, Mick, ripped out the apple trees when he was a rebellious 15 year old. He'd been left to mind the farm while his father took his sister to Italy to find a husband... and he simply preferred strawberries.

Sunny Ridge went on to produce some fine fruit wines and its solid sales network certainly helped Matt and wife, Ruth, sell new drops under the Rebello label. But those apple trees were sorely missed when Ruth announced they should tap the cider trend in 2011.

"My response was: 'What would we want with cider? Isn't that an English drink?'" laughs Matt. "They've never let me live it down."

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Family businesses can make for great media stories when the personalities behind the business step up to share their passions. Sure, Rebello Wines was already an award winner when it launched Cheeky Rascal, hailed as "Australia's first 100 per cent real fruit blended cider". But media outlets get hundreds of new product pitches every week. And while a launch event might gain a mention, personality-driven stories tend to get better coverage.

MAKING A PR MATCH

"To be honest, when we started out we didn't realise we were doing anything special — it was just what we did," says Ruth. "We had a great launch event as part of an integrated campaign [Ruth had studied marketing and design]. We had street posters, trade marketing, Facebook and beautifully designed point-of-sale materials. We also sent baskets to the media with the product and the story of who we are, where Cheeky Rascal comes from and how it's made. We like to share cheekiness, innovation and good design in everything we do."

The Gallaces knew that building awareness for Cheeky Rascal would demand more time, but that was time which they'd much rather spend with their two young girls. Still, it took them a year to find a PR rep who shared their values.

"Most of the PR people I spoke with were trying to impress me with statistics, spreadsheets and spin," recalls Ruth. "As a client, if I think it's spin, what will customers and the media think of it? Then we met Kirstie [Bedford] and we just clicked. She runs her own show. She's not like those PR directors saying 'this is PR and how you work a campaign', then handing you over to a junior."

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Cheeky Rascal and Bedford have scored more than 100 media stories in their first six months of working together — an impressive number, whether it's on a spreadsheet or not!

Cheeky Rascal's PR tips

- Hire a PR rep early: "Even if you can't afford to engage them ongoing, a good PR rep will help you understand and define your story, who you are and what you're doing that is newsworthy," advises Ruth. "It's really important you develop a plan with some clear objectives, [because] there's a lot of distraction out there."
- Work with PR people that 'get' you: "Kirstie [Bedford] probably knows the story of the business better than we do," observes Matt. "[And] because she gets us — and she's helped us get us — she finds the stories that are really interesting within our business," adds Ruth.
- Focus on what the reader wants: "Kirstie doesn't work with a fixed formula like other PR reps do. She comes more from the content side: with all that's happening in the business, it's about finding who'd be interested in reading the story and sharing the things they actually want to know. Really, it's all about the reader."

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