

FROM SHOP FLOOR TO MULTIMILLION-DOLLAR EMPIRE

From a starting position as a nine-year-old observer of his father's business, Unita Group's Robert Rowe has built a mini-conglomerate of design, fabrication and fit-out businesses slated to turn over \$100 million in 2016.



 Sylvia Pennington

For Robert Rowe, school holidays spent removing rubble for his father's business piqued his interest in the shopfitting trade and led to the establishment of a design, construction and fit-out enterprise that would claim a dominant position in the sector.

The 34-year old Queenslander is the powerhouse behind Unita Group, a privately owned mini-conglomerate of nine design, fabrication and fit-out businesses slated to turn over \$100 million in 2016.

Founded by Rowe in 2004, Unita's portfolio of successful projects includes the MCG's food and beverage outlets, the Sumo Salad chain, upmarket provedore Jones the Grocer and fashion retailers Kookai, Bailey Nelson, Sambag and Scotch & Soda.

The group employs almost 200 people across Australia, including 120 production staff who create custom cabinetry and fittings, bespoke stainless steel, floor coverings and wall finishes in the firm's three factories. Their handiwork – coupled with the firm's design and construction service with its offering of collaboration and transparency through the use of custom systems and technology – has consistently helped to fill Unita's bulging order book with around 350 projects a year.

This year, success has also come in the form of a swag of awards for Rowe, including Queensland EY Entrepreneur of the Year for Services and Telstra Queensland Medium Business Award for his fit-out company Tú Projects.





STARTING OUT ON THE SHOP FLOOR

Unlike many other rookie business owners in their early twenties, Rowe had already amassed more than a decade of experience before setting up shop. His 'apprenticeship' with Rowe Shopfitters, the family firm founded by his father Adrian in 1977, had begun at the tender age of nine.

"Mum had four children in the family, and I had too much energy to hang around the home with the other kids," Rowe says. "Mum would say, 'Adrian, you're having Robert these holidays. He's as hard as the other three [put together] to handle – you can have him.'"

Back then the going wage for a full day's work from the firm's junior partner was a Mars Bar and a Coke, Rowe recalls.

"Dad had me removing old shops. I did demolitions; I did a lot of cleaning. I used to hold the other end of the tape measure while he measured a shop."

As well as giving him a taste of life on the tools, going on the road with his father provided invaluable exposure to the sales and marketing process.

"Dad would go travelling around North Queensland, meeting people and talking to people about how their businesses could grow by doing a renovation," Rowe says. "I sat down and listened to him sell to shop owners what the benefits of that could be."

STEPPING OUT OF THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Following an abortive stint in the tourism industry after leaving school, Rowe returned to the family business as a young adult and completed a cabinetmaking apprenticeship. While this provided him with useful skills, it wasn't exactly how he wanted to spend the rest of his life, he rapidly realised.

"What I was good at was observing how people work, what other trades worked around us and what it took to get done what needed to be done in a short time frame," he says.

His youthful attempts to expand the firm's production capacity and introduce more proactive sales and marketing tactics saw him lock horns with his father, who eventually delivered an ultimatum for him to stop rocking the boat.

"When I started my business it was really about doing things my own way. I felt that I was worth listening to at 23, I wasn't stupid, and I had good ideas." At the time he had \$64 in his bank account and a maxed-out credit card.

An early break saw him fit out three shops for EB Games, got the ball rolling for his shoestring start-up and netted him a profit of \$70,000 – "more than I'd ever earned in a year," he says.

Further work with the same retailer followed, along with contracts with Gloria Jean's and other high-profile chains.

Rowe believes that this early success was due in part to his hunger to prove himself, which he believes was apparent to many of those to whom he was pitching his services.

"A lot of people understood that I had a different reason for doing things," he says.

"People go with why you do things, not what you do. Older people took advantage of my passion and honesty because I was cheap – but they backed me. I'll always be grateful for that."

Along with this rapid early growth, though, the fledgling enterprise endured its share of setbacks, including a \$1 million bad debt from a customer during the height of the GFC. It was a blow he struggled to recover from mentally as well as financially, Rowe admits.

"It was a barrier – getting past the emotion of being taken advantage of. A bit of 'Poor me' was happening for a while there, but I did get paid some of the money in the end."

Rowe's prodigious energy, eye for detail and head for numbers have since helped to ensure that all divisions of his empire have remained in the black, even as an ambitious vertical integration strategy has seen the original fit-out business augmented by design, fabrication and IT arms.

In a poignant twist, the original family business was brought under the Unita umbrella in 2012 upon Adrian's retirement, with younger brother Daniel now at the helm.

"It's a lot to be across – and I love it that way," Rowe says. "A founder needs to know what he's talking about, across every aspect of his business. I've run a spreadsheet every day since I started my business. I built tracking systems, because I know the best way to lose money is not to know where your numbers are. There's only a small profit in our industry – take a wrong step and it's gone."

RECOGNITION FOR A JOB WELL DONE

So where to next for the man who's long since proven his dad wrong and done him very proud? More of the same, says Rowe, who has his sights set on a turnover of \$250 million by 2020.

"The first reason I wanted success was to show my parents I was capable," he says. "Once I'd done that, then the reason was more about loving projects, and I love people. I love purpose, and I love helping a customer build something special that's profitable."

"I've always been a person who, if someone says 'Can you do something for me?' I've never said no. You can manage anything. You can find people and be resourceful and get the client the outcome they're looking for." 

"A founder needs to know what he's talking about, across every aspect of his business."