

Mad men

Story Sharon Krum
Photography Dean Kaufmann

Advertising guru Richard Christiansen impresses clients with “a wink and an unexpected delight”. And in between pitching campaigns, you’ll find him promoting his own menswear brand

If they were expecting chocolates on the pillow, then what a group of fashion buyers found when they went to their rooms that night in Las Vegas would have been quite the surprise. It was a life-size poster of a hunky man wearing nothing but underwear – and it was in their beds. At the bottom of the poster was this message: Anthony Keegan and Richard Christiansen invite you to get dressed. And across the, ahem, underwear, the words “Join the Commonwealth”.

“We were at a trade show and we had to get buyers into the booth,” recounts Richard Christiansen, 33, founder, with Keegan, 34, of the menswear brand Commonwealth Utilities. “Many Asian buyers hadn’t come to New York because of swine flu. So we paid housekeeping staff to put the posters in the beds of all the buyers who were there so they would come to the booth the next day and see the range.” People came, but many were also outraged and the hotel fielded a lot of complaints. “But we needed to cut through the chatter. Can you believe in Las Vegas they actually called us vulgar?” laughs Keegan. “Our waitress was wearing pasties, but that poster is vulgar?”

Their guerrilla marketing move illustrates a larrikin quality that is particularly Australian. Christiansen might live in New York, where he is creative director of his advertising/marketing agency Chandelier Creative and also co-runs Commonwealth Utilities, but he grew up on a farm in Duranbah, NSW, and that experience, along with his nationality, seems to permeate everything he does. “We had avocados, sheep; my parents turned the farm into a tourist attraction when I was a kid ... they wanted to make more money, so we would bring Japanese tourists to the farm. We had sheep races, we would make billy tea and we had a wandering Aboriginal tribe. It was a really fun place to grow up and very theatrical,” says Christiansen, who has a twin brother. “We were always thinking of ways to ‘jazz hands’ the property, so it seemed a natural progression to do something creative.”

In person Christiansen is stylish, slender and right now extremely fit, the result of training for an Antarctic run he is planning. He has a reassuring, quiet, voice but it’s coupled with firm, bold opinions. “Your clothing is your uniform, your business card. It’s the first thing people judge you on, which is

why I’m so glad there’s a return to dressing up,” he says of the menswear design resurgence. “When someone walks into a meeting not dressed up, it says they don’t care.”

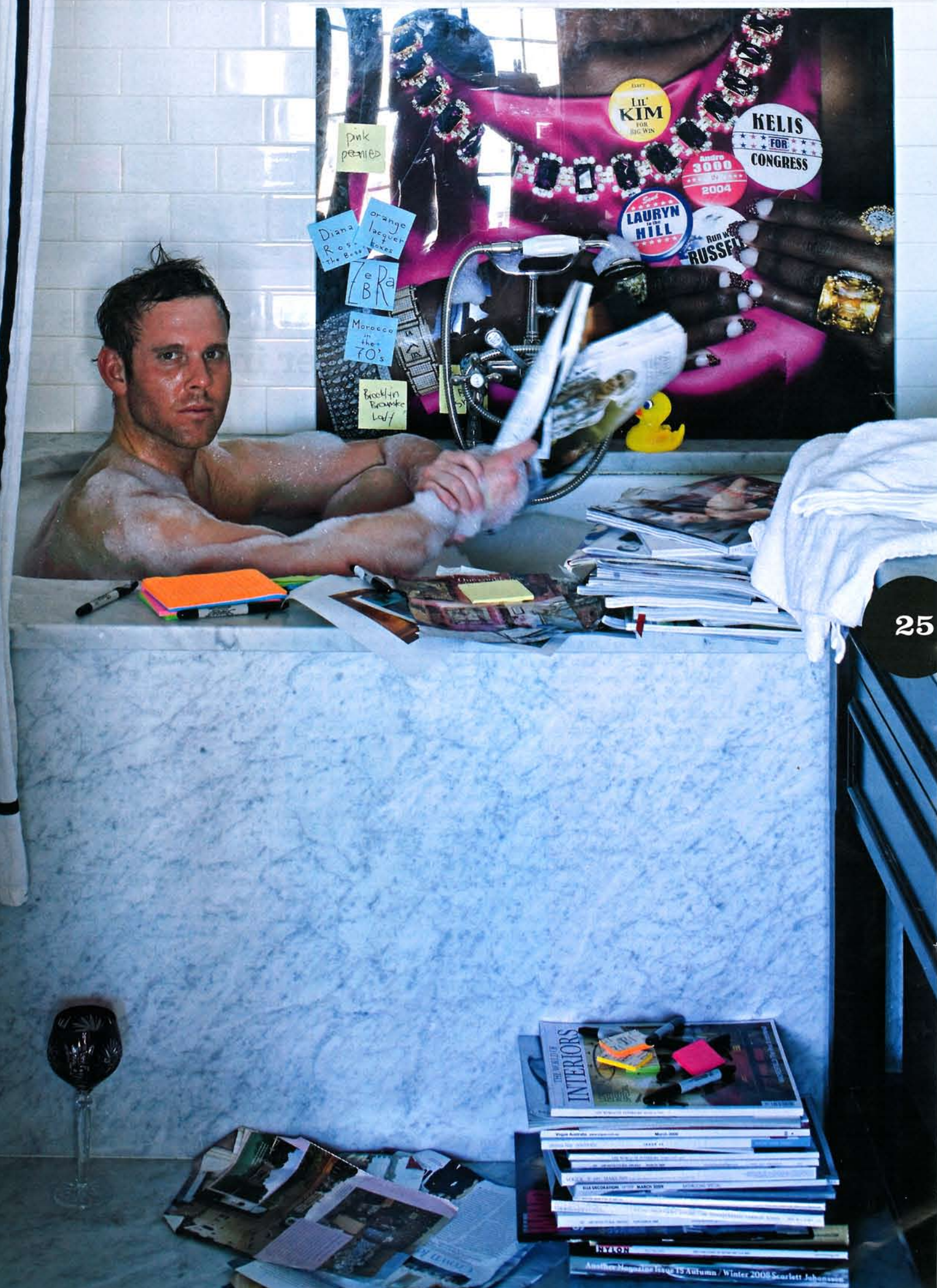
The Chandelier Creative offices in New York’s NoHo are an eye-popping amalgam of sculpted hot pink doors, lacquered black desks, Liberty print chairs, a pink piano, model airplanes, and a library filled with art and fashion books. Kylie Minogue, a Christiansen favourite, is played often. He traces his love of saturated colour to growing up on the farm. “All that blue sky and colour.” He studied law at Bond University but, hungry to travel, completed his degree in London.

“I was desperate to soak up something new. At the time I remember being so determined to leave and make something of myself and go find that *Dynasty* quality.” The campy ‘80s night-time soap, along with fashion and art/design magazines, were his guilty pleasures growing up. “I used to inhale them.” In London he worked in the legal department of a record company and bartended at night, which is where he met Keegan, who was studying at St Martins College of Art and Design. His career then moved at a furious pace, from interning at magazines to joining Fabrica, the Benetton think tank. “I leaptfrogged into running *Colors*, their magazine. I learned a lot from Oliviero [Toscani, the co-creator of *Colors*]. He had a sign behind his desk, ‘Is it immoral?’ If so, the answer was normally yes, do it.”

In 2000 Christiansen launched his own magazine in Sweden, *Milk*. He went to New York to explore selling it to Hearst and when that didn’t pan out began working at art publisher and creative agency, Assouline, as creative director. “That was my introduction to agency work.” In 2004 he learned of the launch of *Suede*, originally intended as a sort of *Vogue* for African-American women. “I was outraged,” declares Christiansen. “I thought what we should have is a magazine that is a street-meets-chic version of something that doesn’t feel like the white girls in *Vogue*, but multi-culti. I met Suzanne Boyd [editor-in-chief] and said, ‘I think your magazine sounds like a terrible idea, this is what my idea would be.’ He became its creative director.

When *Suede* folded, he moved to *Radar* magazine, then “I said to the team, ‘I will mortgage my house and if you stick around I’ll start an agency.’ Why advertising? “We used to get really angry that people were ruining our beautiful magazine

01 Think tank: Christiansen fills up his bath, arms himself with wine, a range of magazines and Post-It notes, and uses the space as his ideas lab.



01

01 Working the room: Chandeliers offices offer a fully functioning Porky Pig ride, pink piano and dark horse; 02 Christiansen’s collection of metal model planes.



02

“Everyone used to say, ‘Richard wants us to be more over the top ... put a chandelier in every photo shoot!’”

layouts with their ugly ads so I thought maybe we can do something about that.” He also believes “that magazine people know how to tell stories whether visually or with words” so it was a logical move. “The internet started to bubble up, and editorial content and storytelling became so important. A pretty girl and a logo wasn’t the solution. You have to tell stories about a brand.”

The name for the business was a no-brainer. “Everyone used to say, ‘Richard wants us to be more over the top, he’s going to cram a chandelier into every photo shoot!’ Chandelier became a term, a way of describing how we worked.” The agency started life in Christiansen’s living room in 2005. His mission: to take fashion and lifestyle brands that have stopped communicating effectively and reposition them, with both a wink and what he calls “unexpected delight”.

You won’t find anyone on Madison Avenue saying this but Christiansen thanks god for the recession. “I am really grateful for it because for so long we were pitching against big New York agencies ... and we were pitching non-traditional work, telling brands: do Internet, do pop-ups, do an iPhone app, tell stories in a different platform – and we were constantly shot down. But then no one had any money and big brands would say: ‘I have \$60,000 what can I do with that?’ And we’d say, ‘Oh my god, that’s perfect!’”

Five years later their client list includes fashion chain Old Navy, Baby Phat, Korner Skincare, Barbie for Mattel, Nars, Jurlique, Peter Som, Liberty and Lane Crawford. Old Navy has been their biggest project, involving the overhaul of all its print and broadcast ads and the redesigning of its logo. For Korner they updated all marketing media, developed product placement and aligned the brand’s marketing with high-end retailers.

(Worth noting: Christiansen doesn’t watch the Emmy award-winning drama *Mad Men*. He says it reminds him too much of work.)

Despite the successes, Christiansen was also frustrated that concepts he pitched were being rejected. “That was one reason we started Commonwealth. We had come out of a job, had all these different ideas and none of them were executed. I thought, ‘Why don’t we just

start our own brand and we can use that to demonstrate our best work?’”

At the same time Keegan, who had by then worked for Versace, Armani, Donna Karan and Kenneth Cole was also looking to push the envelope. Their idea was to fill the menswear niche between Prada and Club Monaco. “We call it entry-level luxury,” says Keegan. “We wanted to create 12 pieces,” adds Christiansen, “because most guys have 12 essential pieces – the two-button suit, a tie, peacoat, dress shirt, jeans, T-shirt, underwear...” During autumn 2009, *New York* magazine declared the label one of five to watch that season.

“We still have our core pieces,” says Keegan, “but people want to be romanced by fashion, so we have layered those with more fashion-forward pieces.” The clothes, Keegan once said, also can have a purpose beyond chic. “I want our guy to look like he’s getting it regular.”

“I like getting dressed up, but I don’t want to wear a suit every day so we are trying to find a wardrobe for a guy who is client ready but not too formal,” adds Christiansen, who likes his clothes fitted and when not wearing his own label takes his shirts to a tailor to have them taken in. “One reason we called it Commonwealth was it was going to be the commonwealth of all our ideas.” Another is that Christiansen is Australian, Keegan Canadian.

Keegan designs, Christiansen handles advertising and branding. (New York Rangers ice hockey player Sean Avery has signed on as design collaborator and muse.) “In Saks we are sitting next to the Helmut Lang and Alexander McQueen labels,” says Keegan. “We’re not as expensive but it’s the same person who gets it.”

Commonwealth Utilities launched in September 2008 and showed in New York late last year and at a trade show in Paris in January. They are stocked in 20 doors across the US (Saks Fifth Avenue, Odin and Fred Segal), Britain (Matches), Japan (Isetan), Canada (Holt Renfrew) and, in Australia, at Robby Ingham stores. The pair are planning to open a freestanding store in New York’s West Village.

Christiansen reveals the unexpected by-product of an advertising guy launching a fashion

line is that it has made him a better advertising guy. “I used to think the answer to everyone’s problem was tell a story, do a website, have a pretty logo. And then we started our own brand, which became this giant financial black hole, and I thought, ‘We need to get sales!’”

“It was courting the editors, buyers, a sales team, PR. It was an exhausting amount of work that I never even thought our clients had to deal with, so it was a good lesson for me how to make our clients look sharper and a little wiser, having just gone through it.” You would think with Christiansen at their disposal, stockists would jump. But no. “We went to every retailer stocking Commonwealth and said: ‘What can we do for you? I have a whole agency of people. I won’t charge you.’ And no one wanted any help.”

“But the menswear store Odin said the one thing you can do is get bloggers on board, because three guys a week come in with an article [from a blog], and say: ‘I want that shirt.’ So we started courting the bloggers a bit more and producing content we knew we could get coverage on – films, collaborations with Sean Avery – and it has produced more chatter than we could have dreamed of. Bloggers are authentic talkers. It used to be your girlfriend, now it’s a blogger you listen to.”

Though he has worked all over the world, Christiansen has chosen to build his business in New York because “you can embrace your enthusiasm and ballsiness here a bit more than anywhere else. You can get dressed up here, and we can do a crazy jazz hands presentation for a client and people almost expect it. But I think everything trickles down from the top, so probably the whole office has a little bit of Australia in it.”

Interestingly, his dream job lies in Australia. Specifically, at David Jones. He has already knocked on its door. “When I was a kid I would go to David Jones in Sydney and look at their windows and think, ‘Oh my god, this is a beautiful heritage brand that has a story to tell.’”

“Lane Crawford is a department store that has managed to evolve and embrace its heritage in a modern way. David Jones [has] definitely evolved but ... it doesn’t have a wink. I would like to give David Jones an unexpected delight.”