

Hard-wired for plenty of risk

by Jackie Range

Whether it's running with bulls, racing his BMW Z4, or soon, shooting into space, Ruslan Kogan loves risk.

"It's exciting and your heart's pounding," the online retailer says, describing the feeling of pounding along the streets of Pamplona in Spain pursued by tonnes of bovine frenzy.

That willingness to take risks underpins a successful commercial life, Kogan says. "Business is all about taking calculated risks for a potential reward," he says over the phone, while smoking a cigarette.

For some, in life as in business, the higher the risks, the higher the rewards. Indeed, embracing risk is a necessary precursor to every new company.

But men, seen by many as hard-wired to be risk takers, are also taking big chances in areas where there is little reward for risk, such as health.

Risk taking features strongly in the male psyche, says Stephanie Thompson, psychologist and executive coach and principal of consultancy Insight Matters in Sydney.

"Men have a bit more of that goal-focused, hunter kind of programming and chemistry that drives their activities and an ancient heritage of being strong and relatively invulnerable compared to females," Thompson says.

It's a motivation that inspires: to build bridges, start wars, create new products. To borrow money, to see opportunities and seize them, to try again. But it's also part of what, in Greek mythology, lured the ill-fated Icarus too close to the sun.

“Risk taking, we might say, is a form of optimism ... somebody who’s willing to give it a go is more likely to get positive outcomes but when they crash and burn the flames are high and can be seen from miles around,” Thompson says.

Against this backdrop, the Royal Australasian College of General Practitioners, or RACGP, is warning that men need to watch out for their health while they are taking risks.

Five men die every hour in Australia from diseases that are potentially preventable, the RACGP says. More than three-quarters of injuries happen to men aged 25 to 44. Compared with women, they are more likely to get cardiovascular disease in mid to late life. Part of that risk comes from a higher rate of smoking, combined with poor diet, excessive alcohol consumption and a lack of physical activity. They are also twice as likely to drink daily than women and more likely to use illicit drugs, says Ronald McCoy, an RACGP spokesman.

“The task of getting Australian men to focus on their health is not an easy one, as many men simply don’t look after themselves, don’t talk about their health and don’t have a local doctor that they visit,” McCoy says.

Kogan epitomises the work-hard, play-hard male (or as he says, “work hard, play harder”). He has successfully parlayed risk to create reward. A case in point, he can’t remember the last time he visited the doctor.

“I don’t even know who my doctor is,” he says. “Google’s my doctor.”

But he says he’s lucky that his mother was a doctor when she lived in Russia and is now a nurse. If he feels off colour, he can pick up the phone. “I get to ask her questions now and then,” he says.

For those who don’t have a health professional in the family, the RACGP is facing what appears to be an uphill task. With its new “M5 Project” it is trying to get men to take more care of their health.

It aims “to break down the barriers that prevent Australian men from going to see a GP, and ultimately, save men’s lives,” says its website, which can be found at www.m5project.com.au.

It encourages men to take measures to prevent ill health. Men should share their family history with their GP, know their healthy weight, check their blood pressure, quit smoking and keep a healthy mind and body, it says.

It also lays out what’s at stake for men who take risks with their health: their relationships with friends and family. “We owe it to them to look after our health,” the website says.

Kogan, who heads to Las Vegas to party eight to 10 times a year, also takes care to look after his health. As much as he likes to party, the 28-year-old entrepreneur also takes regular exercise, going for 10 kilometre runs when he gets home. If he has a headache, he won’t take a painkiller, knowing that there’s a reason why the headache is there that needs to be addressed.

But underlying that, he’s still a risk taker, with the seeming invincibility of youth and success. Indeed for him, there’s no big health contradiction in smoking and running. “I enjoy both of them and I look at the smoking as resistance training,” he says.

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