

Damage control

Carlene du Toit talks to Karen Knight, the 'crash repair lady' who has come full circle in her industry.

Karen Knight started off in the motor repair trade, left it in search of greener pastures and has now returned to the fold - having discovered for herself that it is, after all, exactly where she wants to be. Thanks to her technical expertise and management ability she is cut out for the job of picking up the pieces (both in the literal and figurative sense) for those involved in motor vehicle accidents.

But the Karen who is once again playing a pivotal role in the trade is a very different Karen to the one who embarked on a journey of self-discovery in the late 90s.

It was about ten years ago that the crash repair lady who owned and operated one of the biggest crash repair shops in the business (The Body Shop) realised one day that the occupation to which she'd dedicated her entire working life, had lost its sparkle for her. The challenge was simply no longer there - it was a question of "been there, done that".

Knight considered taking her business to the next level by franchising it or opening up branches but decided against what she considered to be a risky option at the time. Having always felt that she had somehow lost out on life by not being part of the corporate world, she decided that now was the time to indulge her fancy. But the only way to fast-track it to the top she realised was by acquiring some formal management learning. Up to now her position as kingpin of a demanding enterprise had not afforded her the luxury of studying. So she sold up shop, enrolled to study towards an

MBA at Auckland University Executive School, washed her paint-caked hands and picked up her pen to enter the hallowed halls of academia.

A different perspective

Student life, Knight found, was a far cry from the busy days she'd spent in the workshop chasing up technicians, scrutinising panels, keeping customers happy and ensuring that the books balanced. Looking at management from an academic point of view was very different to dealing with the realities and pressures of day-to-day

life on the shop floor but she savoured every moment. She found it stimulating to interact with other high achievers from all walks of life.

"It was a transforming experience. Over and above acquiring all that knowledge, I found my horizons broadened and my ability to think critically, dramatically sharpened," she says.

In weighing up the pros and cons of learning on the job as opposed to formal theoretical learning, Karen says both have their place: "But there is nothing more powerful than a combination of the two."



Karen Knight helps customers restore sorry sights such as this to their former glory.



During her third year of studies, Karen joined Esanda Fleet Leasing as national vehicle manager. But for the lady who had been running her own show for so long, the corporate environment, though interesting, ultimately lacked the challenge, flexibility and responsiveness of small business. She found the environment "stifling and constraining." Knight yearned for the hustle and bustle of the shop floor and the autonomy she'd so happily abandoned just a few short years previously.

"Flexibility is the ultimate freedom" is the conclusion she came to. And, not quite sure what her next move should be, she set off on a world cruise. While taking in the sights and smells of exotic locations, she pondered what it was that was truly important to her and what she really wanted from life.

A new beginning

Casting her mind back to her role at The Body Shop, Knight realised that the best part of the 20 years she'd spent there were the early years when life had been one pure adrenalin rush. She came to the conclusion that to relive the heady excitement of those early days, she would have to start a new business – needless to say, one in the automotive sector. During her stint at Esanda, Knight had realised that, whereas corporates with their large fleets were well catered for in terms of accident management, the general public were left entirely to their own devices. And this area, she says, is a veritable minefield for the uninitiated. It can be a time-consuming, frustrating and costly mission for someone who is not familiar with the industry and who has little influence with the service providers to have their car repaired. "For one thing" says Knight, "the industry is largely unregulated and subject to varying levels of service ranging from no star to five star. You have to have a great deal of technical knowledge to know the difference."

Having clearly identified this gaping void in the market, Knight began putting together a network of repairers whose delivery standards were in line with

her own high expectations, in regard to both technical quality and service levels. She was looking for people she could entrust with prospective customers' smashed cars – and the new company's reputation.

Putting together such a network of professionals went far beyond looking merely at their technical ability, she says. "I was looking for businesses that were structured in such a way that they could provide top quality work consistently and within the agreed time frames. It was the comprehensive package I was after. In fact, it is in the area of service that the industry has let itself down in the past. Having spent all those years in friendly rivalry with the 'opposition' and also on the Executive of the Collision Repairers' Association I knew who was who in the industry. I was in the perfect position to make my selection."

Knight launched Crash Brokers in December 2004 to act as the professional interface between the collision repair industry and the public. However, in no time at all, SMEs, who were immediately onto the unique value of the service it provides, came to constitute the majority of business.

Crash Brokers caters for high mileage professionals who are dependant on their car being up and running. Typical clients include real estate agents, mobile security companies, couriers and freelance workers. Smaller leasing companies that do not offer an in-house collision management service are also clamouring for service and strategic alliances have been entered into with Lease Car Ltd and many new car dealerships within the Greater Auckland area. Crash Brokers is endorsed by the Real Estate Institute of New Zealand who are eager for it to provide national coverage within the next two years – currently the service is only available in Greater Auckland, stretching from Orewa in the north to Drury in the south.

24 hour service

Crash Brokers recently made its service available 24/7. The company pulls out

all the stops for its customers. Calls of distress to the 0800 number are instantly responded to by the rostered self-employed contractors and the work is channelled through to the nearest network service provider with spare capacity. Sometimes this arrangement may not make much sense to the public in terms of the geographic location of their repairer, "but it is only by moving cars around that I am able to offer the best overall solution and a speedy turnaround," says Knight. "At any particular point in time I know where the spare capacity is and who, for instance, has an appropriate courtesy car available."

Once they have made that all-important call, the customer can sit back and relax as Crash Brokers springs into operation. A courtesy vehicle is instantly dispatched to their door-step and if required, the tow truck is set into motion. The customer is kept fully informed throughout the process. And the best part of the service is that it is completely free. Crash Brokers earns its revenue from the network.

Does this mean that the cost of their service is loaded on to the repair costs?

"Absolutely not," says Knight. "Most of the repair work is covered by the watch-dog insurance industry and you can be sure that they monitor costs very effectively."

Once a vehicle has been repaired, it is run past Karen's beady eye before being returned to the client.

Crash Brokers represents a win-win situation for all concerned. Apart from the obvious advantages to the customer, dealers benefit in that they are able to pass on all their marketing and advertising functions to Crash Brokers and then simply wait for the work to be channelled in their direction.

Meanwhile the key to her success, says Knight, is the relationship she enjoys with the service providers and the leverage she has within the industry. ■

For more information on Crash Brokers go to www.crashbrokers.co.nz