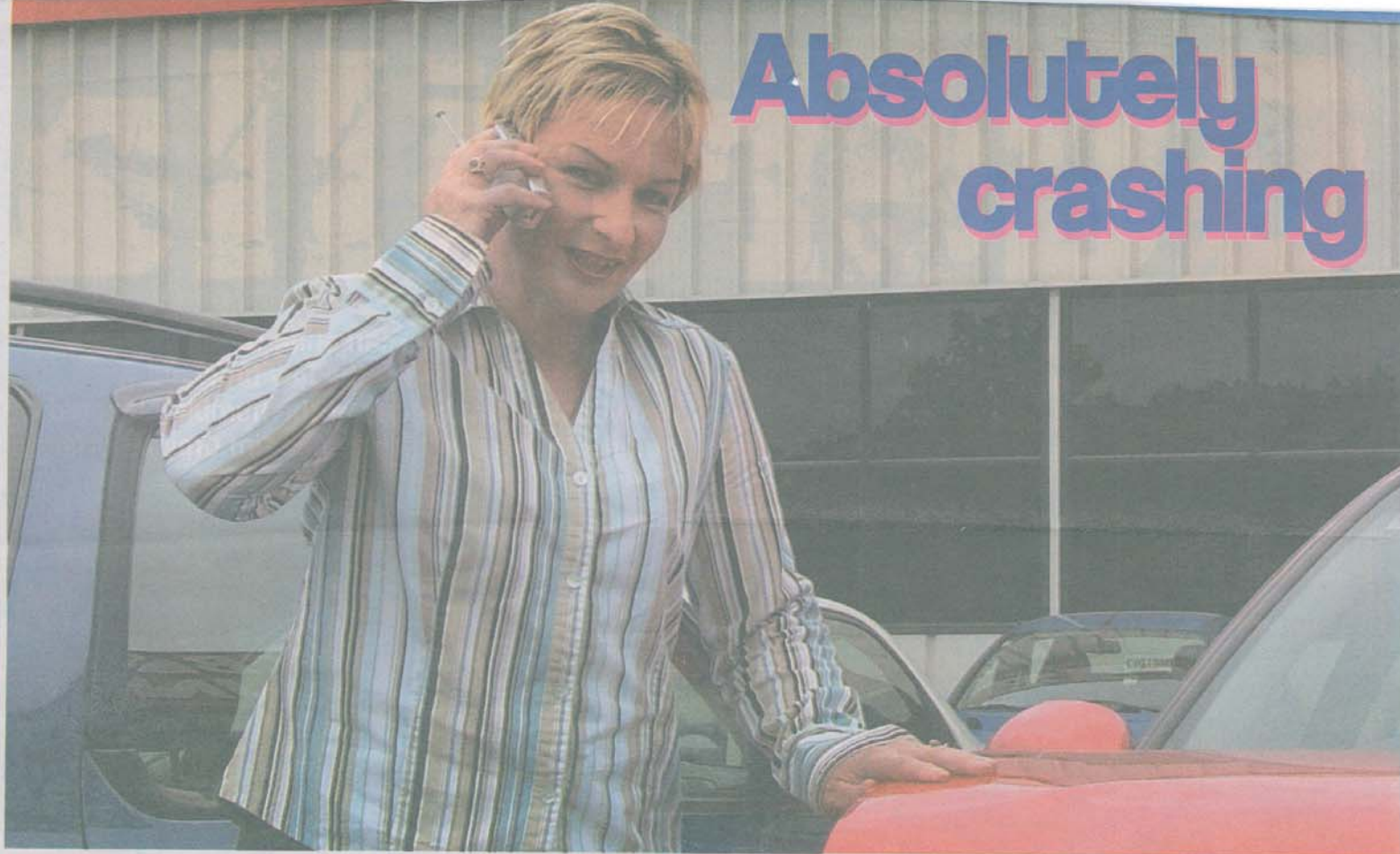


# Absolutely crashing



They say Kiwi business is informal, but it's still a surprise to find a company founder manning her own phone line. However, Crash Brokers director Karen Knight has always done things her way.

The former panelbeater, MBA and self-described "car chick" has traded both workshop floor and corporate life to spend her days as a collision repair matchmaker, and she couldn't be happier.

Crash Brokers, her latest venture, was set up 16 months ago to match individuals and small businesses in Greater Auckland with the same quality collision repair services large companies pay big bucks for – for no extra cost.

many years running her own panelbeating shop, she created Crash Brokers to match clients with repairers who meet her own high standards. The brokering service is free to clients.

Quality is Karen's key criterion in picking a service provider.

"If you can't deliver that, you can't deliver anything. The calibre of management is also critical and so is the availability of good-quality courtesy cars. They've got to have the ability to absorb more volume and be quick."

It's been full circle for one of the few women

same. Then I started a panelbeating shop of my own at 22."

That was the Body Shop, which went on to become one of the largest panelbeating operations in the country.

Looking back, Karen says she supposes insurance companies were initially a little resistant, but more because she was young and arrogant than because she was female.

"I was young and hands-on, and very much one of the boys. There were times when being a woman had a novelty value - in approaching corporate clients and fleets being a woman

Karen recommends further study. She says her MBA has taught her more effective ways to structure her business approach.

"I went to university to fill a knowledge gap. I left school at 15 years and one day - I never had taken time to study - but when I went to university I was much more adult and really wanted to do it by then. It's a very personal thing - it was hell on wheels the first two years, and I had the luxury of being able to do it full time, but I loved it, thrived on it and it taught me such a lot."

In her final year of study Karen took on project management work with Babbage Consultants -

A self-proclaimed "car chick", Karen Knight has a very practical approach to life. That's why it comes as no surprise to find this company founder manning her own phone line. **Brigid Kelly** talks to Karen about swapping her corporate life to spend her days as a collision repair matchmaker.

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Based on a mortgage broker model, Crash Brokers is the only company of its kind in the country. The idea has been so successful, Karen plans to roll it out across New Zealand, possibly within 12 months. Strategic alliances with the New Zealand Institute of Chartered Accountants, the Real Estate Institute of New Zealand and Auckland company Lease Car Limited have demonstrated there's a desire for the service to go further.

"It's proved to be viable, but we're still small and young and our brand is not well known," she says. "I've become a ruthless pursuer of media coverage!"

Karen got the idea while working as national vehicle manager for Escanda during her brief "flutter with the corporate world". While there are accident management services for corporates, she realised smaller operators had nobody to help them choose a quality service provider. Using the contacts she made over

panelbeaters out there. Entrepreneurially minded like many trades-based business people - "Graeme Hart is a panel beater and he's my role model" - Karen says she's always looking for business opportunities, but admits it's easy to "default back to what you know."

"I'm just coming in from a different angle."

A boat builder's daughter, Karen says she's always taken "a very practical approach to life". Always car-mad, at 15, she left school in search of a panelbeating apprenticeship. The idea of a girl on the floor was unheard of in those days, as was the notion of an adult apprentice. By the time she'd reached 18, responses had shifted from incredulity to the pragmatic "you're too old."

Fortunately, Karen had friends in the trade who were willing to help her out.

"I worked after hours, making no money and learning the hard way, and loved it all the

was an advantage, I think, so it was a bit of a mixed bag."

Karen says she recognised very early that securing corporate and fleet clients would help the company grow. Careful targeting garnered The Body Shop some major coups, including exclusive contracts with Hertz.

"I always had a quality focus. I did a lot of personal selling and took more of a structured approach than most trade-based businesses did then."

In the late 1990s, Karen sold the business, went to the University of Auckland, and gained an MBA.

"I'd taken the business as far as I could. I knew I wanted it to be bigger and better, but I didn't have the formal business training."

As someone who, like many tradespeople, found getting into business relatively easy,

"completely out of my industry sector, it was great" - and then went to work for Escanda. But while she liked the change, she missed having her own business.

Building a new company, along with fingers in a number of other business pies, doesn't leave her much free time. She's not as car-focused these days - panelbeating was "hell on the knees", though a very good way of keeping fit - but enjoys driving her three series BMW convertible, travelling, and enjoying good food and wine. She's also a licenced private pilot, though that, too is on the backburner at present.

To anyone starting a new business, she has simple advice: market extensively and build that brand. "You've got to have a strong point of differentiation. Anything unique and innovative will get people's attention. And your customer service has to be faultless."