

Contacts key to crash-hot service

LIKE MANY teenagers, when Karen Knight left school in the 1970s at 15, she didn't have a particular career in mind. Unlike many teenage girls at the time, she sought an apprenticeship as a panel beater.

She didn't get the apprenticeship, but the die was cast. At 22, she and a partner opened their own panel shop in Otahuhu, a business they built into one of the largest of its kind in the country.

In the late 1990s, Knight sold out and enrolled in Auckland University's MBA programme. "I'd taken my collision repair shop as far as I could," she said. "I realised I had limitations in terms of formal learning and business planning. [Going to university] was simply a decision to address that. It was a good one, ultimately."

Armed with a degree, Knight joined corporate car leasing specialist Esanda where she handled a bundle of leasing services, including accident management. "It was there I realised what was natural for me was a mystery to most people," she said. "If large fleets saw value in outsourcing their accident management, who was looking after the public?"



Name: Crash brokers
Started Trading: Oct 2004
Founders: Karen Knight
Activity: Accident repair services

In 2004 Knight's line of thinking led her to start up Crash Brokers – a one-stop accident repair service, taking the hassle out of a typically high-stress situation. Crash Brokers organises vehicle pick-up and repair, deals with insurers, provides a courtesy car and returns the vehicle with

a written guarantee, all at no charge to the vehicle owner.

The business model relies on Knight's knowledge of the panelbeating industry. She uses a network of repair shops in the Auckland area meeting certain quality standards. They fund the service by paying a fee to Crash Brokers for referrals. Putting that system together might be tricky for some people. Not for Knight.

"It wasn't at all onerous because the backbone is the service provider network and I had all the right contacts. Conceptually it's almost like a franchise arrangement."

Nor was the initial financial burden great – most of the cost was in marketing the business – and Knight was fortunate in having the money to sustain herself and the business in the start-up phase.

"We're still small. We've been operating for only a year and I don't know that we've made a huge ripple in the Auckland market," she said.

"But there's a huge scope for growth."

Knight estimates the market's total value is more than \$1 billion a year.