



# Karen's breakthrough! Moment

Life will inevitably throw up moments which can be described as turning points: the point at which we say to ourselves, 'Enough's, enough. This has got to change,' or when an idea is so vibrant we become compelled to follow our instincts. Her Business spoke to Karen Knight about being in the male dominated business world of collision repair and her conception moment when 'Crash Brokers Ltd' was born.

My first business venture at 22 did not result from any defining moment, divine inspiration or single 'turning-point'. I always assumed I would be in business for myself, perhaps because my father was and I had grown up assuming everyone else was too. I escaped high school at the earliest possible opportunity full of confidence and the expectation that I would soon be leading the family firm. Unfortunately, it had failed to occur to me that I might share my visionary strategy with any of the relevant parties, and alas Knight & Daughter Ltd was not to be. I had experienced my first taste of the disappointment of erroneous assumptions and poorly communicated intentions.

From that point, my interest and enthusiasm for cars grew and I pursued a panelbeating apprenticeship long enough for the rejections to turn from incredulous to more practical. I realized that at the ripe old age of 18, I was simply 'too old'. I knew what I had to do — if you want something done, you do it yourself.

I started working after hours with a friend from the trade, learning as much as I could, often working for nothing at all. Over time I gained experience and skills on the cars of friends, family and my first real 'customers'. After returning from my first overseas experience, it was time to get down to business. With two partners I launched the Body Shop on a shoe-string, in a small rented back street garage. We were young and had boundless energy, often working 16 hour days, seven days a week, doing almost everything wrong but learning quickly through the time honoured tradition of trial-and-error. It was paradise and I was on top of the world. Within 10 years we had established a state-of-the-art collision repair business, completed the first TQM certification for the industry in NZ, and become a 'big name' in the sector.

It was the roaring 80s, I was young and indestructible and doing what all the other young and indestructibles were doing — buying anything and everything that was on offer. We launched into property investment, retail car sales, then a finance company. What did I know about property, car sales and finance? Nothing! Were those new businesses successful? No! Was it exciting? Oh yes!

Ultimately, we consolidated and the roaring 80s rolled into the nasty 90s. Fortunately, The Body Shop had gained its success through a relentless focus on high quality and sound operational process and was in a strong position.

As the economy improved into the mid 90s we were still on top of the world, but it had become business-as-usual and it wasn't exciting any more. I wanted to take it to another level but realised my business knowledge was limited. I didn't really know what 'the next level' was and had no idea how to get there. It was a turning-point and it was time for a change.

I decided to pursue a formal business qualification and completed Auckland University's Graduate Diploma of Business Administration in 18 months of full-time study, and was then accepted into the MBA programme. It was a transforming experience, at once exciting and humbling. It provided me with enormous knowledge, structured my thinking, broadened my horizons, and rubbed off (some of) the rough edges from my smug you-can't-stop-me attitude. It also taught me to value the views, experience and input of others, to accept help, and to acknowledge that I could not do and/or control everything. It was another turning-point and it was time to take the corporate world by storm.

Two years in a national role for one of NZ's largest car leasing companies provided some interest but little excitement, and certainly nothing to compare to creating and growing a new business in which 100 percent of the risk, responsibility and reward was mine. It was time for another change but what it would be I had no idea.

It took approximately 90 seconds to convince my partner that I needed time out to think and that taking a year off to travel the world together would be the way to maximise quality thinking time. That fabulous 12 months was immeasurably valuable in clarifying what was important, what I needed to be happy, and what I wanted. I wanted to be 20 again and I wanted the excitement of creating something new. Unfortunately, I had to settle for being 46 and creating something new.

The trip proved to be a surprisingly torturous experience with so many

opportunities to investigate, but not one that lit my fire. Finally after three frustrating months I reverted to square one. I realised I had quite a unique combination of skills and experience in collision repair, both within the industry and from my time in car leasing, as a customer. And I realised something else; after a lifetime in one sector you don't appreciate how much you know, and you don't appreciate how little those outside it know. That was a turning-point.

Crash Brokers Ltd was launched within a few months, and has been my obsession ever since. Crash Brokers provides a full accident management service to the general public, and it's FREE to the customer. We operate a network of high quality collision repairers throughout the Greater Auckland area, and my industry expertise and leverage ensures our customers receive the red-carpet treatment. The service has become a one-call solution for customers who never need leave their home or office. One call to our 0800 number provides courtesy car delivery to their door, co-ordinates the repair, and ensures the highest levels of technical quality and customer service are provided.

The service has proved extremely popular with busy car-dependent or office-bound professionals, and has been especially well received by women.

The collision repair industry has long suffered from a shabby public perception of tow-trucks, dodgy back street garages and blokes in dirty overalls. Whilst certainly still true at some levels, there are also a number of extremely professional repairers with high calibre management providing excellent product and service.

The success of Crash Brokers service of course is knowing who those operators are, and having the relationships in place to access and maximise the benefits. I am delighted therefore to be able to apply my industry expertise and business experience to ensuring a radical improvement in service provision to the public, and to other women in particular.

For more information about Crash Brokers Ltd please visit [www.crashbrokers.co.nz](http://www.crashbrokers.co.nz), or call 0800 2crash (0800 227274).