

The Cowans also learnt that 'experts' are not always right; you need to get good at saying 'no' and continue to upskill and learn; and you must build your business around integrity and hold onto it – that's what gets you through.

In the early days there were also issues surrounding technology development – a lot of money was spent with very little result. Then they found their current IT partner (Mike Dorn at Complete Computing

Solutions) who has been with them for eight years – fine-tuning the reporting programme to meet the needs of clients.

So today the Cowans are looking to the future like never before. There are some exciting projects on the horizon. The VSS software "polish" has potential in overseas markets, and they are currently exploring an opportunity with a Canadian company which involves promoting each other's software programmes. "It's a great fit and

very exciting," says Lynne. "We are also looking to enhance the professional growth of our sales support team around the country, and lift their performance for our clients through special training programmes."

It's been a rough rollercoaster ride for the couple – but in the end, hard work and determination have won over adversity. And if that's not heroic, I don't know what is!

Brolly Sheets: Glenn Hawes and Diane Hurford

For the founders of Brolly Sheets, their business story is not laced with adversity to the extent of our two previous case studies. The winner of the Transitional category is more a hero in the way it secured a niche market and boldly pursued the opportunity for all it is worth.

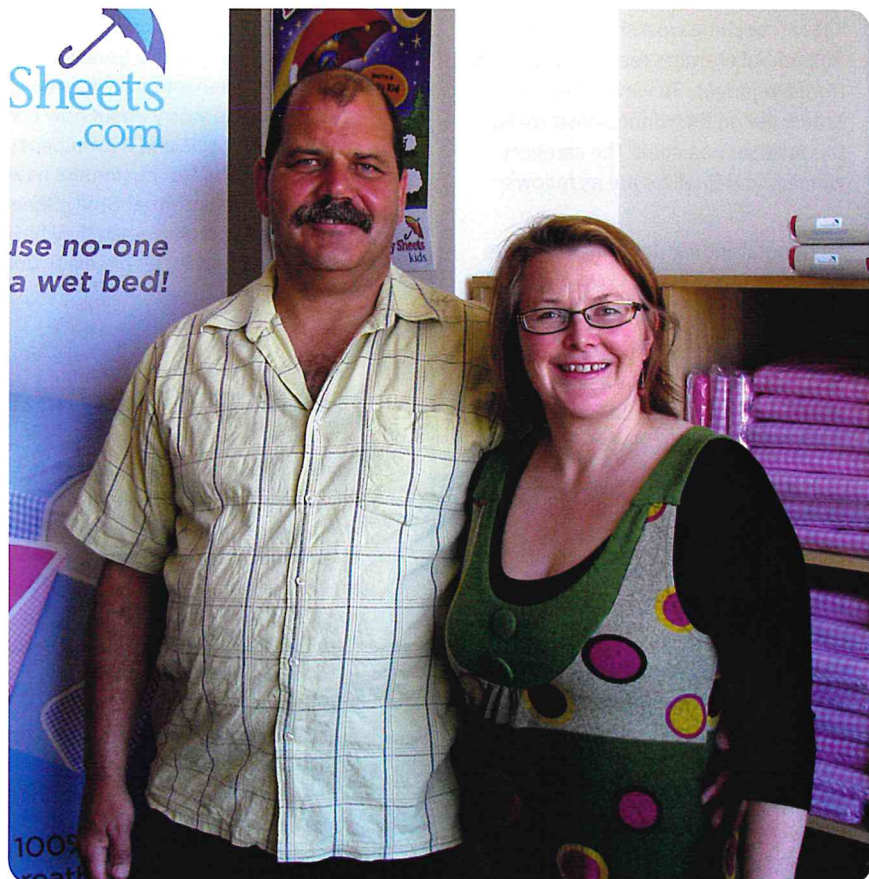
Glenn Hawes and Diane Hurford started Brolly Sheets on Auckland's North Shore in 2006. Diane had come up with an original design for waterproof bed protectors after her experience with their own daughter wetting the bed.

"We felt that the business would be viable on the basis of feedback of the functionality of our initial product prototypes," recalls Glenn. "Once we had established that there was strong local demand for the designs, we structured the company for growth."

"We have been surprised just how well our customers have responded to the Brolly Sheets brand and how willing they have been to share the message. The level of sales generated through these referrals has convinced us that the business will continue to be a success."

And successful it has been. With steadily growing online and retail sales, and Australia now grabbing 66 percent of sales, the growth milestones have come quickly. This year they sold their 30,000th waterproof sheet, and since relaunching in 2008 with their Version two product, growth has exceeded all projections.

Glenn and Diane brought excellent business credentials to their business – Diane has a sales and marketing background in retail travel and has a keen insight on what the customer wants and expects; Glenn has worked in a variety of product management roles for global banks. He understands systems and how



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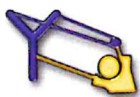
to integrate them.

But the Brolly Sheets journey has not been without its challenges. One of the biggest, say the owners, is to be disciplined around financial management.

"Like all small businesses our biggest challenges have been figuring out where to put our limited resources, says Glenn.

"Like a child the business leads you in a direction that it wants to go in. It is very easy to get caught up responding to the day-to-day demands and lose sight of the overall direction."

Learning to say 'no' is another challenge, he says. "We get numerous approaches each day offering new



The David Awards heroes in small business

Heroes one and all

The David Awards is the only national, non industry-specific award of its kind specifically aimed at businesses with ten or fewer FTEs.

The Supreme winner of the 2010 David Awards received an office-full of furniture, courtesy of Warehouse Stationery, and will attend a 16-week virtual coaching workshop with Tom Poland. All entrants received feedback from the judges. To view a live web broadcast on the winners visit www.thedavidawards.co.nz The category winners and finalists are as follows:

Most outstanding fledgling business

WINNER: Mi5

OTHER FINALISTS:

Kiwishaver, Nudey Rudey!

Most outstanding transitional business

WINNER: Brolly Sheets

OTHER FINALISTS: The Sleep Store, Vendor Sales Support

Most outstanding triumph over adversity

WINNER: Vendor Sales Support

OTHER FINALISTS: Pregoli, Brookby Herbs

Most outstanding lifestyle business

WINNER: Brookby Herbs

OTHER FINALISTS: Home Brew West, The Sleep Store

Most innovative business

WINNER: Wonder Cap

OTHER FINALISTS: Smart Box, Stickyti

Most inspired use of technology

WINNER: Made 4 Baby

OTHER FINALIST: Vendor Sales Support

Most inspired use of marketing

WINNER: The Sleep Store

OTHER FINALISTS: NZ Art Guild, Kiwishaver

Most community-minded business

WINNER: Anguillid

OTHER FINALIST: NZ Art Guild

advertising channels. Getting the other party to understand that our no is no, while being polite and continuing to reflect our own values, has been a challenge."

Diane says their challenges have taught them that it's easier to be in control of your business if there is a clear plan that is easily accessible – such as on a whiteboard or wall chart – and can be constantly referred to. "Having the plan so clearly visible serves to both remind one of the important things and to question whether the diversions are really adding value to achieving the plan."

The couple is thankful they've managed to isolate the business to a large extent from the recession.

"The GFC was just beginning as we were relaunching Brolly Sheets and since we've been internally funded we have not had to worry about how our bank's credit decisions may impact us," explains Glenn. "Our customers have always understood what Brolly Sheets delivers and at a time when they have to carefully consider where every dollar

goes, they see our products as a core spend rather than discretionary."

The goal is to make Brolly Sheets the leader provider of waterproof bedding solutions for the 'in-home care' market in Australasia and Europe. "Long term we believe we can make Brolly Sheets a globally recognized brand," says Glenn. "Currently, we are gaining traction in the UK and turning our attention to Europe."

"The challenge will be to build an organization that thinks in other languages. To this end we are looking for graduates fluent in a European language. In the long term we'd like Brolly Sheets to become the generic title for waterproof bedding in the same way that Google is the watchword for web searches."

Every way you look at it, Brolly Sheets is an impressive business. As The David Awards judges commented: "solid growth in revenues and profits, innovative products, enthusiastic people – which makes for a great future ahead". In other words: another true hero in small business.

A final word from the organiser

Heather Douglas is pleased with how much credibility and recognition The David Awards have achieved in just three years, and is working to make the event widely known as the award for small and micro business throughout New Zealand. There're plans underway to take the whole awards process entirely online for 2011.

"I think entrants and judges are going to love the functionality so I can't wait to see it in action."

Heather gets a thrill from seeing the progress entrants make through entering the awards, and she's impressed by the ingenuity of New Zealand's small and micro businesses.

"They are very good at finding a way to get things done, often on a very tiny budget or none at all. I sometimes think corporates could learn a thing or two from them – especially when it comes to marketing. They are also very tenacious – they see a business idea and stick with it through thick and thin to make it work."

"However, the very thing which often makes them so impressive can also be a hindrance. Many don't have aspirations for their business beyond making a decent living off it. They don't want to grow it because it means sacrificing the lifestyle it provides. There are also issues such as lack of business planning and under-resourcing which mean the business is unlikely to ever get past a certain stage."

"Probably my biggest concern though, is how humble many of the business owners are. Their unswerving dedication to the business is often offset by a surprising lack of faith in themselves."

"I like to think The David Awards in some ways contributes towards providing a public validation of what they are doing and will help instil a sense of self-belief."

Glenn Baker is editor of NZBusiness and a judge for the David Awards.