

Expanding empire built on solid foundations

Helen Carter

MICHELLE Powell believes time and money spent establishing the foundations of her business before clients and staff arrived was the secret to managing its phenomenal growth.

Eight years ago WaiveStar Group had two staff and one client and over the next five years growth exceeded 90 per cent per annum. The supply chain management company now has 45 staff and about 100 big business clients including Blockbuster Video, Suzuki, Yarra Valley Water and Sony Ericsson.

It stores, packs and transports items for companies, provides IT infrastructure and online programs to support the process and arranges marketing material and promotional products including brochures and promotional gifts. It has outgrown two warehouses and moved to a larger warehouse in Preston with satellite storage planned.

Ms Powell, 44, WaiveStar's owner and managing director, has overcome many challenges such as the 2003 flood which wiped out \$1.5 million of client stock to become a finalist in the prestigious Telstra Businesswoman of the Year Award in 2004.

She previously worked for 15 years at LaTrobe University, starting as an administrative assistant and ending as telecommunications and video-conferencing manager.

"By 36 I'd progressed as far as I could and thought I don't want to be still working here when I'm 60," she said. "I wanted to go out into the world and was lucky that I had written programs in the IT department."

Her partner Laurie Clark, now WaiveStar's sales director, owned a printing company and the smaller WaiveStar, which had one client. His vision was to turn it into a major supply management company and offer non-core and online services.

"I started with the client, a financial firm and stored archive boxes. I wrote an online program which put the boxes and their contents online and showed where they were — in



Organised: building her business methodically worked for Michelle Powell.

transit or the warehouse. We started storing about 5000 boxes for them and ended up with 25,000 boxes," Ms Powell said.

She hired business mentor Brian Birley, author of 'the one-page business plan', who mentored CEOs for \$3000 a month.

"I couldn't afford that so paid him

\$800 for three hours a month," she said. "His advice was the crux of what WaiveStar is today. He taught me to build the foundations before the business. I spent the first few months planning what the business would look like over the next few time periods, and still regularly update the blueprint," she said.

She established boards of management and frameworks for OH&S, HR and IT so all systems and infrastructure were in place from the start to manage growth and maintain direction, and she hired consultants.

"The only way I could manage the phenomenal growth of the business was because I had those processes in place," Ms Powell said.

In the early days some clients expressed reservations about whether a small company could deliver but she said her success demonstrated that being small doesn't mean you can't be competitive.

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"Even though I was small, I was encouraged to think big and not think that I couldn't knock on the door of big business," she said.

"Brian taught me to get to know and understand your client including at social functions. Each client has a team to look after them and they get to know the clients."

The online shopping cart also helped kick-start the business as she was among the first in Australia to enable clients to feature carts on their websites.

In 2005 Ms Powell won the first Victorian Government Small Business Growth Award presented to the business best demonstrating accelerated, planned and sustainable growth selected from finalists in the 2005 Telstra Victorian Small Business Awards. In 2007 she won an Australian Business Award for e-business, enterprise and innovation.

As a Victorian Government Small Business ambassador she gives talks to councils, universities and women in business forums.

□ Net link: www.waivestar.com.au