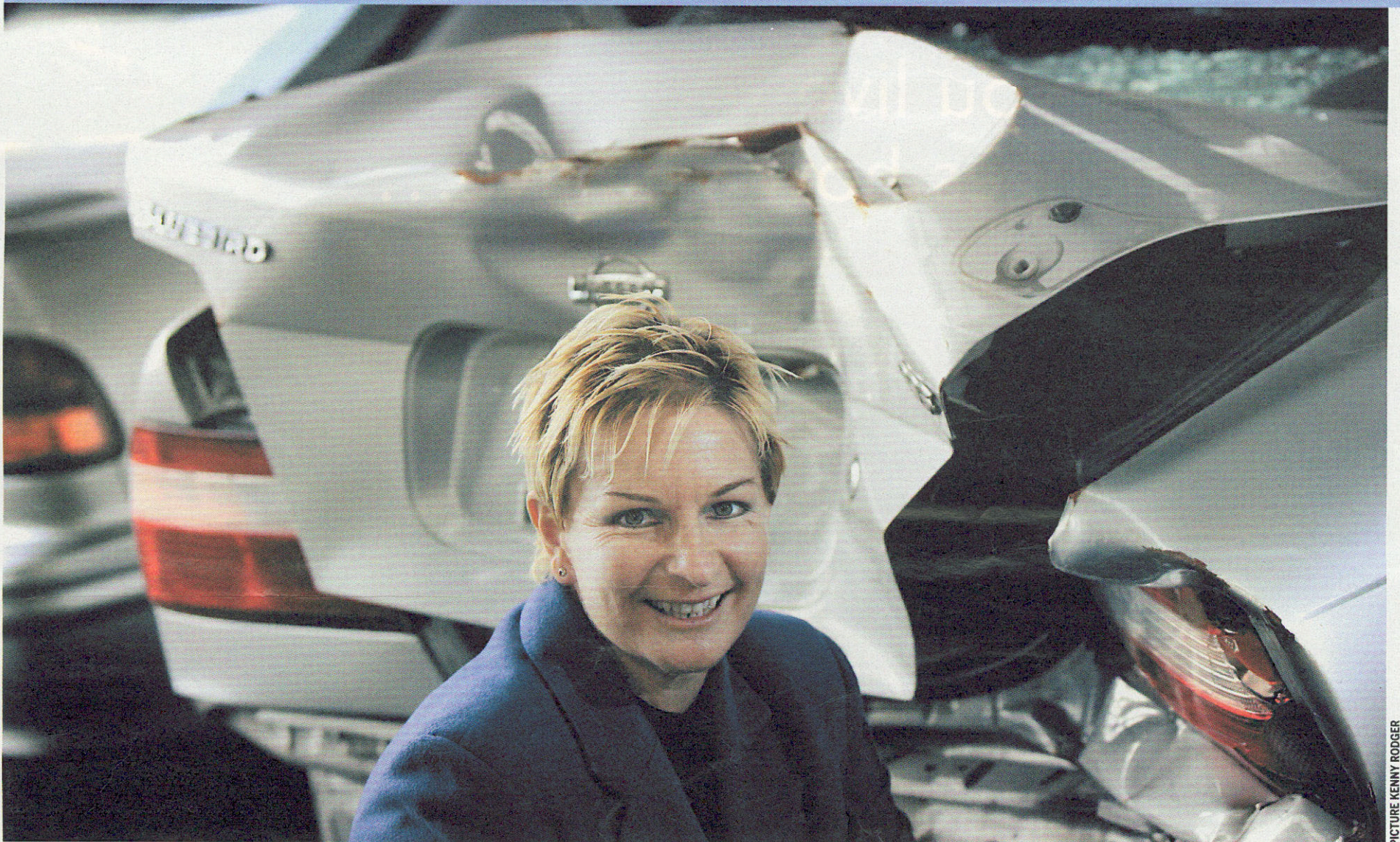


Whose idea was that?

Karen Knight talks about her business which takes the hassle out of pranging the car



PICTURE KENNY RODGER

SMOOTHING THE WAY FORWARD

THERE ARE few things in life more frustrating than a car accident. Even the slightest prang requires hours of fluffing around making insurance claims, finding a decent panel beater and organising alternative transport.

She's had 30 years in the panel-beating industry, but Karen Knight had forgotten the hassle of such incidents until she sold her shop in 1998.

"It's interesting what you don't know you know when you're inside an industry.

"Once I had left it, friends and family started calling me because I didn't have my shop anymore, asking, 'What do I do? Where do I go?'"

As time went on, Knight says she began noting how many times people asked her for advice and thought to herself, "I should be charging for this. This is really valuable stuff."

At the time, she worked for Esanda — a large fleet management and vehicle leasing company — where one of her portfolios was overseeing the refurbishment programme and accident repairs.

"We charged our corporate clients for that knowledge and I thought, 'Well hang on, if the corporate customers can see some value in this, who's looking after those that aren't [clients], who

don't have any knowledge or any contacts? Who's looking after the public?'"

From there, Knight says the idea of Crash Brokers quickly evolved — a one-stop accident management service that will pick up your wrecked vehicle and return it valet-cleaned and good as new.

Oh, and at no extra cost to the customer.

In a similar business model to mortgage brokers, Crash Brokers is funded by the network it operates, with panel beaters paying Knight a finders' fee for the business she brings in.

Crash Brokers deals with 15 operators within the greater Auckland region who pass Knight's high expectations and standards. "It's a very unregulated industry," she says. "Most people don't have enough knowledge to pick between the good, the bad and the ugly.

"There's something like 600 panel shops in Auckland. We deal with 15 currently — potentially there are probably 50 we could deal with — but that speaks volumes for the other 550 which just aren't up to speed."

In addition to quality assurance, Knight believes Crash Brokers offers a number of other advantages.

"A study done in New Zealand found it takes about three to four hours to manage an accident repair — from the point of

impact to the point of delivery. It's a complete waste of people's time and resources."

Knight's team arranges tow vehicles, repairs and interim courtesy cars for their clients, as well as filing insurance claims and dealing with assessors.

She admits several insurance companies were "curious" about the arrangement when it began in 2004, "because our service is presented as 100 per cent free of charge to the customer, there was a bit of scepticism: 'How can you do this, what are the catches, what's your agenda?'"

Internationally, accident management is becoming more common and has been available in both Britain and the United States for 10 years. However, Knight says the concept emerged in Australia and New Zealand only two years ago.

Fortunately for her, insurance companies' wariness was short-lived and today Crash Brokers deals with every insurance company in New Zealand.

So where to now? Ideally, Knight would like the firm to have a large corporate presence. "I'd like Crash Brokers to be to collision repairs, what AA is to breakdown service."

Joanna Hunkin ■

■ www.crashbrokers.co.nz

■ This is the last in the series.