

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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### From drop-out to MD

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#### **HOW I made it: Keran Wicks, managing director, Network Video.**

I LEFT school aged 13 – in those days they didn't pay a lot of attention. School wasn't for me. I'm a person who learns from doing. I don't read well. I have to read things several times to absorb them. I was an abject failure at all things scholarly.

I started pumping petrol in Kew, Melbourne. Then I decided I'd had enough of checking oil – it was the days when you had full service. So I went for a job as a sales girl in a fashion boutique. It was very trendy. I bluffed my way in there and at 16 bluffed my way into the management of Garfinkle Boutique in Moonee Ponds. I ended up running a number of their stores, buying stock and managing staff.

Then, when I was 21, I became Victorian state manager for a New Zealand firm, Skinny's Hideout, which opened in Australia and sold sheepskin – back when it was fashionable. We opened 25 stores in 18 months and I supervised them all.

When I announced I was pregnant, they sacked me. I was 23 and had to work, so my mother got me a job in a video library, which was the great new business in the early '80s. There was a video store on every corner. Those were the days when VHS machines were about the size of small cars. The big innovation then was the remote control that had the wire that stretched across the lounge room. Remember that?

I loved the interaction with the people, and the business. After my son was born I thought there'd be a business in selling movies. So I put the second-hand stock the store wanted to sell in the boot of my car and became a broker, going round selling to other video stores. I did very well out of that and ended up employing a few people. It was a boom period and I opened a wholesale warehouse in Carlton. MovieSearch, launched in 1984, grew to be one of the largest wholesale operations in Australia. I closed the warehouse when I found out that I was pregnant again as I wanted to stay home with the children.

That lasted all of nine months before I thought I'd go mad. I bought a rundown video store in Kew. I'd been on the advising side for so long, helping stores set up. So I thought I'd start my own and called it Little Monster Video – after my first child – and within a few years it had grown substantially.

Opposite us was a Movieland store – that was the first video group to go into franchising. My store was double the size, doing double the business, but Movieland paid half the price for product because it was a group. I talked about becoming a Movieland franchisee, but didn't see why I should have to conform to someone else's business model.

I thought: Well, I'll start my own group, Network Video. Other independent retailers and I got together and acted as a network, providing services that all the stores needed, such as buying and marketing with in-store posters and magazines, things that were cost-prohibitive as an independent. We started with 12 stores in Melbourne and a year later, in 1994, it had grown to 100 stores. In five years we had 300 stores nationally.



Keran Wicks got into the video business after being sacked from her old job for being pregnant. Photo: Adam Knott Source: The Australian

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My objective was never to be a big rental group, but today we're 18-20 per cent of the market. Video Ezy, which owns Blockbuster, is the biggest, but we are the largest group of independent retailers in the world and the only group run by a woman. We have 370 stores and we're still growing.

The rental channel is very healthy, despite all you hear about the new delivery mechanisms, the entertainment nirvana that's going to deliver movies direct to your household at the push of a button. That won't happen for a long time. Rental is booming and in tough economic times it's great value. I've never worked to a business plan. I've gone out of my way to ensure the business is nimble. As the entertainment industry changes, we'll change with it. So when video on demand is viable, we'll be in that.

My favourite movies are A Beautiful Mind, State of Play and Dead Poets Society – anything that shows the strength of the human spirit. That gets to me.

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