

# Metro



## Trading up

Today's tradies are more likely to be wearing suits than shorts, writes **Claire Halliday**.

**N**OT so long ago, calling a tradesman meant beginning with a flip through the Yellow Pages and ending with a man, ringing your doorbell three hours — sometimes days — later than arranged.

Seek a tradesman today and it is immediately obvious that times have changed. Having embraced SMS and internet technology, today's tradies are a much slicker, politer bunch who understand the importance — even if only emotional — of sticking to a deadline.

When Danial Achow launched Service Central with his father in July, 2005, it was the result of three years' worth of IT system building and many more years of pent-up frustration.

"Back in 2002, my father and I were really frustrated with how difficult it was to find quality businesses to do some work for us," Achow says. "We were tired of having to repeat our requirements time and time again. Plus, we had no way of telling whether the businesses were good quality, or what their previous customers had really thought of them."

With eBay's business booming, Achow thought it was time to build an "open and transparent marketplace for services".

Preliminary market research revealed an enthusiastic potential clientele but the overwhelming reaction from tradesmen was scepticism.

"I personally called 600 plumbers before finding one interested. However, we now have a proven constant flow of work and have over 2000 tradespeople registered with us across the country," he says.

The service is free for consumers and markets itself on the strength of the claim that just a single phone call or web-request will ensure available, quality tradesmen (who pay an annual registration fee on top of a small fee per job requested) call them back.

"From day one we have had a phenomenal response from consumers with over 50,000 consumers having used our service already," Achow says. "Currently, we receive around 2000 job requests each week."

To ensure that they are the ones whose phones keep ringing, the service's registered tradesmen go, Achow says, "that extra yard to turn up on time, dress well, and do a good quality job for a reasonable price".

According to Ian Roberts, Associate Director, Faculty of Building and Construction at the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE (NMIT), such increases in professionalism aren't just about hiding any sign of tradie's crack beneath a suit jacket.

Attributing the level of professionalism to factors that include a greater focus on preparing apprentices for real world success, Roberts says that traditional skills-only training has been evolving to combine business acumen with hospitality's can-do disposition.

"In addition to this, the number of companies within construction that employ large numbers of tradespeople has diminished substantially," Roberts says. "The majority of qualified tradespeople either own a subcontracting business or work for one."

Having been involved in the building industry for about 15 years, Aaron Spooner, managing director of property development and construction firm Veroy, brings experience of managing construction companies to the business of managing tradesmen.

"An average day would consist of evaluating the marketing side of the business to assess what appointments

are being attended; then checking on all of the projects ... then getting back to the office to sign off all accounting works, along with whatever else crops up," he says.

It's an approach that reduces the problem with "the conventional tradie" who, typically, has minimal time and more responsibilities for one person to properly handle.

"In my view, I developed this company with the key principle being to 'raise the bar' in relation to total tradie performance," Spooner says.

**I thought I'd just be a carpenter and that would be that.**

SCOTT MILNE

At whocando.com.au, corporate sensibilities have also replaced the aggressive blue heeler as a modern tradie's best friend. The pick-up of technology among a group of people who have a reputation for being far from cutting-edge, says founder Robert Finkeldey, is one indicator of an increased white-collar approach.

Finkeldey, 38, cut his teeth in the trade services industry as a university student in Germany, working for his father's "medium-size business for plumbing, gas-fitting, heating and canal construction".

The MBA qualifications he brings to whocando.com.au highlight an apprenticeship of a much different kind — knowledge Finkeldey put into practice as vice-president for Gartner Inc, managing the consulting practice responsible for market and business strategies across the Asia-Pacific region and Japan.

Much like Achow's inspiration for Service Central, the seed of whocando.com.au was sown when Finkeldey had troubles finding good tradesmen.

"When we shared our experiences with friends, we knew that this was a common problem. After researching the internet for solutions globally, we concluded that we had to build the system ourselves," he says.

"WhoCanDo functions as a defined reverse auction process where the consumer can make a choice based on price, feedback from previous customers and tradesman's qualifications, licence, insurance and other credentials," he says.

When Scott Milne, 25, finished his carpentry apprenticeship, he never imagined going back to school to learn about business.

"I just really enjoy working with my hands — that's what I wanted to do," says the bloke with the broad Australian accent. "I wasn't all that good with computers."

With his builders' registration course through the Housing Industry Association just completed, Milne has realised that, for today's tradie, a laptop is as essential as a tool belt.

"I bought myself MYOB to help with the accounting side of things. Talking to other tradies has been good — they've been giving me some tips on software," Milne says.

Next — the website. "That's one thing I am looking at at the moment. My brother is a computer programmer so he will help me," he says.

Although Milne attracts most of his work through word-of-mouth contacts, he also knows that marketing is important.

"It's amazing how little I knew about running a business," he says.

Having grown up with a tradie father — his dad was a fitter and turner who now works as a building surveyor — Milne says things have changed.

"I know with Dad it seemed to be easier. You have to liaise with the client now — I try to be as happy as I can be with them. It's a lot different than I thought. I thought I'd just be a carpenter and that would be that," he says.

Instead, he has bought himself a briefcase — "for carrying my paperwork in" — and has ditched the shorts and singlets in favour of clean jeans and a spare pair of work boots he keeps polished in the boot for the days when he has to meet with clients.

"That's one thing I was told by a friend who was a carpenter," he says.