

# AUCTIONS IN REVERSE

● Entrepreneurs can find out exactly what their customers want through a new breed of website where consumers request tenders for everything from wedding photos to graphic design, tiling, plumbing and even legal services.

Launched in July 2005, [servicecentral.com.au](http://servicecentral.com.au) gives customers an opportunity to list a job they need completed and call for tenders from more than 5000 service providers. In three years, the website has listed more than 160,000 jobs, and facilitated \$481 million worth of work.

Using a mixture of targeted online, email and search-engine marketing, the Service Central website attracts more than 100,000 unique users a month, as well as a vast and at times quirky range of job requests.

"Critical mass is important for online marketplaces, and we have focused our efforts on building critical mass industry by industry," Service Central executive director Danial Ahchow says. "We have thousands of plumbers, painters, builders, handymen and electricians able to pitch for work through the site. Most of our jobs are fairly straightforward although a few have caught our attention, such as a listing for a divorce lawyer posted at 3am one Sunday, or a request for 1000 pink balls."

Typical of the Service Central tradespeople is Paul Anstis, below, director of mobile whitegoods repair franchise Arrive on Time Appliances, who began using the website to source work in 2003.

"When we came across Service Central, we were advertising in the Yellow Pages and the local paper, as well as doing a bit of networking with local real estate agents," Anstis says.

"Over the years, our business has grown dramatically, and we've reduced our spend on Yellow Pages because with this online form of client capture, the cost of customer acquisition is a lot lower and the conversion rate on quotes is more favourable."

Frustrated by a lack of competition in the professional services space, former lawyer Paul Levitt launched a similar services tender site, [serviceseeking.com.au](http://serviceseeking.com.au), in November 2007.

"The idea is to provide an online dating service for business, where customers can post the jobs they want done, and get the service providers to come to them and compete for the work," Levitt says. "The attraction for the services providers is the cost of customer acquisition online is much lower."

Jeanne-Vida Douglas

