

## **Willie Erken - Willie's tale of success**

Willie Erken, Managing Director of Wagtail Cleaning was a professional cleaner for more than 20 years in shopfront, domestic and highrise window cleaning. As he and his employees developed muscle strain and carpal tunnel syndrome due to the weight and design of window cleaning tools, he recognised the need for lighter, faster and more ergonomically designed cleaning tools.

With muscle strain and efficiency in mind, Willie designed a solution, a unique ergonomically sound window cleaning tool, the Wagtail Combi.

### **The product**

The Wagtail Combi is a multi-functional cleaning tool that is easy to use and reduces strain in shoulders and arms. The Wagtail Combi incorporates interchangeable cleaning pads (micro-fibre for dust, acrylic for windows and cotton for floors) that clean and wipe dry in one simple action. The patented pivot allows the user to gain more reach using a faster action than any tool available internationally. Furthermore, the unique pivoting action makes the product ergonomically easy to use.

Willie knew he'd hit on something big – something that could potentially revolutionise the way windows could be cleaned. He also knew he needed patent protection, in order to maximise the return for his effort.

Willie sought advice from his local Inventors Association and went from there.

### **The need for good professional advice**

"I attempted to patent my first versions of the product myself. I did extensive research on what I was developing, a combination squeegee and mop and a universal joint for one to clean both windows and floors," Willie explained.

"But it turned out not to be a new invention. There was no patentable invention." Determined to succeed with his ideas and designs, he accepted he needed a patent attorney. "But when it came to describing my invention and what was unique, what was patentable, I could not understand the language the patent attorney used. Phrases like 'longitudinal access'.

"We had a very simple invention but it required a specific description and even the patent examiner could not understand what had been written in the description. Apart from anything else it was too ambiguous."

Willie then hired a second patent attorney: "I knew how to describe to my second attorney just what my invention was. I was comfortable with the description that was used in our application because it accurately described our claims for a patent. This was very important because we were applying for a broad range of categories,

for industries other than the cleaning business. We saw a potential in the painting market and the swimming pool cleaning business". Today, he says the patent is the most important legal document in the existence of his company. "If you cannot differentiate your invention then you are stuffed."

#### The importance of planning

While the process of searching existing patents is extremely important, Willie Erken says moving quickly to organise, plan and establish your business is just as crucial.

"Looking back, I should have prepared a business plan, looked at raising finance and got more manufacturing knowledge much sooner than I did. I simply didn't know enough at the time to drive the process fast enough," he says. "It's taken me more than four years to really establish the business.

"The clock is ticking the minute you have written a patent application. It's a time bomb, there's no time for dreaming. You've got to get out there."

"Once you take your prototypes to trade shows and expose them, it is a simple fact that your competitors will take a close look at what you've done, identify the key elements and change them sufficiently in their own product to escape legal action. They will simply go away and do it faster and better if they can."

"Look at all your protection options. You need to maximise the potential for your returns by seeking strong patent protection domestically and internationally if you intend to export your product".

#### ***A leader in his field***

Willie's innovation has positioned his company as a leading innovator of tools used in the cleaning industry. The company currently manufactures 2,000 units a month which retail at \$40 and sell throughout Australia, the United Kingdom, Holland and the United States.

His range of Wagtail products has won a number of awards including the Gold Medal at the International Inventors Exhibition in Geneva. The Wagtail Combi was also featured on national television (Small Business Show) as well as the Home Shopping Network in America to advertise the product for international direct response television.

Willie's ingenuity has been recognised by the Australian Design Awards. His Wagtail Combi was shortlisted at the Australian Design Awards 2001, in the Industrial Design category.

Willie's story is an inspirational tale of how innovation, perseverance, good advice and good humour, can bring great success.