

Manly Daily
Portfolio



Janet Littlehales has invented a keypad device to teach people to touch-type.

Pictures: SIMON DEAN

Touch of inspiration

SUE HOBAN

FRENCHS Forest inventor and new business operator Janet Littlehales can't say exactly what proportion of Australian households now have computers but she suspects it is not far off saturation point.

Nor has she been able to determine just how many computer users can actually type properly, but she suspects that figure is nearly as low as the other is high.

Put together, these two estimates add up to a very healthy market for her new invention, the Keyboard Genius, which she says can teach people to touch-type within weeks.

After a frustratingly long push to get it

“They can type in a fashion by jabbing away with two or four fingers but it's so much more efficient when you can type without having to look at the keys”

- JANET LITTLEHALES

into retail outlets it is now due for national distribution via Officeworks stores before Christmas.

Ms Littlehales claims it is more effective than software typing programs because it is so simple and easy to use, based on a system of colour coding and numbering each key to guide the fingers.

This mother-of-two came up with the idea almost by accident after her son asked her to teach him to type. “He knew I was a

very fast typist and he was always asking me to type up his school work, which I wouldn't do,” she said.

“One day he asked me to show him what I do, so I drew out a very rough sketch of a keyboard and I colour-coded and numbered it and to my amazement within a week he was typing; not very quickly but with his fingers in the correct position.”

Only weeks later he was an efficient touch typist and she was starting to see the

commercial potential of her simple system.

She said the Keyboard Genius, made up of a set of the coded labels stuck on each key, had since been trialled with a range of non-typists of different ages who were encouraged to practise using it for 15 minutes a day for a month.

“Across the board they all learned how to type and over the month not only did their speed improve dramatically but their accuracy did too,” she said.

Ms Littlehales said she was encouraged to push ahead by the fact that computers had proliferated in homes and workplaces without too much attention given to typing skills. “I suspect there's now a huge percentage of the population who can't touch-type,” she said.

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Gavin and Adrian Stanford of Beachwheels Automotive have been servicing the Northern Beaches for more than 25 years.

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Building his business: Chris Hall of CXC.

Picture: MARTIN LANGE

Device puts inventor into key position

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"They can type in a fashion by jabbing away with two or four fingers but it's so much more efficient when you can type without having to look at the keys."

She now sees market potential on several fronts, including schools where she hopes it will be widely adopted to teach children typing skills as they learn their computer skills.

She will also be targeting the home market, for children and adult users, and will consider pitching it to the corporate market, with productivity gains the big selling point.

"We have done our patent search and there is nothing out there on the market that is as simple as this; that is, something that is always visible so every time you sit down at your keyboard it is there to remind you," she said.

Ms Littlehales said her guiding principle in developing the product was to keep it cheap and easier to use than the software programs it was competing with (it will be retailing for \$14.95).

"It also had to look good so it would appeal to all age groups and we really wanted to keep it at a price anyone who wants to learn to type would be happy to pay."

She said the greatest challenge had been getting it into retail outlets despite very positive responses from retailers. "This has been on the go for two and a half years," she said. "Getting the prototype and the physical product made then getting the trademarks and patent work done wasn't that difficult, but the hard part was getting it into stores; just having to work through all the different distribution arrangements."

She has now learned that two of the greatest attributes in start-up business are strong faith in your product - and perseverance. "I was so passionate about it that I wasn't prepared to give up," she said.

She is now exploring overseas opportunities with assistance from Austrade and is having discussions with a company interested in taking the Keyboard Genius to Europe and the US. But she said she would be plotting that next step very carefully.

"It's been a huge learning curve but it's been so much fun," she said. "I have learnt so much and met so many great people and it's just been a great experience, getting a new product to market. If anyone out there has a great idea and a real belief in it, my advice would be to go for it."

Constructive move to exhibitions, sets

SUE HOBAN

WARRIEWOOD niche building company Custom Exhibition Construction (CXC) has doubled the size of its operations after taking over peninsula competitor Interbuild.

Director Chris Hall said the move would not only expand its reach and client base in the exhibition and trade-show market, but help it expand into film and television set construction where Interbuild did much of its work.

"The purchase is in line with our strategy to become the preferred exhibition stand and film and television set construction company in Australia," he said.

"Over the next 12 months CXC will be launching a range of initiatives and services that will drive production

efficiencies and reduce our quote response time."

He said Interbuild founder Warwick Smith would stay on as construction manager of the combined operation.

Mr Hall, who switched from residential building to the exhibition market just a year ago, said the company's first acquisition had come much earlier than anticipated after a year of very rapid growth.

The company outgrew its first premises in nine months and had to more than triple its space in the new factory it now occupies in Warriewood.

"It's a big market," he said. "The Sydney Exhibition and Convention Centre has trade shows just about every week covering every type of industry. We now do a lot of leading companies like Goodyear, Colgate and 3M."

He said about 60 per cent of CXC's business was now coming from interstate

and it was also doing work in New Zealand.

"Some stands can cost about \$180,000 to build and that will then travel for about 12 months," he said. "After a show we dismantle them and they live in containers until the next show or until the company decides to build a new one."

He said the new market was a much easier business proposition than the more fickle home building market.

"You're dealing with corporate clients who pay you a 40 per cent deposit upfront before you start the job, compared with 5 per cent when you're building a house, so in that respect it's much easier for cashflow."

Mr Hall said CXC was now looking to expand into new markets such as office fit-outs and to increase its work for film and television. He said it expected to set up factories in Melbourne and Brisbane in the next two to three years.

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