



## Michael Hill top entrepreneur

This year's Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year is Michael Hill from Michael Hill International. Taking out the overall title as well as winning the Master Entrepreneur category, Hill joins an elite alumni of past winners.

Hill said it was "an absolute privilege" to win the overall title. "I'm going to give it my best shot for New Zealand at the world awards in Monte Carlo."

Chairman of the judging panel, David Johnson, says Michael Hill ticks all the boxes.

"He's achieved everything he set out to achieve but what impressed the judges most was a desire to keep setting and achieving goals."

Hill will compete against leading entrepreneurs from 50 countries in the Ernst & Young World Entrepreneur of the Year Awards in Monte Carlo in May 2009.

## CORRECTIONS

In our October cover story it was stated that New Zealand cycling medallist Matt Randall received his bronze medal at the Athens Olympics. As any die-hard sports enthusiast will tell you, he did, in fact, receive his medal at the Commonwealth Games in Manchester.

And in our story on Manukau's Young Business Person of the Year (Oct Page 18) we spelt Marguerite Howlett's surname incorrectly. Please accept our apologies.

# FROM CHRISTMAS PUDDINGS TO DATABASES

When Sophie Stewart put herself through university by selling Christmas puddings to businesses as client gifts she knew she was onto a good thing. And that Christmas pudding business was the catalyst for a successful career in business.

Five years on she's set up her own successful lead generation company that's grown to 12 staff in just 18 months.

"I ran the business for three years in the holidays and when I left varsity I sold it, along with an extensive database of contacts to another student," says Stewart.

She says discovering the incredible value of that database planted the first seed in her head about a potential business opportunity.

With a Bachelor of Commerce in Marketing and Management under her belt, Stewart headed to Melbourne where she got a job pitching Government accounts over the phone.

"I was based in Melbourne and dealing with people mainly in Canberra who had no idea I wasn't in the same city as them, and that made me realise as long as you have good product knowledge and you're eloquent on the phone it doesn't matter where you are physically calling from."

After Melbourne, Stewart headed to London with an opportunity to work in a huge call centre.

"There were around a hundred of us all in one room making calls. It was a bit like chooks in cages. When you were on the phone you had this constant background noise of others talking."

Stewart says once again she took what she needed from the experience and continued to build a business model.

On her return to New Zealand Stewart spent 18 months working for an advertising agency before taking a leap of faith and setting up 99. The company provides support to businesses through providing up to date, comprehensive databases, lead generation, customer service, market research and even RSVPs.

"We work behind the scenes just like Agent 99 did for Maxwell in Get Smart! So we are making the calls and generating the leads to drive your business into the future."

Stewart says while it's disappointing to see so many companies moving their call centres offshore there is a silver lining for her with plenty of great callers looking for work. And with the majority of 99's work phone-based and 40 percent coming from outside of Hawke's Bay it doesn't really matter where callers work from.

"I have always said as long as our callers have great product knowledge, are articulate and have the right attitude they can work from anywhere in the country."

[www.ninety-nine.co.nz](http://www.ninety-nine.co.nz)

