



# Charity's net benefit

Sue Hoban

IT doesn't take long to work out why Neil Willis, owner of Brookvale-based online business Sydney Commercial Kitchens, might be featuring in the finals of the NSW Telstra Business Awards this Friday night.

In eight years he has taken a fledgling operation feeling its way on the internet to a multi-million business that enjoys unquestioned domination of its online market.

But the irony is Sydney Commercial Kitchens is not being recognised for its business success. It is a finalist in the social responsibility category set up to recognise business support for the community, education or the environment – and its owner couldn't be happier.

"I'm quite happy to fly under the radar in terms of business success but this award is something that has real meaning," he said. "This is the first year they have had the social responsibility category and if I were to become a benchmark for that, it would mean a great deal to me. It would certainly be one of the better recognitions I think I could get in business."

Mr Willis, who has a long history in the hospitality industry, has been recognised for an initiative that ensures \$3 from every sale his business makes goes to the Fred Hollows Foundation. He has also supported the Street Mission Cafe in Manly and believes most businesses could do more to support charities and community groups struggling for funding.

He said it gave him a great deal of satisfaction to know that the more successful he made his business, the more money the charity would receive.

Mr Willis said he initially set up Sydney Commercial Kitchens to provide commercial kitchen design services but the success of his early forays on the net forced a change of direction in 2000. It now sells commercial kitchen equipment to the hospitality industry, with about 1500 items on its website. He said the site now attracted

about 8000 unique visits a week which, according to independent monitoring, put it way ahead of any of its online competitors.

He believed part of the reason for the success was that online shopping was ideally suited to busy restaurant and cafe owners. "They can look and shop any time," he said. "If their dishwasher breaks down during the evening they can search and buy out of hours. When we come in in the morning there are generally orders waiting for us."

He said he was confident the business would continue to grow, after recording its best figures for each of the past four months despite the economic belt tightening that had occurred during this period.

Neil Willis said for a short time he made the mistake common to many emerging online businesses of expecting the website to work by itself. "I thought, 'Okay, I'm on the internet now, where's the money'," he said. "I then decided to become a lot more knowledgeable about the internet and I literally spent hundreds of hours learning everything I could about it.

"The website isn't something we leave and hope it works. We have worked very hard to make sure it provides what our customers need. I work on it every day."

He said he had always been passionate about the hospitality industry and giving good service but had found another dimension to doing business via the internet that had kept him engaged and stimulated. "It's challenging and the demands of staying on top of it provide a nice intellectual challenge for me," he said

While Mr Willis will fly the flag for the northern beaches in the social responsibility category at Friday night's ceremony, Brookvale's Lara Solomon will be in contention for the micro-business award. She is founder of Laroo Australia and the woman responsible for the Mocks, mobile socks craze.



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■ **TELSTRA BUSINESS AWARDS: FRIDAY NIGHT**



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- NEIL WILLIS