

THE RICH LIST RADAR

Admiring the talents and successes of wealthy New Zealanders



ROSS JOHNSON
Security
\$20 million



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By **Fiona Robertson**

Fears of the Y2K bug are now a distant memory for most but the image is clearer for entrepreneur Ross Johnson.

The dawn of the year 2000 was his first year at FIRST Security and Y2K jitters helped set his new company in good stead.

“We were running around at midnight checking buildings,” he says.

Johnson built the business up from those early days, with no capital outside his own resources, to a company with 400 staff.

In July 2006 he sold the business for a tidy sum to ISS.

For many years, he swapped between security

uniform and business suit, but he doesn’t fit the gruff, burly stereotype you might expect from a security firm boss.

His background was in recruitment when he was headhunted for a sales gig in the security business, before setting up FIRST Security.

He describes his company as the “thinking man’s security company” and says his success comes from his analytical sales background.

“I hope for the best, plan for the worst,” he says.

These days Johnson is still involved in the security industry and is aiming to build his company FIRST Management up to be the largest

New Zealand-owned security company.

His main two divisions are FIRST 24x7, involved in electronic security and alarm/offsite CCTV monitoring for corporate clients, and FIRST Recovery, a towing and vehicle logistics business.

He credits the firm’s success to his policy of using up-to-date technology and paying attention to customer service.

Lessons from the 80s

Johnson has been starting up his own companies since he was 19, when he and two varsity mates got into the insurance business.

The venture came to an abrupt end but

Johnson says it taught him a lot.

“[When] you know how easily companies can fail – you plan ahead,” he says.

His main advice is not to go into business under-capitalised and not to attempt to focus on too many things at once – unlike Johnson and his friends who had about five things on the go in their early venture.

“We learned from the over-enthusiasm of the 80s,” he says.

Success

When Johnson set up FIRST Security, the industry didn’t demand much in the way of start-up capital.

“Just uniforms and an office and a couple of computers,” Johnson says.

But it still meant living on “next to nothing” for him and his wife in the company’s first few years, as they reinvested in infrastructure and management.

In those days, the security industry wasn’t selling itself with enough professionalism, Johnson says.

“The bigger, older companies used to amble along.”

Johnson was discussing start-up poverty with security client Neville Findlay of Zambesi recently.

He says given how fragile start-ups can be, it’s encouraging to share success stories.

“I’m not overly patriotic but I do like owner-operated businesses in New Zealand.”

Early retirement was an option for Johnson after he sold his company.

“My wife and friends kept asking me about it,” he says. “But I have unfinished business in terms of the opportunities I see out there. I’m definitely not ready to hang up my boots.”

If he retired, he says, he’d probably only spend too much time motor racing.

“But I’d have to start another company to pay for it,” he says.

Attitudes to wealth

Johnson says he doesn’t feel wealth has changed him at all – especially as he’s reinvesting in his business all the time.

It affects small things, like the labels on your clothes, he says.

“It makes you think how fortunate you are,” he says. “You act to protect that.”

Johnson says he’s avoided any tall poppy backlash because he’s always kept under the radar.

“I have stayed within the business market, I haven’t bought overly flash cars or houses,” he says.

But he was open to talking to *NBR Magazine* as

he looks to build up his business further and to link his profile to his company.

“It’s important for credibility,” he says.

Motorhead

As if the security business doesn’t provide enough adrenaline, Johnson’s hobbies have previously included cycling, speedboating, fishing and scuba diving.

“You need to have a good blow out [from work],” he says.

His current obsession is motor racing. Johnson owns three racing cars, the latest purchase a 700 horsepower Porsche GT2.

Motor racing in particular demands a lot of focus and effort, he says.

“As with business, you really have to give it 110% ... otherwise you crash.”

His dream is to compete in the great Australian and European road rallies.

Johnson’s latest business venture is in motorsport marketing for companies aiming at wealthy consumers, though Johnson is a little worried about mixing his hobbies with business.

“I’m not sure whether I’ll end up putting too much time in,” he jokes. ■