



Ken Lilley: Being the best you can be

The untimely death of **Ken Lilley** in early April robbed the industry of one of its larger than life characters. This is *Wares'* tribute, with love and respect and fond memories.



BDT: 25 years young

At BDT's 25th birthday bash in 2006: Ron Woodrow, Darryl Rochester and Ken Lilley plus Ken's grand entrance on a motorbike!

KEN LILLEY STARTED with BDT (Melco as it was back then) in 1986 as a South Island sales representative. He quickly rose to South Island Sales Manager and in 1988 moved north to Wellington as National Sales Manager.

In 1991, alongside the company's 10th anniversary, he was named Melco's Salesperson of the Decade. The following year he was offered a shareholding and directorship, along with founder **Ron Woodrow** and Mitsubishi Electric.

Over the following decade Melco evolved from a TV and video distributor to a focus on compressor driven products. Fridges, dehumidifiers and air conditioning products became the company's mainstay products and this continues today.

In 2000, Ken and Ron bought back Mitsubishi Electric's Melco shares and the company became 100% New Zealand owned and operated at which time the company name changed to Black Diamond Technologies (BDT).

In 2002 Ron stepped down from the day to day running of BDT,

with Ken taking over as Managing Director.

First Melco and then BDT have achieved much over the decades, including the 27 years Ken Lilley contributed to their progress. While Ken himself would typically attribute much of this success to his many talented team members past and present, he was a born leader and adept at getting the best out of people.

Over the years he also introduced new ways of doing things like the now much looked for annual product launches. Back in the day, these events might involve taking retailers fishing in the Bay of Islands. Typical of Ken, he led these occasions from the front with vim, vigour, much humour and charm. But, as one retailer recalls, it wasn't just an excuse for a party: "The business always got done."

Ken had a huge love for life and was fully committed to everything he did but it wasn't all about Ken. He was the sort of person who became a great friend to many colleagues and retailers – not to mention people outside the industry – whom he would assist and support in any way he could.

At Ken's incredibly well supported funeral in April – surely a sad but affirming testimony to the many people he touched over the years – Ron Woodrow shared the following words which remind us of the Ken Lilley we will miss:

"Ken loved his job. He loved our customers, he loved our suppliers and he loved our staff. He saw them all as an extended family.

"He was supremely confident without being arrogant.

"He was the most consistently positive person I have known.

"He strived for excellence in whatever he did.

"He was always funny, often to outrageous extremes.

"He was caring and trustworthy and was always there to put his arms around anyone needing comfort, help or support.

"He was generous to a fault, and would give his last cent if it was needed."



Pre-shaven head days, Ken Lilley runs a Cube microwave demonstration with key customers.



Mr Cool with Batgirls

At the 2008 product launch (L-R): Bert Skillicorn, Kate Gibson and Ken with batgirls. The winning team from day one of the Connoisseur launch (L-R): Shojiro Sega, Luc Godin, Warren Brewin, Ken and Pauline Herbst. Ken brooks no argument in Wellington prior to the Mitsubishi Connoisseur fridge launch.



Winning team!



I'm watching you...

FAR LEFT: Ken with June Leeming inducting Noel Leeming into the Wares Hall of Fame.

LEFT: 2011: Ken and Ron accept a token of BDT's 30-year partnership with Mitsubishi Electric from Kotaro Yamanaka.



Hall of Fame!



30 years with Mitsubishi

Back in 2011, covering BDT's 30th anniversary, *Wares* asked Ken Lilley about his recipe for business success. His response was simple: employ the best people; find the best products; and support your customers to the nth degree.

That's a formula many businesses would do well to work to. Thanks Ken – you were the best you could be and we are all the richer for having known you!

Note: The personal recollections that follow are a deliberately select few of the many we could have chosen. There are many, many more tributes to Ken on the special page on BDT's website (www.bdt.co.nz/ken/).

From the heart: Some tributes

Ron Woodrow (BDT): From the start, Ken did not exceed expectations, he blew them away. He had an uncompromising desire to be the best in whatever he did. He wanted to be Number 1. Ken wanted our products to be Number 1, and he wanted his team to be the best team in the industry.

But if he was self-motivated, he was also the ultimate team leader and motivator. His philosophy was to lead from the front, and his incredible determination flowed into his team, bringing them along for the successes we enjoyed over the years. And, whenever the team received awards from our customers or the industry recognising their efforts, Ken was ecstatic for them.

The Ken I got to know was an extraordinary person. Yes, he achieved great business success, but most of us will remember him for his total humanity.

Rick Hellings: In our industry Ken was the pioneer of business partnerships, of actually getting alongside people and working together – so that 1+1 made 3 – that is, *real* business partnerships.

From there he forged friendships because of his outgoing personality – to Ken, business was about people. He always had a kind word and he knew everybody by name and many of us became very good mates with Ken as a result.

He had an infectious personality, a big laugh and big charisma – you always knew he was there – and he was always positive in the way he dealt with you and in the way he handled his products. Ken always practiced what he preached – it was always about getting the maximum from every opportunity, personally and professionally.

Trevor Douthett (LV Martin, Baby City): Ken bounced into the industry in Wellington in the late 1980s... He was always very clear in his views and he expounded them loudly – but he was also a remarkable listener.

He had a huge empathy for people and a huge passion for everything. There was that booming voice, there was the push forward, the lead, the take control, but inside all of that was his



ABOVE: The Mitsubishi Electric retail team at the 2011 Wares Awards.

RIGHT: Ken talks about plans for the Wares Hall of Fame at the 2011 Wares Awards.



empathy, his ability to listen and to learn.

He also managed to have time for everything. That to me was one of the most remarkable things – he had time to put huge resource into that business, into his family and his friends and he did a lot of other remarkable things as well!

Mike Lee (Melco, Parmco): Ken was probably the person that had the biggest influence on my business career – I learned a lot of lessons from Ken, like always underpromise and overdeliver! When you were talking to him, you were the only person in the world as far as Ken was concerned and you always felt as though you were the number one priority.

But he wasn't scared to make the big decision: we went through some tough times with Mitsubishi and Aiwa but the way it was handled was with dignity – so he was as good with the negatives as the positives – and he made business a pleasure rather than just something you did to earn money!

Bryce Purdy (Smiths City, Appliance Connexion): Ken was a colleague and a mate. He was just so passionate – it's an overused word but I think this is the most appropriate word to describe him, whether it be business, family, motorcycles or whatever.

I always found Ken to be so inspirational – whether as a leader or a colleague. You couldn't resist being invigorated about the industry or life whenever Ken was around....his energy was just so contagious!

His love for the industry was unequalled and this legacy will be with us forever – there is a vacuum following his loss. I'm very sorry to say Ken, unfortunately it was you this time who "moved the cheese".

Darryl Rochester (BDT): Ken had an amazing ability to engage with people and had a genuine interest in what they were doing, which is a rare gift. I feel privileged and somewhat lucky that I had the chance to work with Ken over the past 14 years. These were some of the best times in my working career and memories I will cherish for years to come.

Our relationship started out as boss and employee but, in typical "Ken style", fast became a friendship. I have never met someone like Ken with the amount of enthusiasm and passion he had for life. As far as he was concerned, anything could be done, you just had to get out and do it!

Kate Gibson (BDT): Ken taught us all how to be passionate about what we do, how to have a great time doing it and the essence of good

old hard work. He taught me integrity and how to genuinely care about our products and our customers. His lessons will stay with us all forever and he will always be in our hearts. I miss him more every day that passes.

Sarah Ellison (BDT): Unlike many other companies, Ken was not some untouchable MD, his door was always open. I was always amazed, knowing how full it seemed all Ken's days were, that he always took time to make sure all was well in my world. In my role at BDT, Ken allowed me to grow and gave me the freedom to undertake my job with absolute confidence and trust. Ken was the soul of BDT on a daily basis and as well as losing him as a leader, the BDT team lost a friend.

Nicole Williams (BDT): I will always feel lucky and privileged to have known Ken and to have learnt such much from him. His unwavering belief in his staff made you feel like you could do anything. I couldn't have hoped for a better teacher, mentor and inspiration. His larger than life personality and leadership will be greatly missed. ▮



Ken and Jason Bell sign distribution agreement.



Ken in his early years (1986-87) as South Island Sales Representative, with Mike O'Malley.



En route to a factory visit with (R-L) Harvey Norman's Graeme Watt, Nigel Little and Frank Anderson.



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