



# IDEA TO IMPACT

Making R&D work for your business

How 11 remarkable New Zealand firms use R&D

# Howard Wright

Almost every hospital in New Zealand uses beds made in New Plymouth, but how did a motor mechanic working in a small workshop under his house during the 1950s have so much influence over their design?



We have learnt the hard way the importance of fully understanding the commercial opportunity before embarking on new product development. We have been guilty of being excited by an idea or technology and developing it without first rigorously proving the business case.

Bruce Moller  
Howard Wright Ltd



It takes Bruce Moller less than 15 minutes to drive to work. When he gets there, Mount Taranaki forms a perfect backdrop for Bruce, his design team and the manufacturing plant creating hospital beds that know more about comfort than any patient could prescribe.

These are not big spongy, luxurious five-star hotel beds. These beds made at Howard Wright Limited's Bell Block, New Plymouth, factory are stacked with clever features that make them among the world's best for patients needing critical and general hospital care. Clinicians and nursing staff like working with them because the controls are more like an iPod than a television remote; they are easy to operate with just one button, those who use them don't need to read the manual first and responses are intuitive. In Bruce's words – Howard Wright beds are simple, smart and human.

The Howard Wright company is built on 50 years of innovation and research. Howard Wright was a motor mechanic who loved to make things and to solve problems. When a nurse asked if he could make a modern hospital bed similar to one she had seen overseas, he decided he could make something much better by using the latest hydraulics. He set up a factory, and by the 1970s, Howard Wright Limited was making most of the hospital beds in use in New Zealand.

In 1991, Bruce, with his wife and young family, returned from the United Kingdom, where he had added an MBA to his mechanical engineering degree,

and was lured back to his hometown of New Plymouth where he joined Howard Wright as the company's general manager. Five years on, he was involved in a management buy-out of the business.

During the 1990s, Howard Wright specialised in customising its designs to suit individual demand, sometimes creating 70 or 80 versions of one model. The company was highly regarded for its products and excellent customer service but it needed to compete internationally in the future, which required a change from its predominantly engineering focus.

"We needed to go out and learn about hospital environments so we could lead rather than react," says Bruce.

In 2005, Howard Wright was invited to participate in Better by Design, a specialist New Zealand Trade and Enterprise group that delivers programmes built on the principle that design strategies and processes can help businesses improve their bottom line. With support from Venture Taranaki and investment from TechNZ, Howard Wright recruited an industrial design expert from Germany for 12 months to help convert the company to a design-led approach.

This process forced Howard Wright to rethink its long-term vision, understand future opportunities and rebuild the business, balancing its engineering design skills with industrial design knowledge.

