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**Gary Walker**

Owner Echidna Sewing

## THE ECHIDNA STORY

### *Who is Echidna Sewing Products?*

The modest echidna might just be the perfect sewing symbol—a living, breathing pincushion. For Echidna Sewing founder Gary Walker, it was the obvious name for his innovative invention in 1995 and provided a uniquely Australian identity for his business as it branched out locally and internationally to become one of Australia's leading sewing and embroidery machine specialists.

With his industry roots dating back to May 1981, Gary has spent his entire working life with sewing machines. A Brisbane Bayside lad, Gary left school just shy of his 16th birthday—with a little coercing from his highly skilled, seamstress mother—to take up an apprenticeship as a sewing machine mechanic with Stubbies Clothing Company, then one of Australia's leading clothing manufacturers.

Gary completed his apprenticeship in 1985, just as the Australian apparel manufacturing industry began its decline. Without any idea about running a business, but armed with unbridled enthusiasm, a love of sewing machines and a genuine belief that he could achieve anything, Gary made the bold move to open his first retail home sewing machine sales and service centre in 1986, Wynnum Manly Sewing Machine Centre.

The next year saw two life-changing events for Gary as he married the love of his life, Cynthia, and sold his business to explore other opportunities. But after three weeks away from sewing machines, Gary realised where his passion lay and became a shop manager with Singer. Over the next five years, and after moving to New Zealand and back again, Gary climbed the ranks to become the Singer Australia Eastern States Dealer Manager.

But Gary never really came to terms with relying on others to make decisions, and in 1992 he returned to life as a self-employed retailer. To take advantage of the new computerised sewing and embroidery machines appearing on the market, Gary bought back 50% of his old retail business. In 1995 he bought the remaining half and developed and patented the Echidna-inspired thread stand. At that point, Echidna Sewing came to be.

After juggling both a successful retail store and a growing wholesale distribution business, Gary again sold his retail store to move his mail order retail and wholesale business to a small warehouse in Capalaba. Countless trips to the USA led to new distribution agreements with leading suppliers and the explosion of computer sewing and embroidery technology for the home market fuelled steady growth over the ensuing years.

In 2004, Brother of Japan changed the world with the release of the amazing PR series multi-needle machines. At first, these machines were expensive and relatively unknown in Australia. But after a bit of prodding, Gary decided to take a close look at these new "semi-industrial" machines. With some relief on pricing in 2006, the Brother PR series machines were destined for big things in Australia. Echidna quickly became the main supplier of these machines in Australia.

By 2008, with the release of the revolutionary Brother Quattro and with few retailers genuinely embracing the "Brother Advantage," Echidna committed to the brand and today is by far the largest Brother specialist retailer in Australia, and one of the largest in the world.

Echidna, which is still very much a family based business, now employs 27 staff and is based in a modern 660sqm complex in Capalaba on Brisbane's Southern Bayside. In an ironic play on words, both of Gary's brothers have been part of the Echidna team for most of the last 20 years. Gary's son, a qualified Electrician, has now also joined the team and is studying to be become a sewing machine technician. His daughter and niece both work fulltime in administration and customer service.

As of 2015, Echidna has a 13,000 strong Australia-wide customer base and with modern technology, support can be given to virtually any location in the country.

"While our staff are our biggest asset, our best advantage is that we sell Brother. The reliability of Brother products is second to none and I don't think we could be a national reseller of sewing machines if we didn't have the Brother advantage," says Gary. "But when or if support is needed, our ability to resolve issues by phone or online with videos and other means is second to none. We also have a strong network of contacts for service mechanics around Australia."

Echidna also has a large 220sqm retail store in Townsville, a smaller store servicing the Sunshine Coast and the newest location in Melbourne. Other locations are planned for the future.

Echidna Sewing is truly a living thing, evolving to meet the demands of a changing customer market. As Gary explains "retailing is a constantly changing world. What worked or suited customers ten, five or even two years ago doesn't necessarily work today. Websites are a good example of this need for change. In fact as I write this, we are building a completely new website to better serve our future needs. It's expensive and it takes time but that's what is needed to be a successful business in today's changing world."

Echidna, or perhaps the industry's, biggest challenge is to engage the younger generations. According to Gary, it's the do-or-die objective for most sewing related businesses. The exciting part is having the creative technology to attract younger people. The trouble is that they don't know it exists or just how easy it is to use. But Echidna will do everything it can to make this happen.

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