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“The numbers are correct ... we are *that* good.”

From a remote corner of the world,
Wendy Alexander’s company is attracting
global attention for all the right reasons.

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Wendy Alexander doesn’t blink an eye at the confusion she encounters over her company. The CEO is practised at patiently explaining the name is Barfoot & Thompson, not ‘barefoot’ — and yes, it is a real estate company, and yes, it did enjoy \$10 billion in sales last year. And yes, it was down to the last five estate agents competing to be the world’s best at the 2016 International Property Awards.

And yes, the rumours were true: the little agency from Auckland did in fact come second to a huge company in the Persian Gulf. It did, however, take out the award for Best Real Estate and Best Letting Agency for Asia Pacific. And yes, that meant trouncing its much larger Australian neighbours across the ditch.

“We definitely punch above our weight,” Wendy laughs. “Even though we’re all the way over in New Zealand, a funny little company called Barfoot & Thompson, >>



people always ask about us. When our numbers are put up on the world stage, people go, 'That can't be right.' But it is. It is correct. We are *that* good.

"I think the fact that we've slipped under the radar for so long, being a family company, privately owned and not franchised, makes us different. Our business model is also unique. I travel the world for the industry, have looked at business models worldwide, and I've never seen what we have here at Barfoot & Thompson."

What Wendy has in her remote corner of the world is New Zealand's largest privately owned real estate company, a 94-year-old family business generating intense loyalty from 2,500 employees who capture around 40 per cent of the Greater Auckland real estate market and manage about 16,500 properties. Then, of course, there is that small matter of collecting a cool \$14 billion along the way.

"That was a record for us last year," Wendy says. "We've been close to it a number of times, always tracking in the same vicinity of those numbers. We have cultivated a niche market with 68 branches only selling in Auckland and Northland; we don't touch the rest of New Zealand. We know our market and know our clients."

Apart from developing that niche market, Barfoot & Thompson's rare business model, which evolved almost organically, has not only provided enormous incentives for established employees but attracts dozens of applicants wanting to join the company. The company's managers and salespeople are all independent contractors, with the managers remunerated on the basis of profit share. If they excel, they are rewarded with a significant percentage of the profit, whereas if they

don't perform, they pay back the same percentage of the loss. Sales are operated differently as well, with listings open to all agents in every branch. Once a listing is entered into the system, it belongs to Barfoot & Thompson, enabling any agent from any office to grab it, sell it, and earn the commission. Another distinguishing feature of the company is its cultural diversity. "We have about 1,800 salespeople born in about 55 different countries and speaking one or more of about 80 languages and dialects," Wendy says. "While that cultural diversity is one of our greatest strengths, at the same time, it's one of our greatest challenges because we need to understand that diversity and accommodate the needs of that cross-cultural dynamic."

Wendy's passion for real estate was triggered by her early recognition that the industry offered the perfect avenue for her skills in public speaking, management and organising. With 18 years in the industry already under her belt, she started with Barfoot & Thompson as a training manager before being elevated to general manager and business development manager. Two decades later as CEO, she's still exploring growth opportunities for the company, but also travels the world training staff, coaching business development, and telling the Barfoot & Thompson story.

Although Wendy has no problem captivating an audience and sharing tips on how to operate a real estate business, she realised early on that selling property was not her forte. She prefers the operational side, admitting she likes to move more quickly than the weeks, or months, needed to groom and process a sale.

"They say if you have the gift of the gab, you can sell anything to anyone. Well, no, you can't," she says. "I have listed and sold properties. It was important that

"It's an exceptional story. I consider myself so privileged to work here."

I get that experience, but I don't like it. It's not what I do best. It takes a special talent, and I have enormous respect for the sales people who have that talent.

"Sure, they are well-renumerated, but they earn nothing if they don't get a result. I watch the good ones sell and I could not be more impressed. The discipline needed around that whole process of sale and negotiation is special. It's just not me."

Wendy prefers to use her strengths to help run the business by focusing on how to constantly fine-tune, expand and improve it. Her complete overview of the company and its ongoing success is what drives her to continue to share Barfoot & Thompson's unique story and business model with others.

"It's an exceptional story; I consider myself so privileged to work here," she says. "I'm happy going anywhere and sharing the story of who we are and what we achieve. I just love talking about the company and giving tips to others."

The story that Wendy tells goes back to 1923 when Val Barfoot bought a tiny, rundown land agency for just £75 in the southern Auckland suburb of Newmarket. He called it V Barfoot Land Agent, until joined by his brother Kelland a year later when it was renamed Barfoot Bros. A decade later, the brothers were joined by Maurice Thompson and the company became Barfoot & Thompson in 1940. From there, the company grew to become Auckland's market leader, expanding to include property management and more recently strata management. Only family members can earn a directorship with the company, a privilege that has to be earned and can take up to 20 years.

"This will always remain a family company; it's not going to change. I can name up to five potential family members coming into the company and I couldn't be happier about that," Wendy says. "Every single family member who aspires to a directorship has to start at the front desk. >>

"Our relationship with Barfoot & Thompson has spanned 55 years, and at the heart of this has been the consistent themes of a true partnership – honesty, integrity and transparency, with the common goal of making a real difference in our communities. It's a brand we're proud to be associated with."
– Geoff Stewart, Corporate Partner, Bank of New Zealand



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Barfoot & Thompson CEO Wendy Alexander with Managing Director Peter Thompson.

They've got to do property management, sell, manage, and learn every aspect of the business. There is no nepotism."

There are six family members currently working with the company — three holding directorships. Peter Thompson, a grandson of Maurice, is managing director having started out in the industry more than 33 years ago, and moving through various positions in sales, administration and management before being made a director in 1997. Kiri Barfoot, a third-generation family member, is a director who joined the company in 1991, starting in the accounts department and working up to become a branch manager. And then there's Garth.

The youngest son of founder Val Barfoot, 80-year-old Garth is the longest-serving member of the team. He joined as a junior in the accounts office, becoming a director in 1968. He is a former president and life member of the Auckland branch of the Real Estate Institute of New Zealand. However, it's his life away from the office that attracts the attention these days, where the patriarch of Barfoot & Thompson is more often seen in Lycra than in a three-piece suit. For more than 30 years he's competed in triathlons, and in 2015 he was inducted as a Life Member of Tri NZ in recognition of his contribution to the

"I am 100 per cent committed to the brand, and intensely loyal. It just works."

sport. "He's amazing; absolutely incredible," Wendy says. "He competes all around the world. Last year he travelled to four countries to enter as many world championships as he could. He's an inspiration to us all. But both families offer something different. They are hugely competent. It's really quite humbling to be a part of — an amazing experience."

Although not a family member, there's no doubt Wendy feels enormously valued by both the Barfoot and the Thompson families. She was deeply honoured to be recognised in the Barfoot & Thompson Hall of Fame, which was established in 2008 to recognise employees who go above and beyond in their contribution to the company. Wendy was acknowledged for her research and development, company strategy, customer relations, training and resources.

"I started off as their training manager and then went from there to general

manager, and then business development manager. I never wanted to be a director," Wendy explains. "I'm one of those people who just gets on with it. I have no aspirations to be anything more than that. I am 100 per cent committed to the brand, and intensely loyal. It just works."

Although Barfoot & Thompson is becoming increasingly recognised on the world stage, there's no push to expand its business patch beyond Greater Auckland and Northland. Auckland, like most major cities around the world, is the go-to destination for migrants and New Zealanders alike. However, as the city continues to go up and out, and the expectations of new residents, particularly those from overseas, need to be met, new strategies are needed to deliver the transformation.

"The provinces have limited appeal," explains Wendy. "Auckland is where the jobs are, where people are prepared to cope with traffic, limited infrastructure,

and all of the frustrations of any big city in the world. They choose Auckland, which means, of course, they have to live somewhere. "Naturally, it's changing. We're seeing differences in how people choose to live, and our apartment market is becoming more appealing and more buoyant," she adds. "We've grown up with the quarter-acre mentality with a bit of grass for the children to run, and yes, it's sad to see apartment blocks going up in what have been traditionally residential leafy streets. The world we are passing on to the next generation is going to look very different from the one we've enjoyed. But a lot of people are moving into or retiring to apartments and finding it's not that bad."

Immigration is another driving force altering the face of Auckland, with a significant percentage of immigrants expected to settle there over the next three decades. Not only are apartments usually the preferred accommodation; >>

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— Pat Houllhan, General Manager, Property Press

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the priorities for what's offered inside are also different. This has encouraged Barfoot & Thompson to not only work with developers but also to create its own body corporate structure to enhance its property management business.

"If you want the benefit of people coming to Auckland and supporting the economy, you have to build the sorts of developments that appeal to them," Wendy says. "They prefer apartments. And where we've advocated for years that a good-quality kitchen and bathroom are the most important rooms in the house, this is no longer the case. They are happy eating down the road, three times a day. It's not going to be easy.

"Our jobs will be challenging in real estate to make all these new residents comfortable," Wendy admits. "But they all have to live somewhere, and we want to be involved. It will probably mean we are going to open up another six branches in the foreseeable future."

Surprisingly, with Wendy constantly looking at solutions to improve and expand the business, she's not a huge fan of technology and its role in the evolution of selling real estate. She's often asked how technology has impacted the world of real estate, and her answers often surprise. "It's one of my favourite questions," she laughs. "I'm an absolute advocate and supporter of progress and growth in technology, but as far as this industry is concerned, technology is a tool; it doesn't replace people. The relationship between us and the client is the critical component of our business and that will never change.

"Our clients may find us via an internet search, but ultimately they need somebody to help them make the deal. For the average New Zealander, up to 95 per cent of equity is tied up in real estate. That is a hugely emotional and personal issue, and they want a real person, whether they're selling or buying, to help them get across the



"The marriage of the business we run with the community in which we operate cross-pollinates beautifully."

line. No amount of technology can help with that."

Barfoot & Thompson has not only helped hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders get across that line; it has also homed generations of the same family. There would be nothing odd about a grandchild of the Barfoot & Thompson family selling real estate to the grandchild of a favoured client.

"There are people who have never left Auckland who all know us," Wendy says. "We have fourth-generation family members working in our company and

client relationships that have continued for four generations. It's so interesting to hear the stories about grandfathers and the homes they bought or sold through us. They are wonderful stories, and it's exciting to be a part of that."

Just in case there is anyone left in Auckland or Northland who has never bought or sold a home through Barfoot & Thompson, surely everyone has at least heard of the company. For decades it has sponsored or assisted clubs, schools and charity events, including the Starship Foundation, World Masters Games and Auckland Rugby.

"The community is our family and we are very much a part of it," Wendy says. "The marriage of the business we run with the community in which we operate cross-pollinates beautifully. We walk the talk with our employees as well. Every few years, we take all of our staff, including their extended family, to somewhere like the zoo. We take it over after 5pm until it closes late at night. Sometimes that's more than 5,000 people turning up: grandparents, grandchildren, aunties, uncles — they are all welcome and they are all valued."

As much as Wendy herself is valued by the company, she is cognisant she is at the pointy end of her near-40-year career in real estate. She is the regional director for the Real Estate Institute of New Zealand representing Auckland, Northland and Coromandel, a fellow of the Institute, and an active member of NZ Realtors. Real estate is her passion, Barfoot & Thompson her love. What would make a determined and exceptionally talented woman retire?

"The answer is very simple," she says. "I want to leave while I'm still on a high and still adding value. I have no intention of working past my use-by date. I'm extremely excited about spending more time with my family and my four grandchildren. But until then, I will never stop giving back to this industry. My loyalty to it and to Barfoot & Thompson will continue until the day I walk out the door." ■

"I would describe Barfoot & Thompson as the absolute professional business partner for every commercial aspect. It creates unprecedented partner loyalty in a fast and high-volume market. Wendy asserts excellence, making the company unchallenged, established market leaders."
— Don Matheson, Associate Director, ABC Photosigns

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