

# Michael Schaper

## Small business owners have been given a strong new voice and advocate with the appointment of Dr Michael Schaper as a deputy chairman of the ACCC.

Changes to the Trade Practices Act now require the commission to include a deputy chair with small business experience, and the former ACT Small Business Commissioner has been appointed to the role.

Despite a slowing national economy, the former Curtin University academic, researcher and small business expert is positive about the future, and says nurturing a healthy small business sector is about more than just economic activity.

'Small business isn't just about people doing a small business activity – it's about people's lives, their hopes, and their dreams.

'It's about what they want to achieve for themselves, their children and their families. It's a chance for entrepreneurs to make a lasting contribution not only for their own benefit, but also the benefit of the community.'

As a former small business owner, Dr Schaper understands the immense pressure that can be exerted on small businesspeople and says one of the best ways to assist them is to provide a strong, functional set of laws that everyone can understand.

'We should remember that the Trade Practices Act as a whole is primarily a pro-small business piece of legislation. In fact, some people have argued if you didn't have that Act it would be very difficult to have a successful small business sector in Australia. We'd have cartels running riot and we'd have large firms continually using their power to dominate small firms or push them out of existence.'

Every year, the ACCC receives around 3000 queries from small businesses. About 40 per cent of those are requests for information, while the other 60 per cent are about more substantial issues.

'That's still not a very large number out of two million-odd businesses, so we want to extend our reach to ensure more businesses are aware of their rights and obligations under the Act.'

Finding out about legal obligations to customers or the limits of dealing with competitors can slip down the list of priorities for business owners with typically busy workloads.

'There are times when small business operators don't deal with an issue until it becomes a problem. By and large we are structured in such a way that when people come to us and they've got a problem and they are genuine, they will find we are keen to help. It doesn't mean the law won't be followed,



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but ACCC staff tend to approach things with a positive and sensitive approach to the situations small businesses find themselves in.

'We all want to ensure that everyone is given a fair go. We need to make sure the frameworks and laws we set up not only achieve that but help business people to be successful.'

He says many small business owners are surprised when they learn of the extensive support that is available. The ACCC has a proactive outreach program designed to educate business owners and includes a dedicated small business hotline (1300 302 021), and a range of information on the website [www.accc.gov.au](http://www.accc.gov.au).

'We also provide information to the network of business advisors across Australia, so that if you do have a question you should be able to get in touch with someone fairly easily who can give you a clear answer.'