

# Top executive replays time at channel's helm

Under Chris Wharton's watch, TVW overcame serious challenges and scaled new heights to become the top metropolitan station in Australia.



Chris Wharton

**C**hris Wharton's time as managing director of TVW was, he admits, the best of times and the worst of times. Under his leadership, Channel 7 won every ratings survey and was the dominant television performer in Perth. So much so, he suggests, that his Seven counterparts on the other side of the country were, initially, often plainly resentful.

But a counterpoint to that success was the economic rationalism of networked TV, which made it necessary for him to oversee a tough round of redundancies. Jobs simply disappeared, and staff had to go too.

"I think we handled it as well as we could," he said. "We helped with advice, for instance, for people who wanted to start their own businesses, and several have gone on to be very successful."

It was the time, too, when, as another example of networking, Seven's putting to air of news stories was done from Melbourne and, oh heavens, it was the time when, after fierce negotiations, the rights to the AFL coverage moved to the Nine Network. As a result, Dennis Cometti walked into his office one evening and handed him a letter of resignation, signalling his desire to follow his love and move with those wretched rights to Channel 9.

To seal their continuing friendship, despite the rivalry, Cometti suggested they have a drink: "All I had in the fridge was some old Swan Gold, which had been out of production for a couple of years," Mr Wharton said. "But I thought in jest, 'Oh well, he's leaving — it doesn't matter if I poison him now'." Subsequently, of course, Seven regained the rights and an unpoisoned Cometti returned.

The TVW that Mr Wharton controlled was indisputably part of a network and a long way from the independent

operation set up by Sir James Cruthers. It was a long way, too, in terms of technology, as shown by the 24-hour, continuous coverage which TVW, in consultation with other stations, mounted after the Twin Towers attacks in 2001.

"I immediately put a CNN feed to air," he said. "I didn't even know if I was permitted to do that. We spoke as a network every hour, deciding how to continue the coverage. The whole news team rallied, as they do both in television and in print, and did everything that needed to be done."

The Twin Towers vision remains one of the most potent examples of how far the medium has travelled in its journey to provide instant and exhaustive coverage of an event that united the world.

So too, the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. The Seven Network, like all others, covered her funeral live, and he recalls his admiration for Susannah Carr's contribution to the coverage, a contribution that was widely complimented at the time.

For him, one of the bonuses of being part of a network was the presence of David Leckie at the top of the Seven Network tree. He had left the Nine Network to join Seven and, says Mr Wharton, not only did he take Seven to the top but he showed it how to win.

"He is a very good chief executive who let everyone do their job." And he has a special place in Mr Wharton's heart for his naming of TVW as one of the top three stations in Australia. His faith was rewarded when, in Mr Wharton's last three years with TVW, it was the top-performing metropolitan station in Australia.

Another highlight for him was the fact that, despite staff cuts and pressure on budgets, TVW managed to keep its public face stable. The newsreaders Rick Ardon and Susannah Carr, Today Tonight presenter Monika Kos, veteran weatherman Jeff Newman — as far as the public was concerned, they were there nightly and nothing changed.

Mr Wharton, a newspaper man before moving into television, is now chief executive of WA Newspapers Ltd and the firm and historic bond between the two organisations is back to where it began, 50 years ago. **7**