



# From Concept to Market

*Liz Donnelly*

**Liz Donnelly takes us through her journey to bring us Eardrop's Journeys. Fun audio CDs for preschool-aged children.**

**L**ate last year I released two audio CDs that launched a new Kiwi preschool brand. Like most start-ups, I worked full-time at a day job while I developed *Eardrop's Journeys* at night – for over two and a half years. With a background in children's media and television, but with no real business experience, in traditional Kiwi 'number eight wire' fashion, I learnt how to swim by leaping off the high dive board. I now have lines on my face that weren't there the last time I looked closely, but the experience of turning my abstract idea into an actual preschool brand has been staggering – on countless levels.

*Eardrop's Journeys* fills an empty niche in the preschool market. These fun

audio CDs teach everyday New Zealand sounds and help develop listening skills in young children. The brand foundation is 'learning through listening' and the disc layout is a new format. Children are taught thirty common sounds and early language concepts as they listen to the CDs.

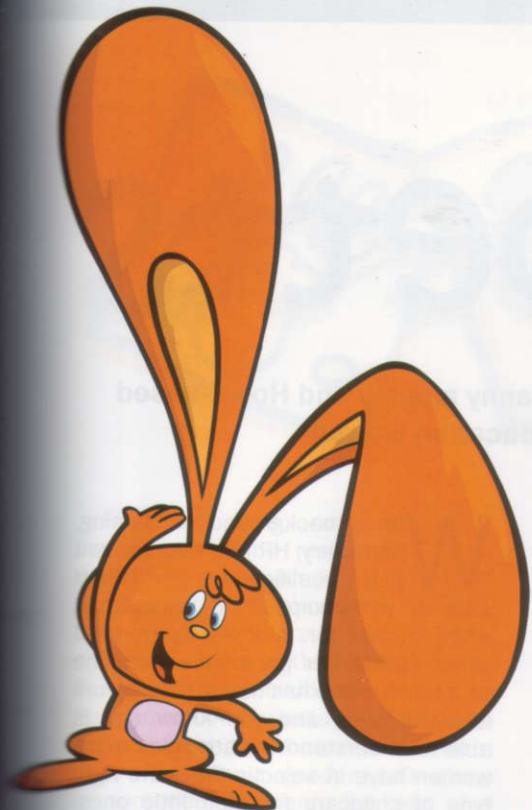
The idea arose one day whilst my two year old son and I were stuck in traffic on Auckland's harbour bridge. Tom kept asking me to repeat the noises of the animals in his book. I was doing a particularly enthusiastic monkey and glanced out the window only to find other drivers were enjoying it too. I was grateful when the traffic started moving again.

This got me thinking. Why were there no simple lists of sounds for preschoolers? My son was suffering from glue ear. Not only would he love something that told him the sounds

of his favourite animals; hearing them clearly would help him recognise them. Surely other children would appreciate this too? Glue ear or not – every mother I knew with a two year old boy quickly got up to speed on diggers, bulldozers, steamrollers and 'fascinating' machines!

I set out to make a fun listening product that would create and inspire learning in our Kiwi children. A child arriving at school benefits from having an ability to listen – but this is taught, not inherent. I have an interest in media and have always been into preschool learning – what takes place in the first three years really sets up for life. Like most mothers, I want New Zealand-made products that reflect my child's world – via sounds, culture and images – as they grow. Children gain a sense of security and firm footing in this world.





Before I did anything, I made sure that nobody else was packaging sounds like this. After six months research (with help from a strategic marketer), I knew that there was nothing similar out there. There are a lot of wonderful children's products around, but none that start with auditory learning as their base. After months deciding on a name 'The Eardrops Company' was born. The brand name had to appeal to parents and children, and it had to be easy for preschoolers to say. 'Eardrops' (drops of sound) was perfect. Now I had something to trademark. I brought on AJ Park Law Firm to protect my Intellectual Property. The project remained confidential; everyone I hired signed non-disclosure agreements – right up until the products were launched.

Things solidified from here. Still working mainly at night, I created a host, Eardrop the bunny, drawn by Brent Chambers at Flux Media, and workshoped my scripts with educators to ensure the language used fitted with Te Whaariki - the early learning curriculum. The website ([eardrops.co.nz](http://eardrops.co.nz)) was developed as a further resource for parents wanting their children to practise listening skills – as well as a direct selling and marketing platform. There is great opportunity online for direct downloads, as a feedback mechanism, and an Eardrops Club that children and caregivers can interact with.

Part of the challenge is keeping up with the technology! I brought on one of New Zealand's best sound engineers to ensure audio quality. (He's also my cousin and is the voice of 'The Farmer' on *Sounds of the Country*). I have always been adamant that any product I created would be competitive alongside overseas mass-produced brands. I enjoyed the way everyone I worked with took my base designs and transformed them into something spectacular. The character and graphic design, the recording of the sounds and theme tune composition are all top quality.

**My bank balance was rapidly dwindling, but I knew I was going to be first-to-market with this simple interactive product. Children it was tested on were in raptures. And, surprisingly, older ones enjoyed the 'demos' too. I thought a three year old would be about the top age but found that four year olds loved the CDs too. I made small tweaks right up until the CDs were mastered in keeping with the feedback. I was creating something really worthwhile for our New Zealand children. I knew this.**

When *Eardrop's Journeys* launched at the Parent & Child Show, it was fantastic to see little kids racing towards the stage literally stop in their tracks, jaws dropped, listening to the sounds coming from my stall. Parents were so enthusiastic and positive about this new New Zealand product. There are not many educational resources around available through consumer avenues that can be used in the home. (And the last thing busy parents need is another complicated item on the shelf!) It was a great beginning. And, a week later, New Zealand Trade and Enterprise approved an enterprise grant, having previously turned me down. (NB: never take 'No' for an answer.)

This positive energy remains and strengthens as more people discover the CDs. There is a solid female network in our country. Women contact me with sales avenues, to tell me which sounds their child loves, with comments for the future and queries about where Eardrop is hopping to next. And he can go anywhere. I'm in production with more 'learning through listening' products. The next Eardrop's Journeys learning tools are two bright boardgames – one to accompany each CD. The CDs are in quite a few homes, preschools and retail outlets - Smith & Caughey just came on board.

It has been a huge learning curve bringing this brand to market. But I believe that it needed to be made. It's something I'm proud of, with real value for our New Zealand preschoolers.

By Liz Donnelly

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## Eardrop's Journeys

- 1** Ensure the uniqueness of your idea. The research period takes time and money and is essential.
- 2** Protect your Intellectual Property. Non-disclosure agreements are great until you are legally protected, even if only for your peace of mind.
- 3** In some cases, 'No' is not actually 'No'. A second attempt using a different approach can work.
- 4** Show rather than tell – a demo or sample makes it easier for people to 'get' what you're talking about.
- 5** Ensure interactivity if you're selling direct to customers. A quality online presence that extends your brand is essential, as is a freephone number.
- 6** Hire people who excel in areas you don't. One person cannot do everything well.