ABRN

Wednesday, Feb 1, 2006

E-mail This Page

Elite collision

May 1, 2004
By: Chris Kemp
Automotive Body Repair News

When they couldn't find the right computer management system, the Elite Collision team built their own.

David Schultz has never been afraid to take risks, but he admits he had second thoughts about opening his own shop in the ultra-competitive Tempe, Ariz., market.

"Starting from scratch is always scary," he admits, "but I'm a hard worker, and I figured why not make the effort for myself?"
In 1997—after seven years as a technician and body shop manager, and another seven in the insurance industry—he struck out on his own with the help of associate and expert refinisher Brent VanderPol. They opened a 5,000-sq. ft. body shop in a strip mall.

The pair toiled side by side until they added a body technician three months later. Schultz's initial fears notwithstanding, the enterprise built momentum and grossed $766,000 its first year.

SNAPSHOT

Name and Location: Elite Collision Center, Tempe, Ariz.
Owners: David Schultz and Brent VanderPol
Years in Business: Eight
Size: 26,000 sq. ft. with an additional 7,400 sq. ft. for its mechanical operation.
Volume: About 145 vehicles per month
Gross Annual Sales: $3 million (body shop only)
Employees: 20
Equipment Highlights: Two downdraft spray booths, two heated prep stations for refinishing, three frame racks, two computerized measuring systems, two computerized estimating systems and a computerized management system.

"Attracting business was a concern in the beginning, but I had worked at two insurance companies and knew a lot of agents," he says. "Brent had a solid reputation as a craftsman, which resulted in some carry over, plus we've always made a big push to build relationships with fleet account and automotive claims managers."

By 2002, business and staff had outgrown the old building, prompting Schultz to commit to construction on a 26,000-sq. ft., state-of-the-art facility with a separate mechanical service business, American Car Center. Again, it was a matter of Schultz building from the ground up and not looking back.

"Like most body shops, we did only a small amount of mechanical repair ourselves," Schultz explains. "We'd sublet stuff like suspension work, alignments and electrical, but decided to take the work on ourselves so we could better manage repair timelines and hire personnel specific to our needs."

The decision to enter into mechanical service has worked out well, as last year's sales figure of $1.3 million attests. But it is Schultz's latest "from scratch" undertaking that may be his most notable—and in its own way, his riskiest. With the help of his team and a dedicated software engineer, he has helped design and implement a management system. Oddly enough, an old-fashioned white board provided the inspiration.

In the old facility, Elite staff listed jobs and updated status manually on a white board that hung in a central location. Easy viewing wasn't an option in the new building. Staff had grown by 25 percent, work volume was rising and the spacious interior spread out personnel. "We needed to get job statuses, delivery dates, and production reports in front of people," Schultz notes. "Technology was the only answer."

Schultz investigated existing systems but was less than impressed. It was more than the commonly cited drawbacks of such systems—difficulty of use, inability to address individual shop workflow and over-reliance on employee input (and therefore, vulnerability to human error). Schultz and company wanted to control, not be controlled, by a system.

Schultz sat down with his staff and in a series of meetings analyzed every major aspect of the operation, from ideal workflow to job duties. Once they mapped everything out, they hired a software engineer to make the system a reality.

The resulting system is a far cry from a white board, with sophisticated production and scheduling features that call out job statuses and delivery times in clear, color-coded terms. Elite's service writers are key figures, acting as job runners, making sure the appropriate customer and vehicle information is entered into the system and tracking the job through the entire process.

In addition to tracking work flow and managing delivery dates, Elite's system includes the ability to import estimate information, order and track parts, manage payroll for technicians and more.

The system has worked so well, and generated such positive word of mouth, that Schultz is marketing it to other shops. If becoming a software entrepreneur seems a bit of a stretch for a body shop owner, it's probably best not to bet against Schultz and his "can do" attitude. After all, he says taking on challenges is what he likes best about his job.

An Open Door into the Operation

Like many of his fellow professionals, David Schultz taps into the power of the Internet to reach out to customers. In Schultz's case, it's more than a matter of marketing and visibility.

"We're trying to make the Web site as much of an extension of Elite Collision Center as we can—like an open door into the operation," Schultz states.

"Customers—both vehicle owner and insurer—should get a clearer view of what's happening, which in turn builds their trust in us."
The company Web site, www.elitecollision.net, engages customers several ways and to varying degrees. It provides a virtual "Shop Tour" allowing "access" to the metal shop, refinish department and front office. Sets of pictures of each area are accompanied by user-friendly text that interprets what is shown, educates the customer on the details of a safe, quality repair and describes available services.

Insurance company personnel can access an account of their own at the site by entering a unique username and password. Here they may access the status of their assigned repairs, as well as photos and a file containing customer feedback for a particular repair. "Insurers need to manage their repair cycle times efficiently and

stay on top of job progress," says Schultz. "Here we can provide information 'on-demand' for them, which is the most efficient, least labor intensive way."
Perhaps the most personal aspect of the Web site for the vehicle owner is a feature called "Check Vehicle," a cyber-album of photos that allows the customer to view his or her vehicle as it progresses through the stages of repair.

As one might expect, this photographic essay contains several views from several angles of the vehicle in complete teardown. Schultz had reservations about doing this at first, but is glad he did.

"I wondered if the customer would get upset when they saw how deconstructed the vehicle gets and how naked the understructure looks," he recalls. "But that hasn't been the case. It's actually turned into a positive, because vehicle owners are impressed with the intricacy and precision that goes into a repair. If they have questions or concerns, they can click on the picture of their service writer...and send an e-mail."

Web development continues, with plans to include additional features in the future.

Print

About the Author

Chris Kemp
Contributing Editor
About Chris Kemp
See more articles by Chris Kemp

Order Reuse Permissions
RIGHTSLINK()