

iATN Remains Valuable Technician Resource

by Chris Hafner

As the influx of computer technology has changed automotive systems and the automotive repair trade, so have new technologies allowed technicians to do their jobs better and more quickly. While many electronic tools are provided by the automakers, the International Automotive Technicians' Network (iATN) has helped pool technicians' knowledge in the interest of higher-quality repairs, said Brent Black, founder and president of iATN.

The service, which now reaches 48,500 technicians from 135 countries, was launched in 1995 as an e-mail discussion group between 50 technicians to discuss new technology and difficult repair problems, Black said.

"It's a huge peer knowledge-sharing network," Black said. "The repair industry has historically been isolated, and technicians are even more isolated. It's tough for them to interact with each other, but this allows them to talk to other people about issues they're all dealing with. You could spend 24 hours a day reading the information on this site and learning more about automotive systems and repair."

iATN has grown into a complete Web service incorporating not only user forums but live Web conferencing on both general and specific topics, with other technicians as well as manufacturer, industry, and government professionals; a searchable knowledge base with more than a million archived posts; a wave-form library with more than 11,500 available images; and TechMail, an in-depth technical assistance request and advice e-mail service that generates more than 12 million e-mails a day, Black said.

The members of iATN are screened to ensure that the experience is valuable for all participants, Black said.

"The expectation originally was that you be a working professional with four years of experience or ASE

certification," he said. "That's still the criteria to join, along with a working e-mail address."

The experience requirements and the fact that the more intellectually curious technicians tend to take the initiative to join means that there is a wealth of information, Black said.

"The members enjoy the process of learning from their peers and sharing what they know," he said. "Some of the members participate primarily in technical discussion instead of asking for technical help. They'll discuss new systems and how they work. There's something for every level of technician."

"I believe the people on iATN are trying to improve themselves, and that separates them. The forums also give them a chance to discuss some of the issues facing the industry. The bottom line is that the combined experience of our members is one million years. I don't care how good you are; there is someone on this group who can teach you more about any given topic."

"I don't think for a second that this is a replacement for ongoing technical education and regular information sources and tools, but this is a great way to tap into other people's experience."

Networking with peers on iATN is also not a replacement for a thorough repair effort; in fact, the service restricts the volume of help requests to help limit the devaluation of the service for the more experienced technicians, Black said.

"If you start asking questions that are readily available in most shops, other members will be irritated because you're wasting their time," Black said. "We assume that you work in a professional shop and are fully equipped."

"To make sure members aren't using iATN as a replacement for the tools and information available in the shop, we put a severe limit on how many times people can ask for help in the technical help center. New people can ask for help three times each month in the system. If they abuse the system and don't do their homework, their rating goes down, and they are able to ask fewer and fewer questions."

While iATN accepts banner advertising, 90 percent of the site's income

comes from members who have upgraded from free status to sponsorship status, which gives the user access to the full site, Black said. Sponsorship status costs \$10 a month for a technician and \$20 a month for a shop and gains the user access to the searchable forum archives, TechNight live chat transcripts, TechMail archives, and the wave form library, he said.

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