

It's Not All Doom and Gloom

COLUMN BY CHRIS THOMPSON

I hate to hear people put our industry down. Maybe it's because this business is all I know, or maybe it's because I love what I do, and can't imagine doing anything else. But whatever the reason, I think that negative people are totally wrong.



Most likely everyone that runs a small business today is facing all the same problems we are. We are not the only ones that have to deal with less expensive imports coming into the market, we are not the only people that have the huge chain merchandisers selling at or just a few points above our cost. Look at the hardware stores, the mom and pop general stores, the independent parts stores, the independent grocery stores, and the list goes on and on. Everyone is facing the same problem, so we are not in this alone.

Well, here is where I have to throw my two cents in. Yes, they may have cheaper pricing, they may have the huge spotless stores—but one thing they do not have is personal customer service. Some people might say that doesn't mean a whole lot. But how many times have you found yourself going to the local hardware store because you could walk in, get greeted with a smile, and be asked, "How may I help you?" And you tell the salesperson what you are looking for, and he walks you to the place where it is, and that is exactly what you need. Or how about when you have a problem, and you ask him a question, and he can answer it for you?

You always get what you pay for, and to a lot of people that is worth extra. Sure we could all sell our starters and alternators cheaper if we didn't have the most expensive test equipment in town, and if we didn't spend the money for the latest tools, and stay on top of what was new in the market, and also what is old.

How many times has a customer come into your shop and said, "I hope

you can get me going, you're the third place I have been to." They finally come to you because they have wasted their time and effort everywhere else. They want it fixed, and money is almost no object at this point. But the point is, they want it fixed properly, so they brought it to you. No doubt someone told them they can get it fixed right at your place, so you have a name to uphold. You have to be the best at what you do, and you need to stay on top of what you do, you need to be the professional in your industry, and most important of all you need to charge for what you do.

Don't sell yourself short. You need to be paid a decent price for the quality services and parts that you have installed in their unit or on their vehicle. You need to make a profit. Just because the super chain auto parts store down the street is so much cheaper, doesn't mean you have to try to compete with them on price. You can compete in many different ways.

Yes, there are many changes coming our way. Fifteen years ago we didn't have to compete with the OEMs, but we purchased good quality parts from them to repair their units that lasted like they should have, and when we made a good, solid repair, the unit would last just as long. But times have changed, and we must change with the times. Think of AT&T years ago. They sold long distance service from a land line, that was all they did. But when wireless came, what did they do? They purchased wireless companies and got in the wireless market. Bad idea?

No, I don't think so. They stayed alive in the marketplace, and they are still here today. If they would not have done so, they wouldn't exist today I am sure.

So at one point or another, every company is going to face the same problem we all face today—market change. We just have to adjust to the market if we want to stay alive. Yes, there is a market change going on right now, but do you think that makes me want to close the doors and give up? No. We have to find out what is going on, and get in gear and move forward. I don't have the perfect answer for the problem, but I know we all can't lie down and give up. I hear all the time it's doom and

gloom from some people, but if you preach it long enough, I guess people will finally believe it.

Let's look at a few positive sides that our industry has going for it that we didn't have 10 years ago.

Look at the Electrical Rebuilder's Association. It is a great place to trade ideas, talk to other rebuilders daily, locate very rare and hard to find parts, ask questions, get answers, get up-to-date training on the latest and even some of the older stuff that's out there. With the Internet, all this is made possible.

This is a great tool that everyone should use. I use it daily. Sometimes I may not always make a post, but I read other rebuilder's problems, and the solutions, and maybe one day it will come in handy. It has several times already. I have had some of the oddest obsolete stuff come in the door, posted it on the forum, and within minutes located that rare and obsolete part that I didn't think I would ever find. Can you imagine how that makes you look to your customer? You look like a hero.

I also advise people to attend the trade shows, and all the training seminars that you can. I know some think trade shows are just elbow rubbing, but it is not all that. Every time I have attended a trade show, I have come back with very valuable information, and it has always made us money and a profit. Yes, it costs a little bit to go, but it is worth what you put into it. It is also a great place to meet the vendors, and to get to know them on a face to face basis. Also remember you will only get out of your business what you put into it.

That goes for the training seminars also. If you have one even remotely close to you, I advise you to go, even if you attended one a few years ago. You will be surprised at the changes that have taken place. And even this newspaper is a great paper to read, and a source for technical information. All of these tools are an asset to us, and we need to take advantage of everything we can get.

Another thing we can look at is changing the way we do business. Remember, it's not the same as it was 15 years ago. I don't have the perfect answer for you again, but just look at the way you are doing business, and see if you

think you can improve it in any way. You know your own business, and you know what works and what doesn't work. If it's working, there may even be a way to improve it. I have always heard the saying, "Don't fix it if it's not broken." But can you make it work better? I know it's very easy to criticize someone else, but it's hard to look closely at yourself.

I am as guilty as the next person, but we must realize what we need to do. We need to listen to every customer complaint, and chances are if you hear the same thing more than once, there is something wrong that you need to fix. Most customers do not complain, they just go somewhere else. I love to hear someone complain. It doesn't make me mad, it makes me want to improve on it so the next person doesn't have that complaint. Do you think these large companies ever follow up on a complaint? Probably very few and far between. So we are small enough to take advantage of the larger companies on this issue.

Just remember not to take it to heart, and always think that the person that just complained also just helped you.

As far as all the import products coming from overseas, well, there is not much we can do about that. I hate it as much as the next person, but it is here, and we must face it. We must learn to use it, and if there is a problem with the quality, you need to let your vendor know as soon as possible. There isn't much made here in the USA anymore, especially electrical parts. If you are having problems with a particular product, whether it's made overseas or even here in the U.S., you need to speak up, tell your vendor that this product doesn't even come close to OE specs and also let them know why. If you get enough people complaining, something will be done.

I don't think the end is anywhere near for the electrical rebuilders. Yes, I have seen some go out of business, but these are the same people that didn't grow or change with the industry. We all need to stick together in this. Remember that we are professionals, and we need to share what we have learned with others. And most importantly, we need to stay up with the changes. Every

rebuilder has faced this problem in the past years. I wasn't around, but I wonder what rebuilders were thinking when the alternator came out. I bet they were scared to death.

I can remember when the throwaway CS130 came to our door. I thought, a throwaway alternator, man, what are we going to do? And just to think, that is was one of the most profitable alternators we have ever rebuilt.

Just don't let the new stuff scare you—stay on top, look forward, and think of ways to change your market plan. Don't let people tell you that you are in a shrinking business. If anything you are in a growing business. More and more engines have starter motors on them. Just look at all the small engines out there. Twenty years ago almost everything was kick start or pull start, now about every lawn mower has a starter motor on it. The boat market has grown, the jet skis, the motorcycle and four wheeler, all the small construction equipment that is out there, the list just goes on and on.

This is not a shrinking business, we just need to market things a little differently than we used to. I can remember when something odd came through the door years ago, we just sold them a new one. When the common stuff came in, we either rebuilt or exchanged it. Now I guess you could say its vice versa for most companies. We love that oddball, hard to get unit, because that's where we make most of our money, and that's where our biggest volume is.

The owner of a very profitable car dealership told me one day not too long ago, "If everyone made money selling cars, then everybody would be selling cars." I thought long and hard on that one, and he is right, there is a profession for everyone, and everybody can't make it in some things. But if you want to be successful in your industry, you need to stay on top of everything and anything that has to do with rebuilding. You have to want to be the best at what you do, and you have to earn it.

Let's face it, nobody is going to just hand you anything. So instead of talking about how bad things are, I think we all should make the best of what we have. Go after business that you do not have,

and let people know that your product isn't sold based on price alone, there is value to what you have, and yes, they are going to have to pay for the value. They are going to have to pay a little more for the quality and the service they are about to get.

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