

Third Generation Rebuilder Adjusts to Changing Times

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"Sell them everything they need, nothing they don't, and they'll buy all they can afford."

This nugget of family wisdom has been successfully handed down through three generations of rebuilders at American Battery and Electrical Services, Inc., located in Joplin, Mo. According to owner Jason Stephens, the business was founded in 1916 and then purchased by his dad and granddad as partners in 1962.

Stephens had no intention of joining the business and had begun working in the oil fields of Oklahoma when tragedy struck and changed his career course. His mother died suddenly in 1982 and he came home to help out—for a while.

"I was just gonna stay a few months. But before you knew it 20 years had passed," he said. His dad retired in 2000.

Although learning the ropes wasn't a big shock ("I'd been around it all my life."), Stephens said it still took a lot of effort to get up to speed with the business.

"I don't like to do anything I'm not proficient at and I don't think there's anything you can do too well," he said. "You've got to learn to do it right."

This professional attitude has resulted



Large enough and diverse enough to handle locomotives and drive-in automotive electrical, Jason Stephens and crew are also specialized enough for the antique starting and charging systems.

LAST SHOP STANDING



Having stood the test of time, American Battery and Electrical Services boasts three generations of rebuilding in a now very unpredictable market — attitude is everything.

in American Battery and Electrical Services becoming the last rebuilding shop standing in Joplin. Today their 7,500-square-foot facility houses four rebuilders along with a janitor and bookkeeper. His shop foreman has been with them for more than 20 years.

They do all kinds of rebuilding, "from 8 horsepower outboards to locomotives," including drive-in automotive electrical, which accounts for up to 40 percent of their business. Twenty percent of their work comes from OTR trucks—that piece of the pie has been eaten away by large reman programs.

"That used to be a lot bigger part of our business, but today the customer can buy cheaper than I can," he said. His biggest competition is truck shops and parts stores.

"Most of our work is specialty, geeky

stuff, like the 1916 Chevy starting and charging system we have right now. There's nobody else that can do it, and somebody who owns a 1916 Chevrolet can spend money on it," he said.

Today they are selling more units than ever, and Stephens said one key to staying in business is not to miss a sale. He said his dad and granddad used to have the "luxury" of choosing what they would work on—and they only did domestic.

"It's not a get rich deal. It's a whole lot tougher than it used to be. Twenty-four hour turnaround is key, but most small guys can't keep enough stock like we can," he said. "Of course you've got to learn to jump right in and sell just like everyone else."

Service after the sale is another area that has kept American Battery and Electrical Services going for nine decades.

"Customer service and integrity are important," said Stephens. "We make mistakes, but we just stand behind things and make things right."

The biggest challenge at American Battery and Electrical Services is keeping up with skyrocketing overhead—particularly health and liability insurance.

"All of the insurance burden is hard. For several years running it wasn't anything to get 15, 18, 22 percent increases, especially in healthcare insurance, although lately it seems to have leveled off," he said.

Stephens is convinced that changing technology such as hybrids will play a

part in ensuring the future of his business.

“I don’t know that it’s going to get any easier, but there’s always going to be a need for somebody that understands how things work. Just throwing pieces at it is never a good answer,” he said. “I just try not to worry about tomorrow or the next day.”

Good advice which seems to be working.