

Bringing Home (and Frying) the Bacon

Lady Rebuilders Remain a Novelty

By Traci Matt
Associate Editor

Recently a customer entered Detroit-area Knapp Auto Electric and handed the shop owner an alternator for testing. Knapp's owner confirmed it was not defective, but the customer was unsatisfied with the diagnosis.

"He then insisted on speaking to the 'guy,'" said Anna Knapp. "I called my husband up front and went into the back without saying a word. My husband tested the alternator, told him it was not defective, then asked him why he didn't believe me because I was the boss. We got a good laugh out of that one."

Indeed, Anna is well qualified to be the boss, although she uses a team management philosophy with her husband, Larry Knapp, daughter, Josie Lenning, and their friend and employee Michelle (Chelle) Lopes.

"When decisions are made, everyone's thoughts and opinions are taken into consideration and we usually vote on major decisions. Not one of us can really stand alone," said Anna.

Her career began at age 16 when her uncle introduced her to rebuilding. She went on to earn a bachelor's degree in business and was working as leader of

STILL EXCITED ABOUT REBUILDING



The Knapp gang (L to R) Larry, Anna, Josie and Chelle give Detroit rebuilders a run for their money.

the mill department in a Detroit machine shop when her husband opened their rebuilding business in 1994.

"He needed my help and that is how we became business partners," she said. "Larry's health started taking a bit of a decline several years ago and I had to step up to the plate."

This has included changes in daily responsibilities and advertising strategies—including her efforts at cold sales calls.

"Am I nervous, oh, yes. But after speaking with a few of the supplier reps, especially our J & N rep, I am convinced that we can never get comfortable. If we always act like the new kid on the block and constantly seek exposure with excitement about what we do

we'll be fine. It's when one gets too comfortable and puts all sales efforts aside that the next guy comes in and gets the business," she said.

Anna said her biggest challenge is avoiding "tunnel vision"—fighting to always be aware of what is going on around her.

"It is very easy to slip into this mode and just focus on the day-to-day business of taking care of what comes in our door. But when we do this, we lose track of what is going on in the rest of the world," she said. "Are there times when I would just love to come into the shop and grab a cup of coffee and sit at my desk and totally focus on my paperwork and nothing else? Yes. Are there days when I would just like to stand at my bench and do production building and not stop to troubleshoot or answer the phone or help solve a problem? Yes. But that is not our reality."

In reality, her day begins before dawn. She supervises the planning, scheduling, production and shipment of products. She works with customers, provides technical support, and has cross-trained employees in all aspects of the business, which is primarily automotive and industrial.

Larry maintains a specialized position in the company working with customers who have unique needs, such as generators or antique starters. He manages their extensive core inventory, comprised of vintage and late model products.



Knapp Auto Electric has the corner on the market in Hazel Park, Mich., as well as the market on the corner.

Office Manager Josie focuses on marketing and public relations functions. She has developed a customer satisfaction program which has improved overall customer service and resulted in increased patronage. A big part of her day revolves around communicating with industry leaders to keep current with technical issues and corresponding with customers on billing and service matters.

Josie said that although it's sometimes difficult to get mechanics to take her seriously ("yes, it does happen quite often"), as a woman she has the edge when it comes to relationship building.

"I have a very good family-like relationship with most of my established customers and they feel comfortable coming to me with questions and concerns about our services," said Josie. "It also makes them trust our company more than any other 'Joe Schmoe.'"

She does get a chuckle whenever she answers the phone and the caller automatically asks for the parts or service department.

The other female in the business, Chelle, has improved assembly processes for product, reducing assembly time by 30 percent and increasing production by as much.

"She has initialized and created quick reference charts for new products, enabling all of us easy access to materials knowledge," said Anna. "She has and continues to create test reference notes for cross training. She has also developed innovative ways to maintain test equipment, greatly increasing the life of our testers."

The Knapp team depends upon the rebuilding industry as a whole to keep them up to date.

"I consider my most valuable asset to be the information and continuing education I receive from my fellow rebuilders, suppliers and anyone else that allows me to pick their brain," said Anna. "The Internet brings us closer to strengthening our technical support. There is a wealth of information out there. Our industry forums are a solid bank account for us. We are constantly accessing them for information and support."

Although they have a high-tech Web site complete with an audio/video



Anna Knapp never rests on her laurels. "It really is by the grace of God and His guidance that all of these blessings have been bestowed upon us," she says.



Office manager Josie Lenning.



Chelle Lopes at her bench.

component, site feedback isn't what they initially expected (www.knappsautoelectric.com). They do have more customers these days who have found them on the Web than in the Yellow Pages.

Anna plans someday to pass the business on to Josie and Chelle, who have invested "time, energy, blood and sweat." This plan includes her retirement, but that hasn't completely crystallized in her mind yet.

"I think I would like to retire, but then I would probably miss it too much."