

Who you gonna call?

Tech resources still abound

By Traci Matt
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Most people from the X or Y generations would consider Amos Weaver an anomaly. Weaver, owner of Weaver's Starter & Alternator in Owen, Wisc., doesn't have Internet access at the shop or at home—and has no plans to ever get on the Net.

"Our church has decided it's something we don't need," he said. "There's just a lot of trash out there."

Weaver said he realizes the disadvantage he's at when he encounters a technical question that could be posted on an online rebuilding forum, and was pleased to learn that the Electrical Rebuilder's Association (ERA) had developed a technical help phone service.

"I had joined (ERA) when I first opened four years ago, but other than the newspaper it didn't really benefit me before because I didn't have Internet," said Weaver, who read about the ERA Technical Help Line in the *Exchange* last year. He had let his membership lapse but rejoined to take advantage of the new resource.

He now uses the service, which is manned by rebuilder Bob Thomas of B&H Electric in Orange Park, Fla., at least a couple times a month.

"It's a little of this and that," said Weaver. "Some things like if the unit doesn't have a part number, but I can see where I think it goes on. One time I got an engine in with no starter. He dug up the information and gave me a whole list of starters and we figured it out. He's faxed over wiring diagrams. Bob knows a lot of things."

The service, which is free as a part of ERA membership, is intended to fill the technical gap for rebuilders—still a whopping 25 percent of ERA members—who do not have Internet access at work.

"For them, the telephone is their only method of contact in real time," said Thomas, who has been taking calls for nine months, averaging 3.5 calls per day.

"We have had several rebuilders join specifically to have access to the help line. The calls run the gamut from simple to complex. On occasion I've even talked to the rebuilder's customer to figure out what was going on. It's a challenge that I enjoy most of the time.

"Sometimes I get lucky and know the answer right off the top of my head," said Thomas. "Sometimes it takes me a while to figure out what's going on. Sometimes I don't know enough about that particular unit or application and I have to do research or seek help from the other ERA technical committee members."

Last month, rebuilder Jason Kiser, owner of JK's Starter & Alternator Service in Palestine, Texas, had a question regarding a RV alternator that Thomas couldn't answer.

"This vehicle had a L-N and a DUVAC charging system," said Kiser. "I had never worked on one of these and was not familiar with how it worked."

When Thomas realized he was going to have to call in reinforcements, they got on the phone with ERA President Jim Thomas and had the question answered in a flash.

"I got the customer back on the road in just a couple of hours due to the ability to get the correct info. The customer was very impressed that I was able to fix their RV because they had been told by the RV dealer that they had to have a special alternator due to the DUVAC system and they were worried they would have to have it towed to a dealer," said Kiser.

Although Kiser is a frequent visitor to the online ERA forums, he said once in a while even a short delay will hurt business.

"The forum does a good job but sometimes it takes a few hours or so to get an answer. With the tech line I can get someone working on it right away," he said.

Industry veteran and ERA Trainer Joe Davis, owner of JDE, has fielded technical questions from rebuilders for years—and most of them still come over the phone.

"About three to four (questions come) a week and 90 percent come by phone at my home office," said Davis. "When I am on the road I get my messages every evening from my wife and I return the call the next day."

Davis said he's frequently asked about

specifications, how units come apart, and how to test alternators with specific types of regulators. He said it does get frustrating when a question is covered in an article on the ERA Web site or at one of the seminars, but the rebuilder refuses to join the association or attend his classes.

Another veteran rebuilder who spends time on the phone answering tough questions—ranging from technical, to financial, and even personal—is Glenn Cheaney. Cheaney offers free consulting to share the knowledge he's gained while working in the industry for more than 50 years. He says recently his tech inquiries mostly relate to antique generators or starters.

One of his most entertaining calls came from a rebuilder asking how to get a 590-type drive to retract. Cheaney was surprised to get such a question from a shop owner—even someone new to the business.

"I asked him, 'No slam intended but why don't you know this?' Before he could answer it hit me. 'You bought this shop because you looked at the people in this trade and said to yourself it can't be that hard,'" said Cheaney. "His former profession had something to do with electronics and he figured he had to be as smart as the rebuilder owners he had met. He said yes, that was basically the way he had looked at it. He agreed that it was a bit more difficult than he had anticipated."

Cheaney said he benefits greatly from the "daily exchange and technical dialogue" which takes place on remanforums.com.

"It is real time with hands-on rebuilders. Many are the best in our profession. There are also available in real time many of the senior tech people of the various manufacturers and vendors in our trade. I can see the vast experience and knowledge base that is there for the asking," said Cheaney.

Don't ignore supply-side support

One tech support expert who has a regular presence online is Northwest Regulator Supply's Technical Support Manager Rich Herrington—although 70 percent of his tech inquiries still come in by phone.

"About 40 percent of my time is spent fielding incoming questions," said Herrington. "The bulk of that time is used answering questions regarding tester or testing issues on our equipment. Probably 70 percent of the calls are from automo-

tive parts stores. This is a very important part of our customer service mission. Too bad there is not a monetary value you can put on this.”

He said most of his calls are related to their product, and the most common questions involve how to hook up alternators to test leads and which test leads to use. His funniest memory is from a call made by a parts store. Herrington explained how the conversation went:

“It was, ‘I just hooked up my new tester and only the starter side works. When I

turn the switch on nothing happens.’ To which I queried, ‘Have you checked your wall receptacle to be sure it is working?’ The reply, ‘Oh, is that what this cord is for?’”

Herrington said rebuilders must take advantage of any information available.

“In today’s world the rebuilder needs any and all resources they can lay their hands on. Imagine not having the ability to tap into JIMCO or Northwest Regulator to obtain testing information,” he said.

If you’ve spent any time with Juan Grube, you have probably seen him with a phone to his ear, patiently explaining the answer to a tech problem to someone on the other end of the line. Grube is the owner of JIMCO, Inc., a test equipment and electrical component manufacturer. His most common inquiry comes from rebuilders who can’t identify a part.

“He’s seeing something that he’s never seen before and there is no traditional resource for it, like a piece of industrial equipment that has a German air-cooled diesel motor and an alternator made in Italy,” he said.

He said the “neat” calls from rebuilders are the ones about something neither he nor the customer have ever seen before, especially if it’s a problem they can solve together.

“Rebuilding is detective work,” he said. “The best diagnostician has got to be someone who thinks like a detective, especially when there’s a third party involved, because a detective needs corroborating evidence.”

Phone contact is the only way you’ll catch Grube, who insists written correspondence is inadequate for technical issues.

“The question you are being asked is never the question. I have to ask 10 questions to one to get to the real issue,” he said.

Grube said many of his calls have nothing to do with things purchased from JIMCO, but his first priority is always to his own customers.

“I want to be a resource for the guy who bought something from me,” he said. “Guys who send me checks, I take their calls first.”

Rebuilder Bill Briner, owner of Bill’s Auto Electric in Savannah, Mo., and a longtime JIMCO customer, said Grube is the first place he turns when stumped by

alternator questions—especially advice on how to hook up “later stuff” to his JIMCO test bench.

Briner, who has been in business for 31 years, said he tackles all sorts of applications, from automotive to tractors to lawn mowers.

“You get some oddball stuff but we take pretty much anything that walks through the door. All this is getting pretty wild out there,” said Briner. “If I’ve got a problem with a car that’s acting up and just need a second opinion I might call him. He’s good.”

Briner does not have Internet access at his shop so he’s unable to tap into many of the online resources available for tackling some of his questions. He relies heavily on someone at JIMCO picking up the phone.

When asked to put a dollar value on Grube’s advice, Briner said it would be “big bucks.”

“He’s probably second only to my wife. He’s the main man,” he said.

Another tech expert with the phone to his ear is Richard Vensel, owner of Vensel Enterprises, who fields five to 10 inquiries a day from rebuilders. Only a fourth of his questions have anything to do with Vensel products.

His most common question is, “How do I make this work or solder this to this?” and his most frustrating question is, “Why does it work on my test bench and not on the vehicle?”

“No one wants to accept the fact that the only sure way to make sure a regulator will work in a specific vehicle is to match the regulator to the vehicle number and accessory package VIN number,” he said.

So from the Net to Ma Bell, from individual rebuilders to associations and suppliers, somewhere out there lies an answer to your question. Cheaney summed it up when he said: “With the rapid changes and interrelated components of our newest vehicles we rebuilders need all the help we can get. Basically I would recommend taking advantage of every resource available because knowledge is strength.”

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Where to turn when you’re stumped

The strengthening of the rebuilding community through the Internet, trade shows and association connections has resulted in a resource pool vastly different than it was even a dozen years ago. Whether you have Internet access or not, there are people to turn to when a technical issue seems to be getting the better of you.

- Electrical Rebuilder’s Association (ERA) offers phone and online tech support. Call the ERA office at (636) 584-7400 or go to electricalrebuilders.org to join.
- The Automotive Parts Remanufacturers Association (APRA) offers phone and online tech support. Call (703) 968-2772 or go to apra.org for more information.
- RemanForums.com is an online resource with discussions involving many types of rebuilding.
- Glenn Cheaney is a rebuilder with more than 50 years in the business who offers free consulting at (239) 821-6548.
- Joe Davis is a veteran industry trainer who may be reached at (610) 367-1756.
- Juan Grube, JIMCO, Inc., (816) 331-1917.
- Rich Herrington, Northwest Regulator Supply, (503) 235-1038, ext. 108, rich@nwreg.com.
- Richard Vensel, Vensel Enterprises, (815) 459-0355, vensel7@comcast.net.
- Take advantage of the technical resources available through your suppliers.