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Technician training keeps Carbondale shop on top of its game in a competitive market

by David Gerchen

Carbondale, Ill.—Owner Steven Rennison of The Auto Shop believes in employee training — so much so, that if a technician doesn't complete 80 hours of training annually, then they're not working for him.

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"Other shop owners call me and ask, 'How do you get your techs to go to training?' And I tell them it's required," Rennison said. "When a technician starts working here, doing 80 hours of training a year is in our handbook. When we start talking about raises, if they haven't completed the training, they're not eligible for an increase." Rennison said he believes the additional training gives his shop an advantage in a competitive automotive repair market such as Carbondale.

Rennison said he pays all expenses for technician training, even when it involves travel. Some of the training they've taken advantage of has come from Auto Parts and Service Association of Illinois (APSA-IL), Federal Mogul, Robert Bosch and from NAPA. All technicians are ASE certified, he added.

Training isn't just for technicians, either. Rennison tries to attend all his technicians' sessions and he goes to management training too. And while he believes he takes something beneficial away from every class, he does have one suggestion for those offering training in the Midwest.

"I'd like to see more service writer training classes available," Rennison said. "There are some on the East Coast and in California, but it's hard to find that kind of training close to where we are."

Rennison is also an APSA-IL board member. He said he believes it's important to be involved for the betterment of the industry and for training.

Rennison says The Auto Shop draws customers from about a 15-



It's truly a family affair at The Auto Shop in Carbondale, Ill., where six of the seven Rennison family members work in the shop. From l., are, son, Jeremy, the service writer; Marie, Steve Rennison's wife and office manager; son, Cody, one of four technicians; Steve, owner; son, Jacob, who keeps the shop clean, and son, Collin, the porter.

mile radius including Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. He said his AAA Authorized Repair facility designation has helped business because parents of students have confidence their cars are being repaired by a reputable shop.

Although the mix of work is about 60 percent domestic and 40 percent import, Rennison said he has purposely steered his focus to securing work on European cars, especially BMW and VW. The number of those cars coming to the shop has increased in the last four to five years, he said, after Rennison bought a customer list from a European-only repair facility in Carbondale that went out of business.

To accommodate the work, The Auto Shop has six scan tools to cover almost any car coming in for service, he said. Additionally, technicians have access to Mitchell, Identifix, and Euroservice, which Rennison described as Identifix for European cars.

There are eight bays for four technicians and Rennison supervises the work. Marie Rennison, his wife and office manager, said, "His heart is in the shop — he can fix anything."

One bay is kept open for tire work and two bays are set aside for a detail shop they operate as well

as larger vehicles such as campers. A free detail job is given to first-time customers while others are given discounts depending upon how much is spent in automotive repair, Steve Rennison said.

The shop features four two-post lifts and one four-post lift for its Hunter alignment system. Frequently used equipment in the shop includes a Motovac transmission fluid exchange machine and BG coolant exchange machine.

In order to make the technicians more efficient, Rennison has carts for brakes, diagnostics and scan tools so that a technician has everything needed to do a job. "I've put together these carts over the years," he says.

"This way the technician doesn't have to go searching for anything or buy additional items themselves, so it's a good time saver."

The primary supplier is Vogler Auto Parts NAPA. Rennison said, "We were the first NAPA auto service center in Carbondale and we use NAPA Tracs as the shop management system. Because of our emphasis on European cars, we source from Bumper To Bumper."

Rennison is clear about his preference for aftermarket parts. "I use them because of the warranty, pure and simple," he says. "We offer a one-year parts and labor warranty on all work, so we need to know we're putting a good quality part on the vehicle."

With six of the seven Rennison family members working in the business, The Auto Shop is truly a family affair. The Rennison's four sons are active in the day-to-day business; Jeremy is a service writer, Cody is a technician, Collin is a porter, and Jacob cleans up the shop. Their daughter, Stephanie, used to work in the business as a service writer, he said.

The Auto Shop has several technicians of long tenure working there. Glen Crismon has worked with Rennison for eight years, as has Ed Dangbar. Rennison's son, Cody, has worked at the shop for six years full time.

The Auto Shop has provided the Rennisons their living for 20 years and Jeremy and Cody have expressed interest in continuing the business when he and Marie decide they'd like to slow down, he said. But with Rennison's love of the business and its challenges, it doesn't look like that day is coming anytime soon. ■



Steve Rennison, owner of The Auto Shop, and Cody Rennison, his son and technician, talk about a heating core he is installing.