

# Center Square Motors stays ahead through careful management, trying new initiatives



By: James E. Guyette  
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It goes without saying that attention to detail is a must when performing collision repairs, but that mindset especially rings true for Chuck Dietch, owner of Center Square Motors in Blue Bell, Pa.



Rigorous research, coupled with a willingness to thoroughly investigate and adopt industry innovations throughout every aspect of the business have long been consistent strategies at the family-operated shop, which was established by Chuck's father, Stanley, in 1956.

"It's the foundation that my dad built – he was always experimenting with things," says Chuck Dietch. "My dad tells stories of how he painted Model T Fords with a unique sprayer that worked off of one of the four spark plugs of the engine on the car you were working on; you painted the car with the compression of the motor."

Stanley Dietch, still spry at age 91, instilled in his son the importance of running a solid operation from top to bottom. "He made sure that he took care of the customers" while taking a frugal approach to finances. "My father was around during the Depression, so a penny saved was a penny earned. He always tried to make sure the bills were paid and not to overspend."

As Chuck Dietch, 54, carries on that tradition of prudent management since buying the business in 1994, he also embraces his dad's careful consideration of new technologies.

"I've always tried to stay up on current trends, and my dad always respected my research. You need to see what steps to take to stay ahead," he says, citing the clarity that comes with belonging to a 20 Group, attending trade shows and seeking advice from industry colleagues.



"You need to get out of the box – get out of your business – and see what's going on," asserts Dietch. "Don't try to cut corners and think about it first. You have to be proactive rather than reactive," he continues, "and you can't just rely on your vendors – you need to ask other people."

These strategies were fully implemented when Center Square converted to a waterborne paint system last year. "I made sure we were set and ready to go, and the transition went well for us."



Much planning went into the conversion, as it involved making physical changes to the 20,000 square-foot facility, along with retraining the technicians. "I wanted to set it up right so I would be destined for success," says Dietch. The paint booths were retrofitted with temperature and humidity controls as the air movement systems received upgrades that included new fans, blowers and dryers.

"I added a new Prevost air line to the complete shop and put in a large rotary screw air compressor and a special dryer solely for the paint shop," Dietch recounts. "Better air movement helps paint to dry. Plus, there has to be little or no moisture or it will inhibit the drying process."

New spray guns were purchased because sprayers for solvent-based paints corrode with the use of water-based paints, and they also help reduce paint use.

"With the old guns, the paint was drawn up from a reservoir. The new guns use a pressure-gravity fit with the paint on top, which results in a much higher transfer rate," Dietch explains. "So there's less waste and overspraying. It also means there's less atomized product going through the exhaust system."

"Our ability to match and blend color was always good – but it's gotten even better," says Dietch. "With a water-based paint, we're able to achieve a better match to factory standards since this technology is being used by the majority of new car manufacturers."

## **Environmental leadership**

Adopting waterborne is among a series of steps that Dietch has taken to be more environmentally friendly, such as recycling discarded tires, antifreeze and oil.

"We view Center Square Motors as a true environmental leader in its industry," observes Vitor Margaronis, marketing director at BASF, which supplied the paint system.

In addition to his dad's Model T cylinder-compression application system of yesteryear, the company's commitment to innovative paint practices was also applied in 1985. "We were the first shop in the area with a heated downdraft paint booth," Dietch says.

That step proved to be a tough sell during one of several enhancements to the current location's structure, purchased in 1977 after years of renting various sites. "We got a loan to do the expansion, but the bank didn't want to lend us the money to do the downdraft booth, but we talked them into it" by presenting research to justify the investment.

"Our latest addition (of 12,000 square feet in 2005) was reviewed many times." As two new paint booths were installed, "I wanted to make absolutely sure the mechanicals, pits and ducting would fit side-by-side. I also incorporated a heated double-prep station in a section of the new body shop area to create a 'rapid repair' area," he says.

"We are moving in the direction of 'lean' and have taken some of the steps to move all staff in that direction," Dietch reports. "For example, we have reviewed lean processes with my BASF Vision representative and are completing thorough teardowns to accurately estimate and map the repair process."



"With five Car-O-Liner benches, I want the ability to repair and print a report showing the completed repair was restored to factory specs. We also have our own wheel alignment system to perform this service in-house so it's faster and more accurate," he continues.

"I do want to stay on top of new equipment and technology. We have demos in the shop to keep our employees on top of new information, and we use ABW Tracker for our shop management program. All jobs are clocked in for each segment of repair. Production is reviewed each week with employees." The

workers earn an hourly wage coupled with a bonus program geared to customer satisfaction scores and production goals.

## Certified efficiency

With OEM certifications that include Acura, Honda and Volvo, "I believe in training; otherwise, what good is it to have a shop with modern equipment without having employees that know how to properly and efficiently use it?"

Education is obtained via I-CAR and programs provided by equipment manufacturers.

"We have our own mechanical department that handles both in-house and outside appointments – this helps our cycle time greatly" by not having to sublet alignments and other services. "My mechanical department consistently is performing electrical repairs and repairing check engine, ABS and SRS lights."

Along with routine repairs and maintenance, state inspections and emissions testing are offered, as is on-site car rental and 24-hour towing.

Dietch believes in being upfront with his vendors and the necessity of adhering to his storage system. "I'll first tell them that I will pay my invoices on time and will be a good customer," he notes, "and I expect the same from them; excellent service and fair pricing. The parts delivery requires the driver to put the delivered parts in the correct labeled parts shelf location – the last digit of the RO serves as locations 0-9; if they can't do this, we can't buy from them."

A company-wide focus on rendering courteous, prompt and efficient customer service serves the business well.

"We have several generations of families returning for service as well as new customers. We strive to make everyone happy and deliver a wow factor when we deliver the finished product," says Dietch, describing how the process brings repeat business and motivates word-of-mouth referrals.



Promotional efforts include local postcard mailings, advertisements in area program guides and sponsorships of assorted community groups. "We provide wrecked cars to local schools for teen awareness of drinking and driving, and also to the local fire company to practice using the Jaws of Life. We support the police department in sponsoring a car show, and I volunteer at the local tech school," he says.

In keeping with the family tradition, Dietch's wife Kathy does the accounting and his cousin Carol Long assists with marketing. Chuck and Kathy have two sons, and the oldest – a junior in high school – is already working at the shop during summers and on weekends when he's not competing in sports. Having a youthful third generation involved carries on the Dietch legacy: "I started working with my dad when I was 12 years old, and I was the only painter in the shop when I was 20 years old," Dietch says.