

Warren Johnson



Discovering the collision industry

Warren Johnson, manager at Unique Collision Centre in Saskatoon, has worked his way up in the collision repair industry. Attracted to becoming a technician by his love of cars, he opted instead for the collision repair track, because he dislikes grease. Starting out washing cars, he moved on to body

repair and then painting vehicles before getting a management position. "If you can't 'just' be a technician," Johnson will tell students in Saskatoon, "there are lots of specialized positions you can go for within auto body repair. You can work on tuners, or custom vehicles. You can work strictly with Saskatchewan Government Insurance work, or you can specialize in imports."

Keeping your options open

Is there a pressure to specialize within the industry? Johnson finds that within the educational system students are now being separated into auto body and paint streams. "It used to be that students were taught both," he says. "The problem with specializing from the outset in one or the other, is that for painters or body men to be really good at what they do, they need to know all aspects of what is involved in the work." In other words, to be really good at body work you have to understand what a painter does and vice versa. On the other hand, he concedes, some shops in the industry just want to hire painters or body people, and it can be attractive for both students and employers when students can graduate after taking one of two two-year courses, instead of one four-year course.

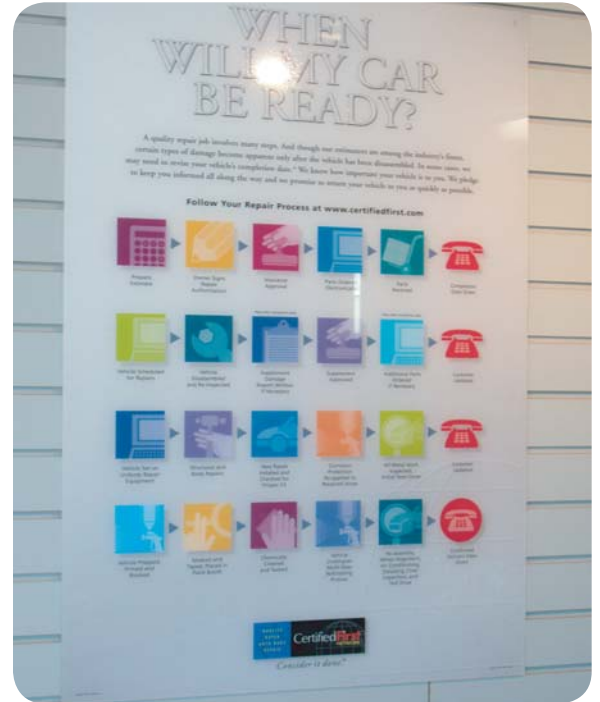
**To the question
"when would I ever use algebra"**

"Well, in a body shop you can't mix paint formulas without it."

*- Warren Johnson, Manager
Unique Collision Centre*

Working with customer expectations - the reality of government insurance

Informed customers are happy customers is the message conveyed by the laminated board in the Unique front office that outlines in detail, for everyone to see, what the typical collision repair process is and who plays what role.



Johnson makes allowances for the follow-ups often required after initial estimates are made. "I realize the government estimators are pressed for time. They are expected to do their estimates in 10 minutes, and often there is hidden damage that you can't tell at first glance." A good estimate comes down to experience, which individuals may or may not have. "When you have seen enough damaged vehicles, you know where the impact will typically cause further, potentially hidden, damage".

Johnson also acknowledges that waiting for appraisers to get back to the shop to verify the need for additional work under the insurance coverage can tie the shop up for a day or two. "This can cause snowballing costs if people have to rent cars" while their vehicle is in the shop. To address this, Unique will "have customers look over what needs to be done and make prearrangements for required parts/materials pending approval. It comes down to respect. If you are a shop in good standing, have a good reputation, then chances are SGI will approve that you go ahead and have the repairs done."

"Customer education in repair procedures" is something that Johnson feels is an important part of the work done at Unique. They need to "understand what goes on, how long it takes, what parts cost." It may take time to tackle the misinformation customers may have regarding the cost of parts and labour, "but unless the misconceptions are cleared up, it can be tough to pay well for good work."



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Educating future employees

From Johnson's perspective, the on-the-job training of the future collision repair workforce through apprenticeship is still in its infancy. He sees problem solving skills as the skills most needed in journeypersons and most crucial to their success.

The educational system has a key role helping students make connections between what they learn and how they will use it. Johnson knows that students can become apathetic and drop out of school when they see no value in the English, the Math and other subjects they learn. To the question "when would I ever use algebra" Johnson can reply, "Well, in a body shop you can't mix paint formulas without it."



The future of the industry

Johnson foresees huge upheavals in the collision industry due to the changeovers required in drying procedures, paint booths, and paint guns. And yet he is optimistic, even exhilarated at the prospect of future changes. In the 12 years he was on the floor, he witnessed work in the industry progress from "body men banging on metal to including air bag systems, electrical systems, decreasing metal tolerances, as well as huge improvements in safety measures. The biggest challenges he sees on the horizon are the retraining for waterborne refinish systems, for glues and adhesives, and polyester fills as well as new vehicle designs that need to be treated with respect.



Drive, determination and pride

The kid whose parents reminded him that he never finished anything, now takes pride in showing his father the journey he has taken to become shop manager. His reward for the drive and determination that have brought Johnson to where he is today, is the satisfaction and self-esteem he derives from what a customer sees when a job is done. Confidence and a sense of worth are evident from the pleasure office staff take in telling customers what the shop does. "Stick with what people need, food, health, or cars," he suggests to youth looking at career options, considering the lure of making a fast buck in the north or west. "This industry will always be around. If you get an inter-provincial ticket, you can go coast to coast, anywhere in Canada. There are some 90 body shops in Saskatoon alone!"



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