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- DENTAL
- VETERINARY
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- RESEARCH



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G&C Auto Body is an ABRN 2011 Top Shop

By Tim Sramcik



G&C's palatial appearance is designed to tell customers that this repair shop is different. (IMAGE /G&C AUTOBODY)

If you happen to be in Santa Rosa, Calif., do yourself a favor and cruise by the building at 251 Bellevue Ave. You'll notice two incongruous things. The building, looks like a palace, especially at night when flood lights illuminate a flowing fountain in the front and the building's classic Southwestern architecture. Yet, the signage indicates this is a repair shop, specifically G&C AutoBody.

Once you get by all the artistic trappings, inside is a business that with six other busy locations offers collision and mechanical repairs to the tune of \$22 million a year. Inside, too, is a business model that successfully defies many of the most popularly held conceptions of collision repair, it might be time for the industry to pull up a chair and conduct some post-graduate

studies.

G&C owner Gene Crozat is a veteran repairer who does business his own way. Crozat's way began in 1961, when he learned body repair while serving in the Air Force at Castle Air Force base in Merced, Calif. After his discharge in 1964, Crozat worked at Rich's AutoBody in Merced before opening and managing a Plymouth, Chrysler, and Dodge Body Shop for Marsati Motors.



The Windsor location has 22 bays.

Crozat moved to Santa Rosa in 1968 and managed the body shop for Torvick Enterprises for four years and then partnered with Leo Gassell to open Gassell & Crozat's AutoBody. In 1976, Gassell retired and Crozat changed the business's name to G&C AutoBody. He's been running G&C since, while finding time to direct the Collision Repair Association of California for two years.

Here are some of the key operating guidelines at the core of his business philosophy.

Don't run cheap. Crozat got the idea for his palatial-looking shops while traveling in Europe. The architecture there caught his eye. He felt it would have the same effect if transplanted home.

"I want people to look at my business and know they're something special. If I were having my vehicle repaired, I'd want something special," says Crozat.

That means pairing the gorgeous exteriors with just as impressive interiors sporting expansive customer lobbies, large stone fireplaces and chandeliers.

Customers who choose to do business at G&C receive some pretty impressive financial perks as well.

All customers have the opportunity to receive free services for as long as they own their vehicle. This includes oil changes, tire rotations, front-end alignments and local towing. Customers just have to agree to affix a three-inch G&C decal on their rear window. Crozat says this offer more than pays for itself since G&C annually repairs 6,000 vehicles, which means he can create 6,000 "mobile billboards" to advertise his services to the area. Perhaps even more important than that, it gives 6,000 customers good reason to return to the shop when they need repairs and to recommend G&C to their friends and family members.

G&C also offers customers rental vehicles for \$1 a day along with a Rental Rebates program where half of the paid rental bill is returned to the customer.



G&C's interiors are designed to be just as impressive as the shops' exteriors.

Take back business you're giving away. This program also feeds into another guideline Crozat frequently adopts – expanding his business into non-traditional areas. "Why should I send customers to a rental company when I can make money doing that myself?" asks Crozat. While renting cars may seem like an expensive, labor-intensive proposition most shops wouldn't consider pursuing, Crozat has good reason to bring it in-house. It makes good business sense.

He explains that he can buy the vehicles without sales tax because they are part of a rental business. Also, because California automatically passes insurance coverage on collision-repair vehicles to replacement rental vehicles, he doesn't have to pay for the coverage. Hence, because of the low overhead and relative low-cost, his rental business helps pay for itself. Throw in its ability to attract repair business from customers watching their pocketbooks, and it makes perfect sense.



Plush couches and an upscale waiting area are products of owner Gene Crozat's belief that customers should get every conceivable convenience.

For similar reasons, he's investing in solar power for his shops. Tax breaks (expiring this year) will help cover an investment that will cut power costs for the shop and allow Crozat to turn to his own business for electricity instead of a utility.

Forget bank loans. On a similar note, Crozat doesn't look to banks for lending services that many repair business utilize for daily operations. G&C is in many ways a cash-based operation since it pays for business mainstays such as parts, labor and advertising with funds it already has in bank accounts.

As soon as parts arrive, we cut a check for them instead of waiting for the end of the month to pay. I get incredible discounts on parts by paying for them immediately," he says." The same holds true for advertising where Crozat says he pays just \$1 for prime cable TV ad spots.

NAME
 G&C AutoBody
 MAIN LOCATION Santa Rosa,
 Calif.
 NO. OF SHOPS 7
 NO. OF EMPLOYEES 35 staff, 50
 independent contractors
 SQ. FT. AND BAYS
 Santa Rosa, 60,000 sq. ft., 50
 bays
 VEHICLES PER WEEK
 175 per week
 AVERAGE REPAIR COST
 \$2,500
 ANNUAL SALES
 \$22,750,000
 WEBSITE
 www.gandcautobody.com/

Replace old rules with more effective new ones. Body techs and painters at G&C similarly are paid immediately when they turn in their work invoices. Crozat is able to do that because his labor system is a complete departure from those used at any other Top Shop, and most shops in general. His painters and body techs all work as contractors. Crozat says both he and they couldn't be happier with the arrangement.

"They work as much as they want, when they want, so they control their pay," he says. If there was any doubt that the shop's contractors prefer this system, G&C's body techs have been with the company on average for eight years. Some painters have been with the business for 15 years.

Expansive repair areas allow G&C to repair 175 cars weekly.

The state of California is not so enchanted with the system and recently accused Crozat of unfair labor practices. "They filed papers and demanded over \$2.5 million in a suit against

me. I offered them \$5,000, and they accepted," says Crozat. Going head-to-head with a state government typically is an act most businesses would steer away from. For Crozat, doing business any other way isn't his style. Doing business his way is what has made G&C so successful.

It keeps the 67-year-old Crozat excited to come to work every day. Notably, at a point in his career when many repairers would consider retiring, Crozat is experiencing some of his biggest success. More than 500 people recently showed up for the grand opening of G&C's Windsor location. Crozat says during the previous three months his business netted record profits.



Expansive repair areas allow G&C to repair 175 cars weekly.

Even more than these accomplishments, Crozat says something even more important continues to drive his interest in the business – his family. His greatest pride is going to work everyday with his four adult children who already are making a mark in the industry while still in their 20s by taking positions in the business. If they follow in their father's footsteps, they'll continue making life interesting in the repair industry for another generation.

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The Windsor location has 22 bays.

NAME	G&C AutoBody
MAIN LOCATION	Santa Rosa, Calif.
NO. OF SHOPS	7
NO. OF EMPLOYEES	65 staff, 50 independent contractors
SQ. FT. AND BAYS	Santa Rosa, 60,000 sq. ft, 50 bays
VEHICLES PER WEEK	175 per week
AVERAGE REPAIR COST	\$2,500
ANNUAL SALES	\$22,750,000
WEBSITE	www.gandcautobody.com/

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