

SHOP PROFILE

by Steve Bodofsky
members.atra.com

Do It Right Transmission and Auto Repair: Working Hard to Do It Right Every Day



The crew at Do It Right Transmission and Auto Repair L-R: Steve Hawes, Larry Straub, Kevin Sensmeier, Robyn Krutchkoff, Mike Rueckel Jr.

It's no secret that one of the most effective marketing tools for any auto repair shop is community service. But to be truly effective, community service has to be a selfless act; you can't do it with a personal benefit in mind.

It's kind of a Catch 22: If you do it to help your business, it doesn't; if you do it for its own sake, it pays dividends.

Maybe that's part of why Kevin Sensmeier, owner and service manager for Do It Right Transmissions and Auto Repair, in Evansville, Indiana, is doing so well. He's one of the founders and trustees for the Tri State Auto Mission (www.tristateautomission.org); a group of local businesses that helps provide



Kevin's modified 2008 GMC 3500 HD and 1996 Impala SS with 29,000 original miles – sees the road maybe 3 times per year.

transportation solutions for people in need.

"I approached one of the pastors at my church about creating a program for people who either need help with auto repairs or finding a working car," explains Kevin. "Turns out two other members came to the same pastor to suggest something similar that same week. We didn't even know each other at the time!

"So the pastor got the three of us together. We went out to eat one night and began to hash out the details for the program. There are other organizations around the country with similar programs, so we called them and asked how theirs worked.

"I'm on the board of trustees and, since I have the automotive experience, I'm the one they come to when there are questions about auto repair. Other board members come from all different backgrounds.

"Some people come to us who can't afford to have their cars fixed; others donate cars for us to fix up and place with people who need them. For the last couple years we did about 90 to 100 cars a year between repairs and donations.

"We don't generally give work away; we provide assistance with repairs. They'll pay maybe half the bill and Tri State will cover the balance. There are about three shops including ours that provide service, and we work at a greatly reduced rate — just barely enough to cover our overhead. And I usually donate three or four transmission rebuilds a year.

"On cars that are donated, we'll fix them up and someone will clean them and get them ready for sale. Then one of our board members will go through the applications and see who should receive the vehicle.

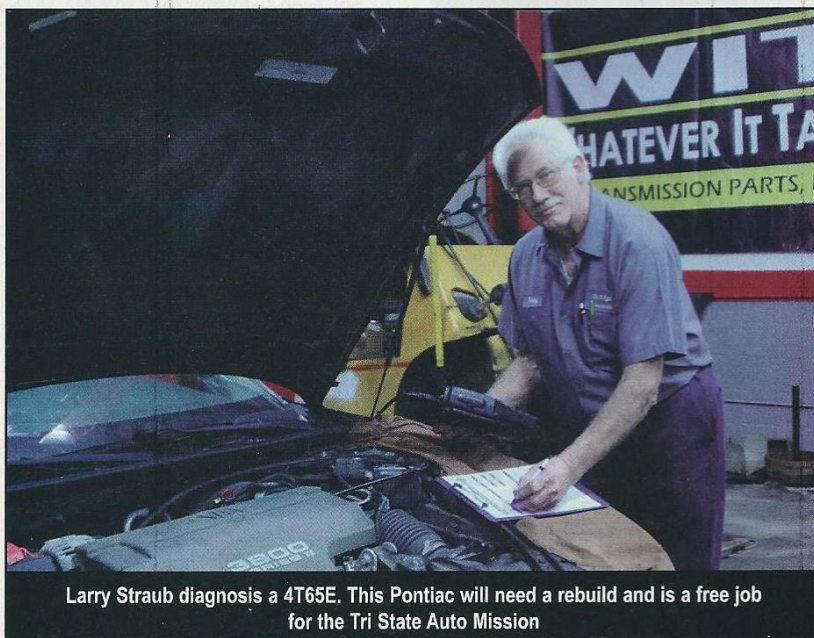
"Depending on the person's financial circumstances, they'll either get the vehicle for free, or the organization will help them purchase it, usually at a fraction of its value. Tri State will work out a no-interest loan for them; sometimes as little as \$50 a month.

"What's important is that they have a stake in the car. That gives it a value; they're more likely to take care of it and they appreciate it more.

"We've been doing this for about



Kevin and Robyn in the front office area.



Larry Straub diagnosis a 4T65E. This Pontiac will need a rebuild and is a free job for the Tri State Auto Mission

six years now. In that time the program has had its ups and downs, but overall it's doing pretty well."

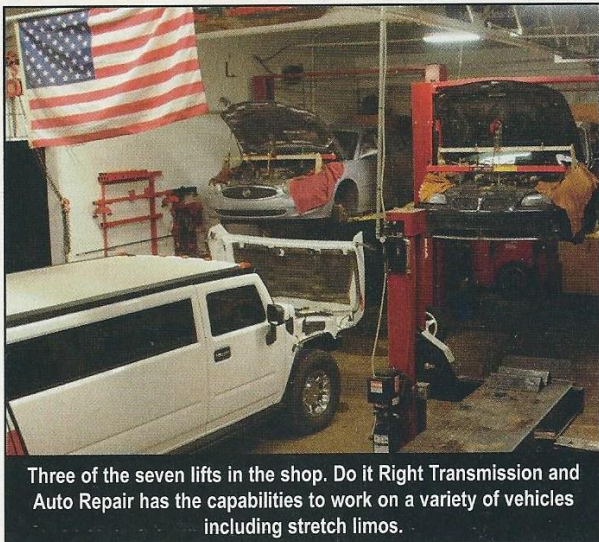
It sounds like an amazing program, and no doubt it helps put the Do It Right name out in front of potential customers. But when asked about the effect it's had on his business, Kevin had to give his answer a bit of thought. Turns out he never really considered the value that Tri State Auto Mission would have for marketing his shop.

But after a few moments con-

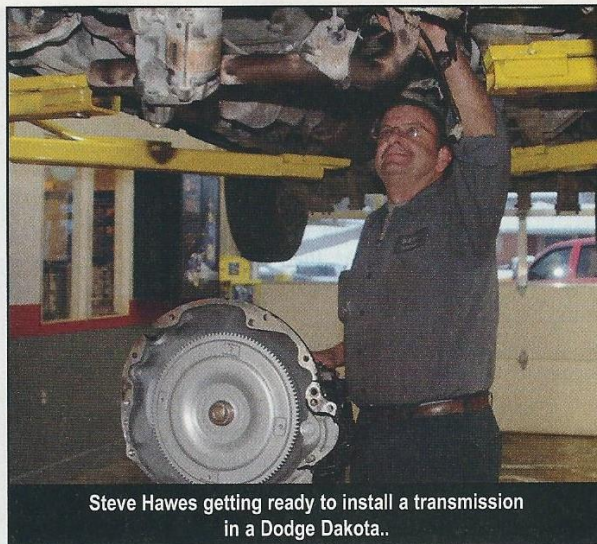
sideration, he was able to remember receiving referrals as a result of his participation in the program. And it's likely he receives a lot more attention than he realizes. Because that's how community involvement works: It pays off when you're not looking for it.

Unusual Beginnings

Unlike so many other shop owners, Kevin didn't get into fixing cars as a kid. And he didn't start in the business right out of high school. Oh, sure, he



Three of the seven lifts in the shop. Do it Right Transmission and Auto Repair has the capabilities to work on a variety of vehicles including stretch limos.



Steve Hawes getting ready to install a transmission in a Dodge Dakota.



In the build-room. Kevin gets started on another 4T65E rebuild.

helped his dad — who was an engineer, not an auto mechanic — with some repair work on their own cars, but that's about as far as it went.

In fact, after graduating high school he went to work in the fast food business for a few years. By the time he was 24 he was an assistant manager at a couple different fast food restaurants, "trying to figure out what I wanted to do," said Kevin.

"The hours were horrible and I got tired of trying to keep a bunch of young kids working," he continued with a chuckle.

At the time he was doing a bit of general auto repair work out of his home. Then, in 1998, a job opened up for an R&R technician at Mike's

Transmissions, right in Evansville. Kevin took the job. At the same time he began taking courses at the local branch of Ivy Tech Community College.

He continued learning on the job while earning his associate's degree in automotive technology. And, after graduating, he also worked at the school for a year-and-a-half as an adjunct instructor, teaching general repair and engine performance.

After three-and-a-half years with Mike's, he went to work for a car lot, handling virtually every type of auto repair, including transmissions. He worked there for about a year-and-a-half when a local shop became available right near his home.

Kevin decided to take the plunge and leased the shop space — about 2500 square feet with two lifts — and opened Do It Right Transmissions. Back then he had one employee working for him.

Business began growing and space became tighter; they packed two more lifts into that tiny area. So, two years after opening his business, Kevin made arrangements to buy the building and he expanded Do It Right to fill the rest of the building.

He began major renovations about two years ago; the new shop is a terrific example of great curb appeal. They now have seven lifts, with four employees, plus Kevin.

And he's not done yet: "We're finishing up a new addition; when we get that done we'll have 11,000 square feet

and nine lifts." Quite a remarkable level of growth in such a short time.

Improving Business

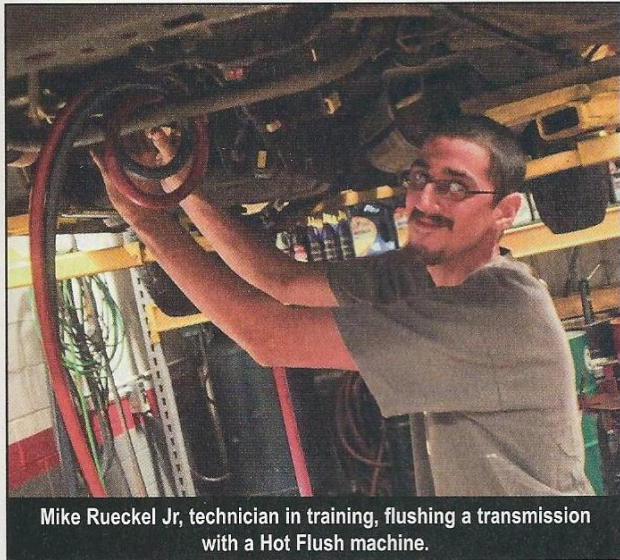
Kevin has made a couple changes to Do It Right's business model over the last few years to help improve his bottom line. One thing that's helped has been the renovations to the shop. Another has been to add general repair to the mix.

While Do It Right began as a transmissions-only shop, about five years ago they expanded into general repair. They also changed the name of the shop to Do It Right Transmission and Auto Repair.

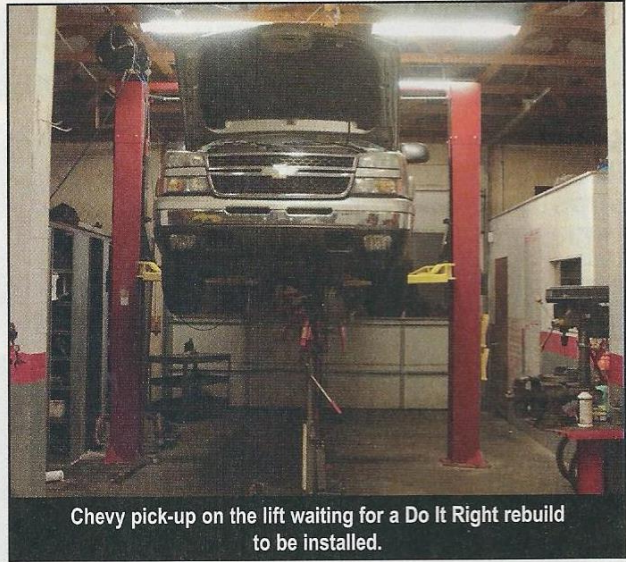
The reason? "It's hard to survive on just transmissions anymore," says Kevin. "When I started in this business, Mike's was the number one transmission shop in Evansville. They were doing 20 to 25 transmissions a week. Three years ago, they closed their doors." When they closed, the business name was sold to another shop and Kevin bought some of their old equipment.

While they have added general repair, when it comes to transmissions, they're still predominantly a custom rebuild shop. "We use maybe one reman a month," says Kevin. Everything else is rebuilt individually.

That actually says a lot, because Kevin is the shop's only rebuild. What happens when they get busy with rebuilds? "I work more hours; it's not uncommon for me to get in at 6 in the



Mike Rueckel Jr, technician in training, flushing a transmission with a Hot Flush machine.



Chevy pick-up on the lift waiting for a Do It Right rebuild to be installed.

morning and work until 10 at night.

“My wife understands: If we’re busy I go to work. If things slow down I go home early and we can spend time together.”

About the same time he added general repairs to the mix, Do It Right became a NAPA-approved repair shop. And with that they began offering Synchrony financing; a program that used to be offered under the CarCareONE name.

According to Kevin, offering financing has increased their sales by about three transmission jobs each month, or about \$5000 in gross sales. That’s a lot of additional money for something that isn’t costing him any more than accepting a credit card.

Another change has been how he advertises. “When I opened, nine years ago, the Yellow Pages and Yellowbook were everything. Today we still have a small presence, but in a few years I doubt they’ll even be around any more.”

Mostly Kevin’s been switching to digital advertising: He has a beautiful web site at www.doitrighttransmission.com. He’s also scheduled to run his first radio ad this December.

Of course, as with any good shop, the vast majority of their work comes from referrals and repeat customers. Advertising helps, but nothing beats a referral for bringing in new customers. This is how they get about 75% of their work.

Kevin’s also a big believer in con-

tinuing education. He tries to attend Expo every year, and goes to the local seminars when they come to town. He even attends non-ATRA seminars, to make sure he’s up to date on everything that’s hitting the streets, transmission and otherwise.

At Expo, he switches between the tech seminars and the management program. The automotive market in Evansville is about 90% domestic cars, so he attends the tech seminars for those units and then switches to the management program while most of the import seminars are going on.

Planning Ahead

Many shop owners today are finding themselves staring down the barrel of their own mortality as they begin to consider their exit strategies. Basically they’re on the lookout for the Egress (GEARS, April 2014).

For that, Kevin’s way ahead of the curve. Although he’s just shy of turning 40, he and his wife, Holly, are building their portfolio of rental properties. They already have four houses and two subdivisions, with financing for three more houses scheduled for 2015. Some are existing houses they fix up; others are new construction.

Kevin and his wife do about half of the work themselves: Kevin does some construction and repair work while his wife handles painting and cleanup. They hire professionals for the rest of the job.

And these aren’t just cheap boxes



Looking good! Kevin and crew are finishing up on 2 years of major renovations. When the new addition is complete, Do it Right will boast 11,000 sq.ft. and 9 lifts!

they toss together: “We’re trying to stick with upscale homes. We charge maybe \$900 a month and, when we put a house on the market, within a couple weeks we have four or five people begging to rent it.”

While they stay busy most of the year, Kevin and Holly try to get away for a nice vacation at least once a year — preferably out of the country. Last year they took a cruise to Barbados. “We flew to Puerto Rico, stayed there for two days, then took a cruise to Barbados, Saint Thomas, Saint Martins...”

Kevin’s favorite place to visit? San Juan. “We’ll probably go back and spend a week there in a couple years,” he says.

A strong commitment to community, a good business model, and a powerful exit strategy... no doubt about it, Kevin is doing his best to live up to his business name: He’s working hard to “do it right,” each and every day. We could all afford to take a page out of his book.