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## Class Auto Center's 'Fixed right, first time' mantra is key to expansion

Thu, 08/25/2011 - 19:42 | by Dick DeLoach

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Class Auto Center founder Ray Neveau (l.) and General Manager Erik Sumen say business is good despite the challenges the automotive industry has faced.



Class Auto Center uses Celette frame systems, which General Manager Erik Sumen says is the only authorized unibody and frame structure repair system for high-end European cars.



Erik Sumen, general manager at Class Auto Center, says its stand-alone spray booth building was designed with Mercedes-Benz engineers to meet their OEM standards.

Long Beach, Calif.—When Ray Neveau founded Class Auto Center in 1980, he said his shop was a far cry from the 25,000-square-foot state-of-the-art facility his business now occupies.

“At that time it was located in a small alley shop in Long Beach that couldn’t have been more than 3,500 square feet — if that,” Neveau said. “It had three bays and a spray booth, and we employed just a few people, including my brother, Richard, who was the painter.”

From the start, Neveau wanted to establish relationships with dealerships, said Erik Sumen, Class Auto Center’s general manager. “Back then the shop started out doing used cars for Palmer Motors Mercedes-Benz in Long Beach.”

Sumen said the shop’s philosophy from the beginning has been to fix it right the first time. “So by following that philosophy, the used-car work led to performing other work for them and then doing customer cars. It just took off from there.”

“Our goal has always been to bring our customers’ cars back to their original, pre-accident condition,” Neveau said. “We call it, ‘Fixed right, first time.’”

The shop remained in the alley location until the mid-1980s when it moved to Anaheim Street in Long Beach, Sumen said. “We operated out of two buildings on Anaheim Street for the next few years.”

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Every vehicle to be painted at Class Auto Center is prepped by a team of experts before going into the paint booth, General Manager Erik Sumen says.



The 25,000-square-foot Class Auto Center facility was custom-built from the ground up, founder Ray Neveau says.

Sumen said they were able to buy a piece of land at the shop's current location on Cherry Street in the late 1980s and started from the ground up. "We had the facility built exactly the way we wanted it and moved into the building in 1990," he said.

Everything is under one roof now, Sumen said, except for two specially designed spray booths, housed in a separate building. "They're not like sprays booths you've seen at other shops," he said. "Mercedes-Benz engineers actually came over here and worked with us to build spray booths exactly to their OEM standards."

The shop sprays Spies Hecker waterborne paint exclusively, Sumen said. "We use Spies Hecker refinishing materials because they are approved by all high-end European car manufacturers," he said. "Spies Hecker products also come with a limited lifetime refinish warranty."

For major collision damage, Class Auto Center has Celette frame systems, which Sumen said is the only authorized unibody and frame structure repair system for high-end European cars.

"We are constantly investing in new equipment to be compliant with the OEM programs," Sumen said. "We have 'smart welders' for aluminum, which cost about \$25,000 each, and fixtures for the high-end European cars are a huge expense for us."

The next step for the company is going to be implementing a 5,000-square-foot aluminum center in another nearby building, Sumen said. "We're getting ready to make a big purchase of equipment for that shop."

"Based on the new CAFE standard now, who knows what's going to come down the pipeline from manufacturers in the future such as aluminum, magnesium, composites, plastics," Neveau said.

"A lot of manufacturers are going away from welding components back on to using really aggressive epoxies and pop rivets for structural repairs, so we have to stay up on that technology," Sumen said. "Mercedes-Benz and BMW even have procedures set in place to repair frame rails using epoxy and rivets."

Because Class Auto Center is an authorized Mercedes-Benz, Porsche, Audi, BMW, and Nissan GT-R collision center, Sumen said all of his technicians are required to go through all OEM training classes and some I-CAR classes. "Our estimators, body men, painter, and some of our technicians are also due to take the next set of ASE tests," he said.

Sumen said his business has largely managed to remain consistent through the challenges facing the automotive industry. "We have remained steady, knock on wood. We've been very lucky that way," he said.

Neveau said it's not luck but rather doing good work that's helped the company remain successful. "I attribute the company's growth to the strong relationships we have with our dealer partners," he said. "Also, being in the same community for more than 30 years is a big factor."

### Dealerships trending away from collision work

Sumen said none of its dealer accounts have their own body shops, which he sees as a growing trend. "More and more dealers are moving away from having in-house body shops," he said.

"The body shop and mechanical side of the business have become two different animals, and I don't think a lot of dealerships understand the true mechanics of the collision repair industry."

Sumen said its dealer partners refer collision business directly to them, so customers work directly with them through the whole process.

"The dealers know customer service is a priority with us," he said. "We handle everything,

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including contacting the customer's insurance company, arranging a rental vehicle, if needed, and even delivering the car."

The shop's dealer business has also led to a large amount of walk-in business through the years from return customers for whom they have previously done collision repair, Sumen said.

"Typically, every household is going to have a different automobile in the family, be it a car or truck, and we don't shy away from that business at all," he said.

Sumen said the company does very limited advertising and no cold calling. "When a customer shows up to drop off a vehicle, the estimators have a required entry they have to make when creating the repair order that asks how the customer heard about us."

One form of advertising that Sumen said has been very successful for the shop is its website. "We established a specific online campaign and image geared to a strategic market — high-end European automobiles," he said. "And it has actually brought us customers outside of our prime market area."

The shop uses Mitchell 1 as its management system, Sumen said, and three estimating programs.

"We use Mitchell, CCC Pathways, and ADP collision estimating software," he said. "We do this because all insurance companies use one of those programs and it enables us to create a user-friendly environment with the insurance company so we're talking the same language when we're estimating a vehicle."

Sumen said he constantly pushes insurance companies hard to call in re-inspections to avoid any downtime during the repair process. "As an independent repair shop, we can't simply write the sheet and keep the repair job moving," he said. "Sometimes we have to wait for several re-inspections in order to keep the job moving."

The main thing Sumen said the shop wants is to instill confidence in its customers. "All work is guaranteed for as long as the customer owns or leases the vehicle," he said. "The limited-lifetime warranty covers all work performed, including parts installed, labor, color match, and gloss retention."





**Darren Hulbert** · Licensed Agent at Transamerica Financial Group  
Nice article. I have had several repairs done at Class Auto. Exceptional!  
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