



# Dicker Motor *Smash Repairs*

## Resilience in the face of adversity

WE MEET JOANNA AND BRETT DICKER OF DICKER MOTOR SMASH REPAIRS IN GOSFORD ON THE NEW SOUTH WALES CENTRAL COAST. THEY HAVE ENJOYED AND ENDURED THEIR JOURNEY IN THE INDUSTRY AND NOW LOOK FORWARD TO A BRIGHTER FUTURE.

### Background

The business was founded by Brett's parents, Barry and Sue, in the mid-1970s. They moved into the industry having previously run a service station and young Brett found his way around the panel shop from a very early age. It was in this environment that he grew into the industry and took the earliest opportunity to go to TAFE to gain his Panel Beater's certificate in the late 1980s. This was a time when there was no shortage of young people (mostly men in those days) entering the industry.

In 2004 Barry and Sue decided to retire, sooner than expected, and Brett and Joanna took over the business – a whole lot quicker than they had anticipated.

The medium-size business continued to focus on quality and customer service, even recognising that the investment required to significantly grow was beyond them, so they consciously decided to keep doing what they do best. However, by around 2014 things were changing.

### Challenges and changes

According to Joanna, the most significant change in the industry was when insurers, who had previously focused on quality work and customer service (and paid a reasonable rate for these repairs), turned their attention



to price. "To us it looked like they were sacrificing quality for price and that caused us several issues, financially and morally. We even got to the point that we would not do work at the price required as we were just not prepared to lose money or compromise our reputation – we saw this as protecting Barry's legacy and Brett's own character."

The Dickers decided to walk away from their insurer as it was simply not viable. They believed their business name was too valuable and so they looked to change the business model to one that respected the value they were delivering. They looked to the smaller insurers who were happy to

work with them and support their quality and also refocused on private work to help pay the bills.

They were even interviewed as part of the recent parliamentary enquiry and those that visited couldn't believe the number of hours that both Joanna and Brett were working just to keep the doors open.

### The personal impact

Putting in all the time and energy to run a business for no gain, and seeing the impact on the family was simply heartbreaking. "We understand the sacrifice when it's our own business, but we worked very hard for a long time for almost no money, it began to take its toll."

The toll this was taking on their health was enormous. It was not only the physical exhaustion but the mental stress that had a flow-on effect to their family and to their own relationship. There was no respite, no days off, no holidays, and very little time for the family during school holidays. "It really was the result of working in such an environment for such a long period of time." Joanna becomes emotional when she speaks about their tough times and the strain on the entire family.

"Our existing system was well past its use-by date and one of the frustrating things was that we knew we had some inefficiencies in the

business, but with the long hours, financial constraints and physical and mental pressure, there was just no time to make the necessary improvements.”

Joanna opened up to the pressures that the situation put on their marriage and it was only through reaching out for help and improving the communication between them that they got through the really low times. She also emphasised how important it is for men to also reach out for help when they need to. “Both physical and mental health are so important, so even if the first call is to your GP, it’s a step in the right direction.”

**So, where are they now?**

The real-circuit breaker was the introduction of iBodyshop, which has taken away many of the manual tasks that were consuming most of Joanna’s time. “iBodyshop puts into place any activity that happens in a day and it simplifies the processes. Now I feel like nothing can be missed – even if I’m not in the shop.”

The business had reached the point where it needed another person

to manage the processes, but instead they opted for iBodyshop – it really was the best solution for Dicker Motors. “There are still some things to fine-tune, but I feel I can breathe again. This body shop management system ensures that everyone knows where every job is at any point in time – it really is a godsend.”

Their IT service provider had researched the options on Joanna’s behalf and recommended iBodyshop. “It took me some time to make the decision and Rebecca (Witt) understood our situation as she had been through a similar experience.”

**And where are they going?**

Although the past ten years have been very tough at times, Joanna has no regrets about the decisions they have made, especially in changing the body shop management system. They have stayed true to their values and continue to turn out high-quality work.

“We have a solid reputation in the community, and we feel we really do have a future in the industry. We are already becoming more efficient – I haven’t picked up a pen since we

installed the system – it’s just so much more efficient. However, we will always retain our hands-on approach as we feel this is what really sets us apart.”

The Dickers have only recently employed an apprentice spray painter as Brett firmly believes in passing on his knowledge – another positive for the future of this medium-sized business with nine employees processing an average of 20 cars per week.

It was clear from the discussion that both Joanna and Brett had been through some stressful times, but it was also clear that they are in a much better space today.

**Editor: It was a pleasure to hear the Dicker’s story of facing great adversity and having the resilience to find a way through by reaching out when they needed to and making the decision to change their system and change their future.**

**If you are in a similar situation, don’t wait until it all gets too much: reach out to someone you know – perhaps even start the conversation with your GP.**

**Rebecca’s story**

REBECCA WITT, NSW SALES MANAGER, IBODYSHOP SHARES HER EXPERIENCE, WHICH YOU WILL SEE HAS MANY SIMILARITIES WITH JOANNA AND BRETT DICKER

In the early 1990s I left the NSW Police Service to buy a little two-man shop on the Northern Beaches of Sydney with my then husband, who was a spray painter.

This was a time in the industry when repairers had good relationships with the insurers and our customers could choose their preferred repairer. We grew quite quickly through word of mouth and, looking back on it today, I know that it was that extra personal touch and care for the customer and their needs that was the catalyst for growth.

The introduction of automated claims in the late ’90s plus talk of repair centres was the beginning of change – it took away that personal touch as claims with major insurers had to be made over the phone. Customers were being steered away and competitive

quoting took a strong hold.

Personally, I feel this time was the beginning of a “Cycle of Stress”. We were not only fighting to maintain our customers, but fighting to repair to the right quality and be paid accordingly, and fighting the never-ending Monday to Friday business battles. On a Sunday I would get an overwhelming feeling of doom and gloom with thoughts of “what am I going to walk into tomorrow?”

Almost 30 years on, as the NSW Sales Manager for iBodyshop, I am sitting on the other side of the fence and I cannot emphasise enough how important it is to have a positive attitude. I recall so many times when sales reps wanted to gossip about the doom and gloom in the industry or the bloke down the street going bust, so I decided to ban these reps from the business. The



negativity breeds negativity.

I now approach panel shops with empathy and insight on how we can make the office and workshop more streamlined and help repairers feel they no longer have to be “slaves to the business” or get to the point where they don’t know how much more they can take.

I have seen repairers in tears wondering how they can simply get a day away without feeling guilty that work is not complete. What I love about my job with iBodyshop is that we can give them simple solutions, help relieve some of the burden of feeling they need to always be there.