



Freeway Smash Repairs



Proving you don't have to be big to be good at what you do

NEW ZEALAND-BORN GRANT JOHNSTONE OF FREEWAY SMASH REPAIRS IN OSBORNE PARK, WA TELLS US ABOUT HIS JOURNEY IN THE AUSTRALIAN COLLISION REPAIR INDUSTRY OVER THE PAST 27 YEARS.

Originally a timber machinist, Grant did an adult apprenticeship in panel beating at one of the largest panel shops in Auckland and even before he completed his qualification, he was promoted to run the workshop. He stayed on for another couple of years before heading off on a working holiday where he based himself in London and got extensive industry experience around Europe. On his way back to Auckland, he stopped in Perth

for a friend's wedding and stayed – that was 27 years ago!

His first job in Perth was with John Hughes in Belmont, where he worked for 10 years as a panel beater, shop foreman, and then an assessor. His employer supported him when he wanted to move into assessing full time and he took a role with the RAC, where he stayed for several years. “The biggest challenge was to support the preferred repairer network, not all of

which were to my liking, whilst ensuring that cars were repaired to a satisfactory standard.”

When the founder and previous owner of Freeway Smash, an RAC preferred repairer for over 20 years, decided to retire about 12 years ago, Grant took the opportunity to buy the business. A prerequisite for the sale was that he had to take on the head painter as a partner. Although not a preferred option, things worked out well for a few years and they became RAC and SGIC approved and the work was solid. “I always wanted to be the sort of shop that my former assessor colleagues would send the work to.”

The partnership dissolved after a relatively short period due to differences in what they wanted out of the business (and what each was putting into the business). Grant bought out his partner and, to simplify things, now that he was on his own, he signed up with Capricorn. “When Capricorn says ‘it’s easier’ – it really is. I was able to consolidate my accounts, build a heap of member points and, of course, there is the variety of services available.”

In fact, more recently Grant was able to buy the building with the help of the wealth he had built up in his Capricorn account. “I just couldn’t have done it without Capricorn.”

However, the business has not been without its challenges. Things changed at RAC and the new management decided not to renew their preferred status. Grant could see



Grant Johnstone.



the numbers dropping off and although he was reassured it was just the state of the market, he was surprised when he received the “Dear John” letter, during the Christmas break. Not long after this, SGIC significantly reduced its network and Freeway Smash became an “Associated Repairer”, which was really a back-up for them. Since then, Freeway has been “self-sufficient” in a sense, although they are listed with Auto and General. However, the bulk of the work now comes from Grant’s contacts in the assessor network and a substantial amount of private work.

Grant believes his key point of difference is that he treats all the cars that come in for repair as if they were his own. “If any of my staff don’t feel the job is quite right, then it’s not good enough for us at Freeway Smash.” Interestingly, Grant does a final inspection on all repairs before they leave the building and he believes that it is this “care factor” that makes the difference and brings in the private referral work.

With 10-12 cars per week and four technicians, Freeway Smash supplements the panel work with other commercial painting jobs to keep the team busy and keep the revenue ticking over.

“We rely on Glasurit waterborne technology for all our work. Although it is a bit more expensive, the quality is well worth the investment. Similarly, we invest in 3M consumables, which

we also believe improves the final result.” It is clear that by partnering with suppliers of high-quality materials, Freeway Smash has become the business that Grant set out to have.

Grant believes that one of the key challenges within the Perth collision repair industry is that there is very little training taking place. “The good shops won’t train because there are no volume guarantees, and the ‘rapid shops’ that do have the volume, don’t have the time.”

Still in his early fifties, Grant looks ahead and is already planning for “life after Freeway Smash”. “Although we are still a relatively small business, we really are a part of the fabric of the local community. I am still looking for the right transition plan that further enhances the reputation on which Freeway Smash Repairs is built.”

However, Grant is a pragmatist and has a realistic view of the future. He is all too aware of the ongoing consolidation in the industry and the changing nature of the relationships with insurers – he is under no illusion where his business fits in.

Editor: It was refreshing to meet a real down-to-earth small business owner who takes great pride in his work and his brand.

