



# Auto Body and Paint

## Over four decades of commitment to the industry

CHRIS BRINKWORTH, 40-YEAR VETERAN AND MANAGER OF AUTO BODY AND PAINT, TAKES US BACK TO WHERE IT ALL BEGAN AND SHARES THE SECRETS OF THEIR SUCCESS.

“Growing up in and around a panel shop in suburban Perth, I was always fascinated with all things mechanical – even as a child, if it had wheels, I wanted to figure out what made it work. Once I was old enough to go to my dad’s workshop, well, nothing was safe!”

Chris’ dad Peter even has a photo of him as a 5-year-old with a big smile on his face and covered in oil and grease, hoisting out a V8 engine from a ’62 Studebaker. From those early beginnings, Chris was destined to work in the motor industry.

Chris’ journey in the smash repair industry began in 1980 when he landed a job with Recon Smash, a business established to service the needs of the Regent Motors Group (RMG) in Perth. In fact, one of the “founding fathers” of Recon Smash, Robert Van Helvoort, is still a current director of the business.

Chris began as a labourer in the panel shop, where his boss told him his only job was to keep the place clean, swept, and in good order with nothing out of place. However, when that was done, he was free to help the tradesmen. “Trust me, I flew through

my cleaning duties for the chance to work on a car, although I spent 12 months proving myself before I was offered an apprenticeship. I was fortunate to be taught by some truly talented tradesmen, both on the job and at the TAFE, and I also won an Apprentice of the Year award each year of my apprenticeship.”

When Chris became a qualified as a tradesman in 1985 he continued to learn and enjoyed using his new-found skills. In 1986 he was offered the position of workshop foreman, where he quickly figured out that the more he could teach his team, the easier his job was going to be. However, following a serious car accident in 1990, he found himself on crutches and unable to work, but the boss kept him on to help around the office, answering the phone and ordering parts. “I think at that point I knew that running a panel shop was what I wanted to do, and soon after I was offered the position of assistant manager.”

However, by end of 1993 the business had been doing it tough and so the owners decided to scale back operations, let 75 percent of the staff

go and move the business into a single workshop unit. It looked like the end for Recon Smash, but it turned out to be Chris’ big break as he was offered the position to manage the few remaining workers, although he had a budget to lose money every month when he took the helm.

“Thanks to the “Plan for Profit” program run by Dulux paints, I learned many of the skills required to run a successful business, and in no time the business was making a profit and growing again, albeit slowly as the owners, who had their fingers burnt, were none too keen to invest.” However, by 1999, following five years of positive returns, the business moved to a new, larger site and a new Lowbake spray booth and prep bay was installed, as well as a new Chief bench and laser measuring system. This led to a sustained period of constant returns and growth.

One of the most fulfilling and rewarding achievements was in 2015 when the business qualified as a Toyota factory authorised repairer. With the support of Paul Bower of Toyota Australia, who not only set the



standards but also guided the implementation, the business is now at the point where the “Toyota way” has become part of their DNA.

Their relationship with Toyota is reflected in the day to day operations – process-driven, proactive and applying a continuous improvement philosophy. The 5S principles are also a key part of the business, which includes getting the parts suppliers to use the “just in time” principle whenever possible.

“However, the real key is discipline, as there is no value in having the best processes if you don’t have the discipline to follow them, and that means everyone doing the same thing the same way, which can be a challenge for any manager. But as the title suggests, managing people is the key to success. For example, if someone points out a better way, we make sure to change the process and share it with all staff.”

Chris continues: “The philosophy is simple: prioritise the decision-making process to first benefit the guest (customer); second benefit your colleagues, who in turn support the guest; and thirdly, benefit yourself. When everyone is putting the needs of others before their own, we know that everyone around you has your back.” For many years Chris has referred to customers as guests, and he sees his staff as part of a family, today the Auto Body and Paint family, and the facility is effectively the family home.

Of course, some years are more challenging than others, with work provider partnerships coming and

going along the way, and key personnel retiring or just finding other opportunities elsewhere. “We’ve always strived to be an employer of choice and it’s a real compliment if an employee can use the skills they’ve learned to better their career. The true mark of a good business is to have your staff seen as the best in the industry.”

Chris is also philosophical as he sees partnerships with work providers and maintaining a strong transparent

relationship as paramount to success. They have a long-term association with Toyota Insurance, RAC, Allianz and IAG. “I must make a special mention of the IAG partnership and the high standards they set. I can confidently say we are a better repairer as a result, and we are always striving to exceed both our suppliers KPIs and in turn, our mutual customers’ expectations.”

RMG has now grown to become



Chris and Jenny Brinkworth.



New equipment.



The Workshop.



a multi-site dealership network covering some 14 brands, with director Tyson Sutton being the driving force of this growth over the past decade.

Fast forward to 2020, and you find the business in yet another new premises, this time with a new business name, Auto Body and Paint, which better reflects the aspirations of the key stakeholders. With the new location comes a new challenge – to produce 60 to 70 repairs per week with a staff of 20 tradespeople plus support staff. However, and not surprisingly, Chris singles out someone who has been integral to the business: “My wife Jenny has been my rock throughout the journey and has supported me even at times when I had to put the needs of the business ahead of family time. Jenny is now supporting Andrea in the office and much better understands the pressures and challenges that the collision repair industry can bring.”

Auto Body and Paint has once again invested in new equipment, and again Lowbake was the spray booth supplier of choice as both previous booths lasted 20 years. The new equipment is an Alpha spray booth and a gas arch spray cabinet along with five down draft prep areas. They have added a Cellete chassis bench to service their BMW clientele, along with two mini Chief benches for small rapid repairs.

“In 1999 we made the decision to become a Glasurit shop, and we’ve been with them ever since. Although we began with 55 line, we are now using 90 line, the waterborne offering with outstanding hiding power, easy application and optimal process

times.” The importance that suppliers such as BASF can make to a business in the areas of product development, management training, benchmarking and ongoing staff training is not lost on Auto Body and Paint. “I’ve always said, ‘a can of paint is can of paint’ and anyone can sell you a can. What makes the difference is the technology in the can and the backup support that comes with it.”

Chris was delighted when they were appointed a BMW approved repairer: “I must say, BMW is setting a new standard in brand-specific

training, in conjunction with I-CAR Australia, and in relation to equipment levels and business presentation.”

It is clear that the future looks bright for Auto Body and Paint. They have plans to further develop their new site with the recently purchased four adjoining units. Chris really sums it all up: “There’s an old adage that says, ‘build it and they will come’. However, I say it’s more important to offer a great guest experience, quality repairs at a competitive price, creating an environment where work providers want to do business with you.”



The Auto Body and Paint family.

