



# Finishline Autobody Repairs Setting a new benchmark in Adelaide

WE VISIT ONE OF THE LATEST AND MOST IMPRESSIVE NEW FACILITIES IN ADELAIDE AND MEET RAYMOND KHABBAZ, A PROFESSIONAL BUSINESSMAN WHO HAS BROUGHT HIS EXTENSIVE EXPERIENCE TO THE COLLISION REPAIR INDUSTRY.

Raymond kicked off the discussion with a bit of his own background and how he came to be in the collision repair industry. He pointed out that over his 47 years in business he has experienced many different business disciplines, and in the late 1980s to early 1990s owned one of the largest collision repair facilities in Adelaide, Plush Crash Repairs at Fullerton. “We grew the business significantly and became the first South Australian collision repairer to divest, rather than implement a succession plan. First and foremost, we are businessmen.”

Raymond’s career took him into

the food processing industry where he enjoyed a long and successful career, including managing both national and international businesses employing hundreds of people. “I exited the majority of my business interests in 2019 and I’m in what I like to call “Gap Year 2”. Finishline has become one of my gap year projects. We’ve owned this property and operated on the site as an aftermarket business since 2007, although we always kept an eye on the collision repair sector, particularly as my brother Les is an experienced panel beater and spray painter. We decided to refurbish the site in late

2019 with a view to establishing a benchmark facility.”

It’s clear that Finishline has well and truly set a high bar, as no expense has been spared, even as the industry slowed down in 2020, casting a shadow over the short-term health of the sector and the economy as a whole. The facility has already been recognised with a state and national award in late 2020. “This gave us confidence that we had made the right decision, although it is still early days, and the business is still in an embryonic stage. We like to think of ourselves as a family business



Raymond with his pride and joy.

underpinned by corporate experience, which means we are always thinking strategically about the business.”

Some of the staff have been working with Les for many years, and at this stage it's 7½ people doing up to a dozen repairs per week, mostly low impact work. Growth will come and when it does, Finishline will be in a better position to look at investing in new talent and initiate their apprentice training program. “We have extensive experience developing apprentices during our time at Plush and expect to transplant this into Finishline. As with the physical assets, we are not afraid of investing in human assets – it's the backbone of the business.”

Raymond was keen to discuss the changing nature of the industry and how it is impacting the development of Finishline. He is philosophical about the trend towards consolidation and the associated downward pressure on rates, and the influence that the insurers have over deciding where the work is directed. “Fundamentally, we are all in this together, so the onus is on all of us to make it work. Sure, we all have to coexist, but we believe that we need to develop our own value proposition and protect our own business. It's a tough industry with many challenges, but one in which we are invested and determined to succeed.”

We turned to the ever-changing collision repair environment into which

Finishline has jumped to discuss the impact on the business. Raymond said he intended to build a facility that looks like a dealership and had expectations they would attract OEM recommendations and/or OEM approvals. However, Raymond found that some of the OEM's existing relationships are deeply entrenched and therefore this initiative has been somewhat more of a challenge, although they are now underway with an alignment with Genesis. “We find it interesting that OEM-certified repairers are expected to follow approved procedures, use approved equipment and have OEM-trained technicians. Well, our view is every repairer should be required to do this – it's a fundamental requirement of returning the vehicle to pre-accident condition. Hopefully, our position on this point will assist in raising our profile with the OEMs.”

Finishline does all their own pre- and post-scanning, in addition to the vast majority of recalibration, although whenever new sensors, cameras, Radar and LiDAR are required, they are fitted and aligned by the relevant dealer.

The Khabbaz family has a very long relationship with PPG – it goes back to 2013 when Les came back into the industry. So, when they were setting up Finishline, PPG was a natural choice. “The quality of the coatings – Envirobase water-based

basecoat – and PPG's exceptional levels of service and support have been the benchmark here in Adelaide for decades, and they immediately saw our vision and got on board. We were particularly excited about PPG's all-new fully-automated mixing technology, MoonWalk, which we now know operates with ultra-precision, at the touch of a button.”

Joe Esposito, PPG's Business Manager in South Australia added: “When we saw what Raymond and Les were planning, we knew it was a journey that we wanted to be a part of. We were looking for a marquee facility to install the first MoonWalk system in the country and we knew immediately that we had found it. Finishline was built exactly as it was envisioned – they really do walk the talk – and to see MoonWalk installed and up and running is such a thrill.”

Kevin Woolerton, Marketing Director Australasia for PPG added: “Les and Ray at Finishline Autobody Repairs have done a terrific job of creating a state-of-the-art collision centre of excellence, and installing PPG's new MoonWalk technology is the icing on the cake. We are very pleased to welcome Finishline as the local pioneers of MoonWalk but, if the expressions of interest we have received from across the region are anything to go by, it will be the first of many! MoonWalk actually represents



Great street appeal.



the leading edge of some very cool technology that is coming as part of PPG's Digital Customer Experience. In the future, we may well look back and say, 'I remember when it all began.'

Finishline is "driven" by iBodyshop's fully integrated system-driven software and is a perfect fit for the way they do business, as everything is process-driven. They have also installed Italian spray booths from Prinz International, and pulling and alignment systems from Carbench, a relationship that goes back to the Plush days.

It may be self-evident what differentiates Finishline in Adelaide, but Joe is keen to add: "When Raymond decided to build this facility, it really was 'one-of-a-kind' in Adelaide, which is the more obvious differentiator. This is why we were so keen to add MoonWalk to the project. However, they also focus on building relationships with the owner of the vehicle, at what is an emotional time for them. They stand up for their rights to get a safe and proper repair and will always ensure the customers are completely satisfied when they leave the facility."

Picking up this point, Raymond points out that currently Finishline has no formal alignment or relationships with insurers, although this may well change in the future. They are happy to work with any insurer who is happy to work with them. "This industry is at the cutting edge of technology and when we bring a vehicle back to pre-accident condition and match manufacturers' tolerances, we need to be compensated accordingly. We just don't get the recognition, nor the reward we deserve."

Raymond also pointed out that the project was well underway when COVID-19 hit, but they were committed and forged ahead regardless. "With the much-reduced movement of people, accident rates declined significantly and what little work we had in the early months effectively dried up. It was not a great time to be trying to get a business established, but thankfully things are now moving in the right direction."

So, as Finishline gains momentum, Raymond is again philosophical about the future. "We still have the determination to create the most prestigious and most recommended collision repair facility in South Australia. Initially, we were aiming for 2023, but the pandemic has slowed down this progress. We will, however, develop a strong, sustainable business

that will have a long-term future long after Les and I have moved on to our next adventure."

**Editor: True to his word, Raymond is first and foremost a commercial person, with a successful track record of going "all in" when he takes on a project. Finishline Autobody Repairs is clearly no exception.**



A Chev Bel Air resto well underway.



PPG's Joe Esposito with MoonWalk.



A reception worthy of a dealership.