

Enthusiasm for business

There are many examples of workplace relationships that have resulted in romance and marriage. Col Jackson discovered a different type of workplace relationship - one that has resulted in an award-winning business partnership.

When Elite Automotive Repairs in Sydney's west gained the accolade of Mechanical Repair Business of the Year in the annual Motor Traders Association of New South Wales round of awards, it was due recognition of how employees of a business can successfully advance themselves through sheer dedication and hard work in their field of endeavour.

The awards are not part of a judging process; they are the result of customer feedback, nominations from within the ranks of MTA-NSW, which is representa-

tive of a large slice of the State's automotive industry, and association staff.

According to the association's CEO James McCall, the awards acknowledge those member businesses that have performed in their specific fields of endeavour at a prominent level.

"An MTA member performing above and beyond the call of duty stands out and heavy competition within each section of the awards is common," he said.

"Winning an MTA award is a bankable commodity as it gives customers a 'warm glow' in the knowledge that they are dealing with the best".

The Elite Automotive story stands testimony to how business acumen, a dedication to customer service and quality repairs and strong background support can hold sway

in a fiercely competitive environment.

It also stands to acknowledge the role women can play in male dominated enterprises where, generally, it is a man's world from both a business and customer sense, yet women who are prepared to learn, project their image (and perhaps authority) and show their knowledge - especially in the mechanical field - can win in the long run.

Donna Axiak (pronounced A-shack) and Darren Lindsell are the joint owners of Elite Automotive at Seven Hills, yet Donna has been working in the motor industry for the longest period.

Theirs is a story of two people willing to have a go - two people who enjoyed their past achievements working for an employer, and now reaping the success of their endeavours (and

a big gamble) as partners in a business that has gone from strength to strength.

Donna left school in 1984 before she was 17 and gained employment doing "office duties" in a mechanical workshop. She was more of a jack-of-all-trades doing everything from the books to customer service, but it was this willingness to have a go that set her up for a prosperous future.

"I did just about everything, cleaned spark plugs, helped put automatic transmissions together, selected parts for various repair jobs, all back in the days when points were part of the mechanics of a vehicle," she contends.

A few years down the track and Darren came to work for the firm to gain work experience. The owner and some of the mechanics were so impressed with his work and dedication that he was offered an apprenticeship.

The years rolled by, Donna learnt more and more about the trade and Darren completed his apprenticeship.

According to Donna, who by now was (sort of) running the show and was signatory to everything as "the owner travelled extensively".

"Darren was one of these blokes who just seemed to take control.

"When the head mechanic left a few years later, it was only a natural progression that Darren accepted the leading role," she added.

"Together, we assumed control; we treated it as our own."

And Donna is first to acknowledge that being a female in the motor industry means you still have to fight that 'male thing'.

She is also forthright. "You get to learn which (male) customers you can 'push' a little. They always want to talk to the mechanic, but when some customers

realise you know something about cars, they often will open-up," she says.

"But there are those who will just not talk to a female.

Donna married in 1990, and soon cut back her working week to start a family.

"There was a full-timer in the office," said Donna, "but I can't remember a time when I wasn't there at least once a week.

She and husband Mick have four children.

Meanwhile Darren married Kelly in 1999 and they now have two children.

The introduction of the Goods and Services Tax in 2000 was a significant time for Donna. "That is when I came back to work full time," she said; "the boss was happy and I got everything done."

Over the years the business owner made remarks about Darren taking the business over one day and in 2004 suggested he was considering selling out.

Donna and Darren consulted their respective partners and found they were in absolute support.

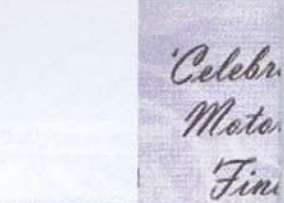
Negotiations started and stopped over a three-month period when and at one stage they fell apart completely.

Had all that work been in vain? They had set in place the wheels of business including trust accounts and there had been the legal fees.

The overall enthusiasm to become business owners was now overwhelming and it steam-rolled them into deciding to go it alone. They were prepared to start from scratch.

The hardest part was finding a unit to house a mechanical workshop.

Generally real estate people had a stereotyped view that the premises would degenerate into a greasy dirty mess and no one would help until they found an



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agent who was just the opposite.

"He found us a really nice unit," said Donna, "and by that stage we had organised all our computer software even though we didn't have a workshop.

"We had given ourselves a period of about eight weeks to find a workshop, have all the necessary equipment ready to install and start work in the first week of January 2005.

"That was our goal," said Donna.

In that eight weeks they:

- Found a workshop but could not get the keys until 4 January 2005;
- Organised signage;
- Arranged for phone and service connections;
- Sourced equipment;
- Completed reams of paperwork to the Motor Vehicle Repair Industry Authority (MVRIA);
- Came up with a name (Darren's wife's suggestion);
- Trialled software;
- Attended various Sheriff's auctions to source office furniture.

In the middle of all this Donna's 46-year-old husband suffered a heart attack and was in hospital for two weeks.

"I had to handle this as well," said Donna.

But the strong background support that had been promised by their respective families was forthcoming, including that of Donna's and Darren's parents.

"The unit has a mezzanine level and it doubles as a rumpus room for the kids so that they become an integral part of the business," said Donna.

"That was one of our goals, to be able to have our families with us and not be apart due to the many hours that we needed to invest into our new business.

"We practically lived here in the first few months," Donna added.

The deadline of the first working day of the new year arrived, and they still didn't have the keys to the premises. They duly became available at the real estate

agent's office and later that day their first two-post hoist was installed.

Their first client had a car booked in for the following Thursday.

"That's when we started," said Donna.

"Darren and I were 'it' for the first few

months before we hired our first mechanic at the beginning of March."

Elite Automotive now has three mechanics in addition to Darren and an apprentice commences indentures at the end of this year. Donna is in charge of

the office and customer service.

The workshop is open on Saturday and the number of staff on duty depends on the amount of work booked in.

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Donna Axiak readily admits she can talk a lot but her friendly and efficient manner is the driving force behind the high customer service standards that have endeared her to customers.

She can talk mechanics with the customers and she has particularly persuasive credentials - this year she became the only female member of the Institute of Automotive Mechanical Engineers' service managers group of which she is currently vice-chair.

Donna successfully completed her first Motor Traders management course in 1988 and has since added qualifications in OH&S, small business management and running a successful business.

Darren Lindsell came from a boat and ski racing background and saw it as a natural progression to move into mechanical repair.

"It is something I always wanted to do".

He is a strong believer in the value

of hard work and that you can never stop learning, and will go out of his way to attend a trade course that can better his knowledge and the efficiency of the business.

His post-trade courses include electronic fuel injection, ignition systems and steering and suspension.

He is a qualified air-conditioning and LPG installer, an LPG licensed repairer, authorised registration inspector and is certified to issue blue and pink slips.

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