

Disjointed by Rick Escalambre

The automotive aftermarket generates over \$300 billion annually. If you factor in new and used car sales, this number could easily reach \$400 billion annually. The automotive industry has contributed to our economy through recessions, depressions, layoffs, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, terrorism, and wars. Why does this industry continue to struggle to improve its image and gain the respect it deserves and has earned?

Webster's Dictionary defines Disjointed as dismembered, disconnected, without unity or coherence. The automotive industry is disconnected, without a desirable public image and unity or coherence. Suppose you look at the number of automotive organizations operating throughout the nation. In that case, the only thing they have in common is that they represent small and different factions of the automotive industry. Each organization operates with good intentions, but small groups without strong cohesion do not provide the articulation, continuity, or strength in numbers necessary to implement change.

Another major problem is that *anyone* who wants to perform car repairs can! California's only legal requirements are registering as a business and obtaining an ARD License from the Department of Consumer Affairs. There are no industry technical standards they must meet to perform automotive repair. Customer service quality will remain questionable without industry standards for servicing modern vehicles. The automotive consumer will continue to look at us through jaundiced eyes. Should this industry consider mandatory licensing? Then, the automotive repair industry could be a profession, not a disjointed group of people with vastly disparate skill levels who repair vehicles. However, the various trade associations now competing for our membership cannot effectively self-regulate or oversee technician licensing.

Throughout California, you hear each major manufacturer touting their training program and pushing NATEF and AYES. Once again, we see a disjointed industry. The OEMs move NATEF and AYES, thinking that their promise of vehicle, components, and service manual donations are enough incentive to entice educational institutions to become certified. Unfortunately, vehicles and components do not pay the bills. The cost of school certification programs can exceed the annual budget of high schools. I would ask certified institutions: has NATEF brought your school the industry support, like vehicles and components you envisioned? If an institution is not affiliated with a major manufacturer, are donations challenging to obtain? Here is a quote from an executive from a major manufacturer, "Over the last few years, **XYZ** has changed regarding who will receive donated vehicles. At the same time, we have fewer vehicles to donate. Currently, **XYZ** has only been donating vehicles to NATEF and AYES schools. If you talk to these schools, they will tell you they are not getting enough donations. In short, there are not enough donations to go

around.” Why should my school go through the cost and headaches necessary to become certified if the benefits are not there?

In education, we often think we have strength in numbers, but this is not the case. The people with the power, money, and influence, such as automobile manufacturers and parts manufacturers, do not spend their time or money working together as a unified body that could provide real hope of saving vocational education in our state. Training is a small part of each manufacturer’s and industry’s budget. If the industry offered politicians the financial support needed to get their attention, would they kill off vocational education? The people who set policy in Sacramento continue killing off vocational education because they do not seem to see the need for it. They should consult the Department of Labor’s Employment Outlook Handbook and note the documented occupational growth projections. Then perhaps, with employability factored into their decisions, they might see long-term career education (part of their mandate) as necessary rather than use vocational programs as budget-cutting targets!

Automotive programs demand a positive image and higher visibility! I have heard, "My kid is going to college," but they seldom will major in automotive technology. The last time I checked, there were seventy-five community colleges with automotive programs; many of them programs offer an AS Degree in Automotive Technology. Private schools also provide AS Degrees through partnerships with accredited colleges. Politicians and parents of potential students need to understand that automotive technology can be a viable career path and that we are facing a significant shortage of qualified technicians. If we do not address this problem, people will have to wait longer and pay more to get their cars serviced or repaired. This will make for a depressed group of consumers. Unfortunately, the automotive repair shop will catch the wrath of consumer frustrations and anger, not the politicians who should have recognized this problem and attempted to save vocational education. We must immediately initiate a marketing campaign to educate the consumer as an industry. Trade associations, new car dealerships, mass merchandisers, independent repair shops, high schools, community colleges, and private training institutions should be promoting this agenda.

We also need to educate the automotive consumer we service! The automotive consumer is anyone who operates a motor vehicle, politician, doctor, lawyer, police officer, teacher, or student. What is one of the best ways to ruin the average person's day? For most people, it is to have a problem with their car. This is because we, as a society, are so heavily dependent on the motor vehicle. Every consumer depends daily on their car to get them through a day of work, a job interview, school, a vacation resort, a business trip, a medical emergency, or any activities. In most cases, people who support and use mass transportation must still drive their car to the train, bus, or rapid transit station. The industry must better educate people about the career opportunities awaiting their sons or daughters. We must do a better job of explaining the role the automotive industry plays in everyone's daily routine.

This editorial's idea is not to place blame on any group. I intend to "drop a mirror" in front of everyone associated with this industry with the hope we might ask, "What can I do to help?" Which organization(s) should I join that will represent and promote the automotive service industry as a united group of professionals committed to upgrading the image, pay, and prestige of the automotive repair technician?

Until our industry does this, we will continue to be the Rodney Dangerfields of the world, a body of individuals who cannot get any respect!

Note: this article was originally written on 3/02 and updated on 6/22. The question is, have things changed much?