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When Inspiration Strikes

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Editor's Note: In January, in celebration of National Oil & Lube News' 25th year of covering the industry, we began a series looking back at the lube industry through the eyes of participants who have been involved with the business for most of those 25 years. This month, we hear from two men who were inspired early on by the industry's potential.

Jerry Forstner wasn't looking to get into the quick lube industry back in the mid 1980s. A veteran businessman, he was actually in the process of selling a different company when an acquaintance approached him about starting an oil change business. So, Forstner packed his bags and took a quick trip to Detroit, Michigan, to investigate the fledgling quick lube business for himself.

"At the time, there were maybe 40 quick lubes in Detroit, but none in our hometown of Cleveland (Ohio)," he said.

Intrigued by the idea, Forstner and several business partners opened their first store, a Pennzoil 10-Minute Oil Change, in Cleveland in 1985. The business grew, adding more and more stores, and eventually changed its name to Lube Stop. Forstner bought out the last business partner about seven years ago to become sole owner, and hired Tom Morley to be Lube Stop's president in January 2004. Today, Morley runs the day-to-day operations of Lube Stop's 37 facilities, all of which are centered in the northeast Ohio markets surrounding Cleveland, Akron and Canton.

For Forstner, however, the more than two-decade journey as a lube owner has been an interesting and rewarding one.

"This industry really became a necessity with the demise of the corner gas and service station," he said. "There was a need for someone to do the routine maintenance services that dealers didn't really like to do,

and that customers didn't want to have to make an appointment for. That's where lube shops fit in."

Forstner said that the business has changed in the past 25-plus years, going from shops that did only oil changes — "literally no add-on services," he said — to high-tech facilities that provide full-service automotive maintenance. What hasn't changed is how fast industry members can provide service.

"The quick oil change aspect has changed the least," Forstner said. "Customers can still get their oil changed in six or seven minutes if all they want is an oil change."

Like many who jumped into the industry back in its early days, Forstner and Lube Stop overcame their share of challenges. Unlike some, however, Forstner said his biggest obstacles didn't come from cities, but rather from governments.

"It was a real challenge getting zoning permits in the early days," Forstner said. "Cities didn't understand the concept. They didn't understand the need for a basement pit. And they weren't keen on giving us the required permits. We had to sue several cities, and even the state of Ohio, to get permits for some of our early facilities."

Forstner said another early threat to the company involved a wide-ranging news expose in the late 1980s that attempted to paint many auto service facilities, including fast lubes, tire stores and others, as rip-off artists. Lube Stop was never targeted, but many consumers viewed the company as guilty by association.

"We got past it with a lot of community service, a lot of hard work, a lot of advertising and a lot of convincing customers that we weren't those unscrupulous guys portrayed in the media," he said.

One of the biggest legacies Lube Stop has

created, and one championed to this day by Morley, is its focus on environmental responsibility.

"When I first started in this business, over 75 percent of people changed their own oil, and about 85 percent of those dumped the used oil in their backyards. That was millions of gallons of oil going into rivers and lakes," Forstner said. "We've eliminated millions of gallons of oil from the environment, which is a major positive impact. I'm proud to be associated with that type of company."

In fact, Lube Stop was one of the first companies in the fast lube industry to focus on re-refined motor oil, introducing an almost completely sustainable product chain that sees the company re-use much of the used motor oil it collects from vehicles.



The Lube Stop in Eastlake, Ohio, opened in 1985. Pictured, above, at the opening are Rich Kastor, Lube Stop's first store manager; Tim LaGanke, co-founder, Lube Stop; Eastlake P&Z director, name unknown; Eastlake mayor, Morris Becker; Glenn Purtell, Pennzoil; Robert R. Frost, Lube Stop investor; and Jerry Forstner, Jr., co-founder, Lube Stop.

With more than half of all Lube Stop customers opting for the company's environmentally friendly re-refined motor oil, the business Forstner helped create has had a

dig deep into vehicle owners manuals from today and 20 years ago, their recommended intervals — at least for "severe" driving conditions — are not that different.

sent a crew down, and they drove and drove but couldn't find the building. Finally, they called him and asked for directions. When they pulled into the lot, they found

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major impact on the environment.

"I think our focus on the environment has been a very big positive, not just for our company but also for the industry as a whole," Forstner said.

The Mother of Invention

Most of us know the old saw about necessity being the mother of invention, but for Mark Cawthon, owner of Devon Industries, it was also the inspiration for his company.

"Back in 1988, I had a friend who owned several lube shops. I visited with him and some of his employees about the equipment they believed they needed for lube shops, things that would be new and different and make their jobs easier," Cawthon said. "Things went from there, and I started Devon."

Twenty-three years later, Cawthon said what has changed most about the industry is its level of professionalism and the quality of services offered.

"Lube shops today are offering people all the services they need under one roof," he said. "People don't have to leave their car at a dealership or some other facility to have it serviced. The lube business does a really good job of fulfilling people's needs. Fast lubes today are one-stop auto maintenance shops."

Cawthon said that evolution from simple oil change shops to comprehensive automotive maintenance facilities has been a positive one for the industry.

What hasn't changed, according to Cawthon, is the need for frequent automotive maintenance. He said that if you really

"Oil changes haven't changed that much, either," he said. "You still need an oil filter and fresh oil."

While many of the innovations championed by companies like Devon made life better for lube operators, Cawthon said not everyone believed in the need for those innovations.

"I remember hearing a guy at an industry meeting talking about computers and how they were not important to have in the bay area," Cawthon said. "Now, you have to have a computer in the bay in order to access the data necessary to service most vehicles. It's a must-have, and you see computers in just about every fast lube bay in the country."

Having been in business for more than two decades, Cawthon has his share of memories.

"We once had a customer who had ordered a modular lube building, and we were going to supply the equipment. He called us and said the building was being shipped to his site on a truck and asked us to come install the equipment. So, we sent the equipment. The next day he called and said that the truck carrying the building had gone under an overpass that was too low and completely tore up the building. He was back to square one," Cawthon said.

"Another time, we had a customer in Florida who was really hot to trot to get a shop open. He called and said construction on the shop had reached a point where we could move in and install the catwalks and everything he needed. So, we

Jerry Forstner, Lube Stop

an open pit with no building and a foot of water standing in the basement. It wasn't anywhere near ready for us."

The downside to being in business for so long is Cawthon said he knows too many former customers who have passed away during the ensuing years. Still, he cherishes their memory.

"I remember a lot of people in this business that I have known, respected and loved," he said. "There are a lot of good people in this industry. It's been a good business to be a part of. People in this industry have great integrity. They are people of their word, and they do business with you in an honest and forthright fashion." ♦

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