

Defining Moments

A Look at the Past Ten Years and the Future for Women in the Collision Industry



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It is an unprecedented time in the collision industry: scary, yet ripe with potential for those open to change.

RECENTLY, AKZONOBEL CELEBRATED THE TEN YEAR anniversary of its Most Influential Women program, honoring the best and brightest women of the collision industry; it was a time to recognize past achievements and a time to look down the road ahead.

Asked to identify “defining moments” for women in the industry, past recipients of the Most Influential Women award gave varied responses. Some detailed specific events, like Stacy Bartnik of CARSTAR serving two terms as the Chair of CIC or GERALYNN KOTTSCHADE of Jerry’s Body Shop becoming the first female chair of NACE.

Others described more subtle, though no less real changes in industry culture, including the recognition that women who run shops with a husband or father are full participants in the business, not to mention the successful female shop owners who go it alone without the involvement of a male relative.

Added to these defining moments was the creation of the Women’s Industry Network (WIN) in 2007, the industry’s first association committed to the advancement of women in the industry. Also noteworthy were the gains by female technicians in the Skills USA competition, with Sarah Strickland coming in tenth place in 2007 at the post secondary level and Rachel Fonseca coming in second place at the high school level in 2008.



The next ten years and beyond

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Although technical school teachers report that some of their best students are women, and many shop owners admit that a capable female CSR or estimator will more often earn the shop higher CSI scores than her male counterpart, this high praise does not translate into appreciably more women in collision repair. According to U.S. Department of Labor statistics of women in non-traditional occupations, in 1999 there were 167,000 “auto-mobile body and related repairers” but only 1,000 of them—only 0.7%—were women. In 2007, the number of women doubled to 2,000; however, with an overall drop in workers to 155,000, it still represented only 1.6% of the total number of people working in the technical ranks.

So, what is the reason for the shortage of women in the industry? Is this a reflection of the number of women pursuing technical school training or is it indicative of the number of women who are actually hired by shops? All indications are that it’s a little of both.

“When I grow up I want to paint cars”

The collision industry can take a page from another male-dominated industry, firefighting. In April 2008, an exhaustive study entitled *The National Report Card on Women in Firefighting* was published. It found that both males and females who actually became firefighters formed their ambition for that profession by the age of 11. However, women were less likely than men to picture themselves as firefighters when they were young. The authors suggested that the pattern could change by making women firefighters more visible as role models and actively promoting the career to girls and young women. They added

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that these processes must start early, before individuals enter the workforce.

Efforts to “speak to” young women about collision repair as a career path are spotty at best, and there is compelling evidence that they are even being steered away from it. Recently, a collision repair instructor shared with me that a class of middle school girls was given a tour of his college to introduce them to career options. They were shown the culinary arts and medical sciences departments, but not the collision repair or automotive technology programs. While the motivation is unclear, the result is unmistakable; the middle school teacher and college administrator prematurely closed the door on collision repair as a career path for these girls.

It is incumbent on today’s business owners to think about the future workforce. In only seven years, that 11 year old girl will be 18, wondering about her career. Will she see any role models in your shop? And is there anything you can do to promote the collision industry to girls and young women in your community?

The little secret that’s not really a secret

Recently a shop owner told me he hired his first female painter. He was proud of this. He was flooded with applications for the job and, “Clearly, she was the best candidate.” However, there is a footnote to his story: he admitted that he probably would not have hired her if he had not required that everyone in his company go through sexual harassment education. Before the training, he felt ill-prepared to invite a woman onto the shop floor, and he sensed there was a risk — a risk he could avoid by not having women work closely with men. He stated that by

conducting training, in this case an online program, it educated everyone on the issues, enabled him to articulate a code of conduct for his business, and gave him peace of mind to hire the best person for the job.

The truth is many shop owners and managers are uneasy about hiring women to work alongside men on the shop floor. They believe they are avoiding risk by not hiring women, all the while taking on an even greater liability — artificially reducing the talent pool by ignoring half the population.

Not only must shops look at recruiting female employees, but they must consider what it will take to keep them. According to a Right Management survey of 444 human resource professionals, between the cost of recruitment, training, severance and lost productivity, losing an employee may cost a business many multiples of the employee’s annual salary.

To retain women, employers need to think about advancement opportunities, work-life balance issues, and clearly communicated policies about appropriate conduct in the workplace. Consideration should be given to “big picture” messaging. This means everything from your web site to commercial advertisements and training materials. Look at the letters that you send. Do they start with “Dear sir” or are they gender neutral — for instance “dear colleague” or “dear customer”? (And when you get one of those letters, do you diplomatically let the sender know — as one business person who wants to make the industry better to another — you might want to make that form letter gender neutral?) Don’t forget, any extra effort you make in this area will be to your benefit with your female customers, as well.

Will this be a defining moment for your business?

A “defining moment” is most often perceived retrospectively; it is the look back over one’s shoulder, the “I remember when...” When first presented to us, it may appear as a crossroads — a place where new ideas and thoughts meet. This is that crossroads where survival dictates that new ideas and thoughts have to meet. It is an unprecedented time in the collision industry: scary, yet ripe with potential for those open to change.

Forward-thinking shop owners and managers recognize that they must run their business like a business. By educating themselves and their employees about what it takes to attract and cultivate a diverse workforce of top talent, and clearly setting expectations of proper conduct for all people in the workplace, they are empowered to fearlessly hire the best people and courageously let go of people who violate the code of conduct, all contributing to the good health of the business.

Make this your defining moment.

