

Ken Newton,
CEO, VASA

Under the Southern Cross

Diversification is fine, but can I make some money too?

This won't come as news to you because greater minds have warned of this for ages – the days of the dedicated aftermarket air conditioning installation and repair workshop are long gone.

VASA had a rule when it was founded back in the early 1990s, that membership could be gained only if the workshop earned 80 percent of its income from doing air conditioning work. A few years later, it was lowered to 50 percent. Now, VASA would be hard pressed to find ten workshops which do air conditioning repair exclusively.

The other problem was that workshops in the far tropical north did lots of air conditioning work all year round, but those in Tasmania (just up the road from the Antarctic) would starve if they relied on failed air conditioners.

The VASA directors were sensible enough to see the writing on the wall and about six years ago, merged with the Australian Association of Automotive Electricians. Now, under our new banner, VASA represents air conditioning repairers, auto electricians, and cooling or heat exchange technicians. The majority of VASA's

members are now auto electrical workshops and thanks to the technical evolution of the motor vehicle, the auto electrician has emerged as the kingpin of the trade, pushing mechanics aside.

There was a time when auto electricians were only found in back streets, usually in pokey little workshops littered with bulbs and wires and strange electrical gadgets, with no customer facilities – mainly because they didn't see many retail customers. They got most of their work from the big garages on Main Street. Auto electricians were regarded as nerdy guys who could fix electrical problems in cars.

These days, of course, cars are mostly electrical, electronic or computer driven. While mechanics are still necessary, they have increasingly taken a back seat while the auto electrician has moved from back street to Main Street.

In a rather dramatic reversal of hierarchy, many VASA members now employ mechanics in their workshops. They offer mechanical repairs as a value added offshoot to the core business of auto electrical. Nowhere else is this diversification in the auto repair business so clearly expressed than at the bi-annual Wire & Gas Convention, which has been hosted by VASA since the mid nineties.

By the time you read this, several hundred Australian and New Zealand technicians will have attended the next Convention in mid-June 2010. The Convention is unlike any other. VASA has managed to turn it into a three-day spectacle of training and trade show, with the large-group plenary speakers gone the way of the Dodo.



This trend is by popular demand. Once the technicians got a taste of the training programs at the Convention, they voted for more action and less talk. As a result, this year breaks all records for training, but unlike the conventions of pre-2000, when trade displays and speakers were dominated by mobile air conditioning, this year's training line-up points up the diversification trend in Australian and New Zealand workshops.

Of the ten training sessions being offered, only two are devoted to air conditioning subjects. Others will teach about CAN bus, engine management systems, alternator rebuilding, ECU programming and recoding, hybrid maintenance and radiators and cooling systems.

One of the most popular courses is expected to be the one devoted to better business, for which the convention organizers have coined a rather catchy sub-theme 'Learn to Earn.' One of the country's top business gurus has been hired to help workshop owners make better profits without burning themselves out.

Aftermarket auto workshops have a reputation in this country for being good at their job, but lousy at running a profitable business. VASA aims to correct that trend and will work in coming years to address this subject more forcefully. ❁

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