



Ken Newton,
CEO, VASA

Under the Southern Cross

Where else? Who else?

I've reached the conclusion that conventioners are a special race of people. You might call them "the chosen ones."

As I glanced across the crowded room at our recent Wire & Gas Convention, the show VASA hosts every two years for Australian and New Zealand air conditioning and electrical technicians, I realised that I knew about 80 percent of them by name.

These are the people who always turn up at conventions. They are highly professional technicians who would never admit that they know it all. They came to learn more. Wire & Gas has now become probably the South Pacific's auto equivalent of the Club of Rome, the most famous of global think tanks and centre of innovation.

A big statement, you say? Where else would you find ten of Australia's leading experts and trainers in one auditorium, covering—in an intense three days of knowledge sharing—a range of subjects from hybrid maintenance to fixing the aircon on a huge piece of road building machinery?

Wire & Gas has stopped paying ridiculously high prices for ex-Olympians or sporting heroes trying to inspire workshop technicians with their own tales of triumph over adversity. In some cases, these so-called motivational speakers cost \$10,000 just to tell us "don't give up, you'll get there."

The plenary session is gone, replaced by a quick overview of the industry by a couple of our gurus, an open forum and an annual general meeting of VASA to which everyone is invited. Then it's nothing but trade show and training, with a slap-up dinner in the middle for three solid days.

So as I looked around the room at the familiar faces, I couldn't help but wonder where the rest of the 20,000 or more potential delegate technicians were. Why is it, that year after year since these conventions began in 1994, do we see mainly the same faces, with a smattering of new people? Regardless of the state of the economy or of the motor industry, we can never get more than 400 people to a convention.

And how come, with this recent convention, the biggest promotional campaign ever launched through our leading wholesalers still was only able to capture the same sea of faces and a handful more?

Is it the cost, the apathy, the distance?

Can't be the distance. One delegate travelled five hours by plane and another seven hours on the road to get to the convention from a remote Western Australian mining town. He's so desperate for knowledge that he would think nothing of driving half way across the continent to go to one training night. He pleaded with us "please give us more training, we will go anywhere to get it."

A guy I'd never seen before at any convention came up to me, and with real tears welling up in his eyes, thanked me over and over for allowing him to come to the best show of his life. "I have one complaint," he added. "How can I listen to every one of the ten trainers when there are only five training sessions available?" That's true. Delegates have to choose which of the five sessions they will attend.

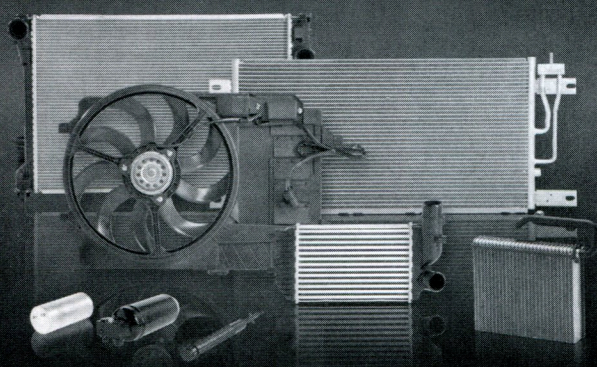
I asked him the name of the workshop he owned. "Oh, I'm just an employed technician at a big workshop in Melbourne. I paid my own way to come. And the sad part is that when I turn up at the shop on Monday morning, my boss will ask me if I had a nice weekend. He won't be interested in anything I have learned, or how I might be able to apply what I've learned to the welfare of his business."

Now that's apathy – or would you call it stupidity?

I'm thinking of a new approach to marketing the VASA brand. We might publish a list of the convention delegates and tell the motorists of Australasia that these are the smartest auto technicians in the land. Why would you take your car anywhere else? ❀

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