



It's Your Turn

Relationships matter

We tend to forget that people are more than just the human elements of the financial transactions we make every day.

By Billy Bentley

Like a lot, of my friends in the automotive industry, I started out as an automotive technician and was offered an opportunity to buy the family business from my parents. Together with my loving wife Dinnette, who is also my business partner, we have built a thriving business.

Our family life is fabulous. We have two wonderful children, a seven-year-old daughter and a nine-year-old son.

For most of my life I've been very fit and active; it was just my nature. I enjoyed running marathons, skiing (snow and water), kiting... and anything else that gave me an adrenalin rush.

My life was unfolding better than I

could have dreamed... but life can throw you a curve when you least expect it.

In May 2007, everything was turned upside down when I was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia – a very aggressive cancer of the blood. Things went south for me literally over night, and I ended up in a hospital, surrounded by worried family and friends. Although my health is stable now, thanks to a cocktail of powerful drugs, my future depends on a transplant of compatible stem cells – hard to find, since only one person in a million has body chemistry that matches mine.

You may have read about this in the last issue of *Canadian Technician* mag-

azine. Well, now I'd like to tell you how this has changed the way I view life... and business.

When I found out how sick I was, I was bombarded by a tidal wave of emotions. I became obsessed with thoughts of death and about what would happen to my family. My mind ran wildly, creating a vortex of negativity and anxiety.

But even when things look bleakest, I was surprised – and moved – by tremendous comfort and support from my staff, clients, suppliers, and other shops in the area. Their help has put a positive spin on the adventure my family and I are on.

I know it may be hard to believe, but



It's Your Turn

cancer can have a positive side. Here's what I've learned about true success in life and business.

1. Team members look out for each other.

My wife and I have the good fortune of working with an incredible group of people who formed a tremendously successful shop team. We didn't fully comprehend how wonderful they were until recently.

I have to admit that, as a shop owner, my concern had always been what my responsibility was to my staff's professional development. I accepted that I owed them proper on-going training. I wanted to help them learn the skills they would need to be successful at work. Now I expand that to think about their personal success as well.

For example, the challenges I face could be faced by anyone else on my team. As a shop owner, I want to ensure they have the financial resources to deal with it. Do they have disability insurance? Are they able to contribute to their own RRSPs? Am I allowing them to look after themselves by giving them paid sick days when they need it? Do they have a proper dental plan? Do they have comprehensive medical coverage?

If we can not provide each and every one of our valuable staff members with these important fundamentals, what kind of message are we sending? How are we measuring the success of our businesses? We are doing our families and employees a tremendous disservice if we are not there for them in their time of need.

I think we have to make the right choices – based not on finances alone but on our obligations as human beings. And as an industry, we need to consider ways to ensure that anyone in the aftermarket that needs help is getting it. Perhaps we need to have some serious discussions to figure out how we can do that.

2. Team members step up in crunch times.

I cannot say enough wonderful things about my staff. Last spring, we were persuaded to take our entire staff on a training session that explained exactly how our business operates. We actually shut the shop down for three days so all 10 of

us could attend together. No one was left out. It turned out to be one of the smartest moves we ever made.

Every member of my team was exposed to how to measure the success of our business. They learned the details of our management strategy and shop processes. For the first time, everyone fully understood the important role each person played within the shop. We learned to see the business as one big machine with many moving parts that all had to work together in order to survive, prosper, and grow.

When we took the course we did not know that our new perspective of the business would be put to use so soon.

In the month of May 2007, I was totally

Relationships – both in and out of the automotive aftermarket – are paramount. They are the most important aspect of our lives. They are our legacies.

out of commission. I was unable to operate the business in any way. Doctor visits and hospital appointments ruled my life. But thanks to a staff that could take absolute control of the business, May 2007 was our most profitable month in our 14-year history. They are a truly amazing team and they did an incredible job. They understand that business success benefits everyone. It does not just line the pockets of the owners.

3. Relationships matter most of all.

Everyone wants to make a lasting impression on the people they deal with in their day-to-day life. Sometimes it takes a tragedy to find out if you have been successful at this. The response to my cancer of so many people in my community and industry has taught me the true meaning of friendship, and the value of building relationships within our business community.

I was particularly caught off guard by the response of my main supplier, Sutherland Automotive, owned and oper-

ated by Eric and Teresa Knogler. Upon hearing that I was admitted to hospital, Eric and Teresa (without a call from me or my staff), started multi-day deliveries of parts. They also began picking up from other suppliers and dealerships to help lessen the load on our staff during our time of need. (Deliveries may not seem like a big deal to people in large cities, but our service facility is in a rural location where we normally get stock orders delivered once a week.) Each and every night, Eric and his staff dropped off prepared meals. Our property was cared for. Our grass was cut.

As news of my illness spread, clients, business contacts, and competitors all got involved, planning fundraisers and offering gifts of labor. It seems that through luck and positive management, we had created a community of people ready to pitch in at our time of need. They all transcended business and gave far more than we could have ever expected.


It has made me see that in order to succeed, we all need to slow down a little, understand each other a little better, and offer our loyalty to each other. We need to create relationships that transcend business.

When you consider what is truly important in life – our families and our friendships – you realize that we are people first, not just business owners, workers, customers, or suppliers. The people we touch in an average day are more than just financial transactions. They are fathers, and mothers, and sons and daughters. When we treat each other fairly, we build relationships that make our industry stronger.

And this is one of the greatest truths I have learned as a result of being diagnosed with cancer: Relationships – both in and out of the automotive aftermarket – are paramount. They are the most important aspect of our lives. They are our legacies. Next to our health, they should be our primary focus.

Ultimately, over the long haul, we create friendships.

We create a community.

We create our lives. 

Billy Bentley is the owner of Clavet Service Station, in Clavet, Sask.