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Collex Collision

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Collex Collision Experts' nine metro Detroit locations make sure to keep all customers happy

For a body shop to survive in the Detroit area, where independents, chains and insurer-owned shops all vie for a piece of an auto-savvy market, it has to be top-notch. To not only survive but also grow and prosper for more than a quarter century takes something special.

Say hello to Collex Collision Experts.

Collex traces its beginning to 1975, when John Gagliano opened Motor City Collision in Warren, Mich. Today, Collex (adopted in 1985, the name is a combination of collision and experts) has nine locations that basically surround Detroit. Their collective goal, according to Gagliano, is to make themselves "totally irresistible" to customers—both car owners and insurers. They do that through precise production and management, an emphasis on employee training and programs designed to ease the customer's repair experience.

Since the shop's inception, John has gradually brought his younger siblings into the business. Robert is COO, Rick is the vice president of operations and sister Grace Lopez is vice president of information technologies (IT).

IT was the key that opened the door to Collex's expansion, according to John. "We automated the first shop in 1983, and we went to an IT management system in 1985. That enabled us to start multiple locations."

After the second shop was acquired in '86, there was a nine-year span before the next two were acquired. The others followed in 1996, 1997 (two locations), 1998 and last year. Together, the shops total 115,500 sq. ft. and employ 160 people.

Information on all jobs is fed into a centralized computer system at the Clinton Township location, which is updated every 10 minutes. This central data system "is continuously being examined and modified," says Gagliano. Indeed, continuous improvement influences every function at Collex.

Communication is another key. Each shop holds a daily meeting to inform all employees of the status of vehicles in need of repair. General managers, parts managers and customer service representatives attend a monthly meeting at the training facility at Clinton Township to learn about new programs and get status reports on their locations.

The training center, or Collex University, takes up about one-third of the 40,000-sq. ft. Clinton location. Its size and well-equipped teaching facilities are a testament to the value Collex places on training. The

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wireless freedom in the body shop



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company provides ongoing, in-house training for all employee functions, including estimating, unibody repair, vehicle detailing and communication skills. Employees also have access to training programs provided by suppliers and industry organizations like I-CAR.

On-the-job training occurs through a highly effective mentor program in which a more experienced employee takes a new/inexperienced employee under his/her wing, offering training, direction, advice, support and encouragement.

Craig Weiskirch is a painter/helper who joined Collex two years ago. Paul Vigiano, a painter with 10 years of experience, mentored him. Weiskirch had some limited experience before he came to the Clinton shop, and, he says, "I thought I knew a lot. But Paul showed me things I had never thought of." Vigiano passed on techniques in color tinting, sanding and rubbing a finish that could only be learned through experience.

Employees get plenty of attention at Collex, but customers get even more. For example, they can take advantage of a 90-days-same-as-cash credit card, which allows them to make monthly payments on their repair or deductible for three months. The shop also provides free loaner vehicles to customers who don't have rental coverage on their insurance policy. The latest benefit is a Web site that allows customers to track their vehicles progress through the shop. Customers can log on to www.collexcollision.com and view each step of the repair process on their vehicle. It also allows Collex damage evaluators and customer service staff to interact with customers via e-mail. Not surprisingly, all nine shops maintain a customer satisfaction index in the high 90s.

Collex continues to grow. As of this writing, expansion at the Novi location was nearly completed, and revenues for all nine shops were up 17 percent during last year, despite the fact that auto insurance claims were down significantly nationwide.

Snapshot

Name: Collex Collision Experts

Locations: Nine in the metro Detroit area

Total size: 115,500 sq. ft.

Employees: 160

Equipment: Total of 163 bays; each shop has at least one downdraft paint booth and computerized frame machine