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# Slowdown drives car owners to repair, rather than replace rides

By Jonathan Devin  
Special to The Commercial Appeal  
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While many small business owners are struggling in this economic crunch, Sam Rudd, owner of Tracy's Foreign Car Service near Downtown, says his business is on the rise.

"People are rethinking buying a new car because money's tighter and because the automotive technology is changing quickly," he said.



At Tracy's Foreign Car Service, Sam Rudd, owner, and Jeff Grisham, a 15-year employee, run a diagnostic test on an Infiniti.

"They're willing to fix up a car they already own to avoid buying a new one. Suddenly that 10-year-old BMW is looking better than it did yesterday."

Rudd, 47, felt destined to one day own Tracy's, where he started working as a mechanic in 1980 after moving here from Washington state when "a girl broke my heart." He moved up the ranks as a shop foreman and manager and 10 years ago bought the garage from original owner Carl Tracy, who's now deceased.

"My aspiration was always to own my own business, and I showed an interest from the beginning that I wanted to own the place," he said. "Tracy had no one in his family who wanted the business when he retired."

The 30-year-old business specializes in BMW, Jaguar, Volkswagen, Audi, Volvo, Honda, Acura and Mercedes repairs, but Rudd said he also repairs some domestics because many of his customers have one of each.

Typically his staff services 40 to 60 cars a week in the garage's seven bays. He estimates he has invested about \$150,000 in technology to keep up with the changes in the automotive industry.

"A combustion engine is a combustion engine, but imports and domestics use different fuel systems, different computer systems," he said. "On BMW, for example, when you replace a module, you have to code that module to the computer. There's probably only four or five shops in the city that can code that module. Because the equipment costs \$12,000, they don't want to make the investment."

But keeping up with technology can be a losing battle, and Rudd admits that the rush to create eco-friendlier automobiles presents a challenge. He urges caution to customers considering the first round of hybrids and flex-fuel cars on the market.

The trouble is that technology will likely continue to change rapidly, so the "green" cars of today, like digital cameras and iPhones, may be quickly outdated as technology becomes more efficient and accessible, he said.

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"There's a six- to seven-month wait for a Prius right now," he said. "It'll get up to 50 miles to the gallon someday but eventually they're going to get 80 miles to the gallon when they move to lithium batteries. People panic and don't do their research, and Toyota's sitting back laughing it up."

Good people bridge the gaps in technology, and Rudd says he'll take his chances working with a staff of six, some of whom, like mechanic Jeff Grisham, have been employed by him for more than 15 years.

Grisham said that he left Tracy's once, briefly, but sought every opportunity to get his position back.

"(Working on cars) is something you learn over time," said Grisham. "It's hands on, that's the way I see it and I like it. I like it here."

Rudd also relies on technology to explain repairs to clients. About six years ago, he brought Tracy's into the digital age with cameras and e-mail.

"If you want to know what we're doing to your car, but you have a busy schedule, we take digital photos, we get your e-mail address, I e-mail you the photos and we talk over the phone," Rudd said.

A monthly subscription to the Independent Automotive Technician Network, an Internet service that connects service technicians across the country, helps Rudd diagnose hard-to-solve repair jobs.

"If we have a problem that we can't figure out, we can go on there and there's a database with fixes," Rudd said. "We probably fix two or three cars a week from it."

That's well and good, said Cynthia Ham, a longtime customer who has brought three different cars to Rudd over the years. But what sold her on Tracy's was not necessarily technology.

"Recently when I took my Volvo through inspection, it failed," she said. "I drove it directly to Sam and left it and when I called to see if it was ready, he said 'yes' and that he had taken it back through inspection for me ... to which I replied, 'Sam, I love you.'"

Tracy's Foreign Car Service

Owner: Sam Rudd

Employees: 6

Address: 646 Monroe Ave. Ext.

Phone: 526-1644



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