

Eldon Ingram

Passion for the Profession

Training makes the award-winning difference.

BY KRYSZYNA LAGOWSKI

When Rob Ingram was only six years old, he figured out how to jump-start the family tractor.

“I’d start it without the keys, use my foot to push the hand lever, and move it into the parking lot,” he recalls. “My father took the batteries out of the tractor so I couldn’t play with it.”

Even then, Ingram knew where his passion lay. “I always wanted to come to the shop instead of playing at home during the summer,” Ingram recalls. “I grew up in the shop. It was where I wanted to be.”

Ingram is the third generation owner of Eldon Ingram in Stratford, Ontario. His grandfather, Eldon Ingram, bought a Texaco station with one bay in 1952. “With my father, Rodger, and now myself,



Rodger and son Rob Ingram

we’ve expanded to six bays with three techs and two service advisors,” says Ingram. His father recently retired from the shop, leaving Ingram in charge.

AUTOPRO of the Year

This year, Ingram and his team earned the prestigious AUTOPRO of the Year award. “We’re very proud of how far we’ve come, because we’ve only been part of the AUTOPRO program for six years,” he says. Last year, Ingram was runner-up for the award, but claimed the prize for his shop this year.

Ingram says his shop utilizes many of the NAPA programs. The selection process includes a mystery call to gauge a shop’s level of commitment to 17 different

business strategies. “They want to see how you deal with customers,” explains Ingram. “That was the final test, and we were one of two that scored the highest.

“Like any other independent shop, we had very little business management training,” Ingram confesses. “Once we started to work with Ideal Supply in Stratford, our NAPA Auto Parts supplier, we took some of their training. When they introduced us to the AUTOPRO program, we jumped all over it.”

He says it’s made an enormous difference to the shop. “We truly are locally owned but nationally recognized,” notes Ingram. “We can offer roadside assistance, national warranties like one year

20,000 kilometre parts and labour warranty anywhere in North America. And the 10 year, 400,000 kilometre powertrain warranty, that’s very valuable to our customers.”

Ideal is a family owned business, and Ingram says he enjoys working with them. “They back us very well,” he notes. “We have the freedom to make whatever decision we need in order to keep our customer on the road, and they always back us up one hundred percent.”

Training

There’s also business management training, provided through Ideal Supply. “The Dave Meunier TACT Automotive courses have been invaluable,” says Ingram.

“We’re always trying to improve things. We’ve been dealing with the Pro Shop side of it as long as we’ve been with AUTOPRO. It’s an excellent match for what we do.”

And naturally, he credits his staff with the shop’s success. “The people who work for me are implementing all this. They’re on the front lines every day.”

Although his father was a little apprehensive about joining the AUTOPRO program, it didn’t take long for him to see the value. “My father was in the trade for 47 years full time, and over the years, he’s seen how we went from a corner gas station service centre to where it became very labour intensive, and now, with a strong focus on diagnostics,” says Ingram. “Once he was exposed to the programs, he came right on board. He saw the value, knowing where our industry is going and where we need to go as a company.”

“We need to create a good experience for the customer.”

Rob Ingram, Eldon Ingram, Stratford, Ontario

Education

Ingram has been at the shop full time for 20 years. “I’ve been here since I was 18 years old,” he says. “When I was in high school, I was here pulling motors out of cars, diagnosing them.”

Ingram says he wishes he’d gotten a business degree before taking over the shop. “I thought I could come in as a diagnostic tech and run the business, but that’s not true,” he says. “There are so many aspects of the business that you need to understand in order to run a successful shop. The people that aren’t taking the time to do that are not going to stay around.” In the last 10 years, Ingram has taken many college courses after hours to educate himself to take care of the business.

“What we do from day to day isn’t getting any easier,” he says. “We need more young people in this industry. The average tech is over 55 years old, and the average owner is in his 60s. We need young people with energy, drive and the desire to move forward.”

Entrepreneurs

That’s where Ingram believes the industry will, to a certain degree, take care of itself. “The key to the future is business motivated entrepreneurs taking training early,” Ingram says. “Those are the people who see the value.”

“We have a shortage of technicians. And the best shops, paying the best wages with the best systems and procedures, will attract the best techs.” While money is important, Ingram doesn’t believe it’s the final decision maker. “Many techs stay with a progressive shop with good working conditions that treats them well and provides a positive, inclusive working environment.”

He sees lots of young entrepreneurs using their solid business background to push the industry forward. Since his shop is on a main road in a part of town which is being developed, Ingram knows he will continue to attract a steady stream of customers. “But we need to create a good experience for the customer, and for that, you need good management skills, with a good understanding of what makes a business work successfully.”



Craig Shoemaker, Tim Pile, Rodger Ingram (sitting), Rob Ingram, Bruce Grasby