

Vic's Transmissions

Keeping It Light

Vic Lisiewski and his crew at Vic's Transmissions in Elysburg, Pa., take transmission service seriously, but that doesn't stop them from having some fun while they're at it.

"We try to keep the mood light in the shop, because it can be tense," said Vic, who has been in business for himself since 1985. "We'll joke around during the day, pull pranks, that kind of stuff. Nobody screams at each other. If someone's having a hard day, they'll do something silly to try to brighten him up. We try to keep the atmosphere nice."

He applies the same approach to the ads he runs on local TV stations.



Vic's Transmissions in Elysburg, Pa., continues to grow, completing its latest expansion in December.



Owner Vic Lisiewski and his wife, Julie, pose with the shop's robot-like mascots, Turboman and Roverdrive, which are decked out Hawaiian style. The mascots get the attention of passing motorists and appear in ads for the business.

"We'll do 30-second spots, and we have a lot of fun doing that. We're a little bit on the silly side, so our commercials are pretty much geared to make you laugh. It gets everybody involved, and everybody likes to see themselves on TV. We have a good time coming up with ideas to make funny TV commercials.

"Same thing with the radio - we sponsor certain shows. Then we'll do a 60-second spot for that. Usually someone different, each time we do a different commercial, gets to participate. We're pretty much out there just trying to keep the mood light, and a lot of people just like to listen to us and see what we're going to come up with next.

"It seems to boost morale with the guys. Everybody's always coming up with different ideas."

Vic attributes the success of his shop to the dedication of his employees, support from his family, continually updated training and ATSG - the Automatic Transmission Service Group.

His wife, Julie, a registered nurse, handles payroll and taxes for the business. His mother, Dorothy, a retired bookkeeper, set up the shop's accounting system. Vic and Julie's children, Mark and Sara, also help out. Sara, who has worked part time at the shop

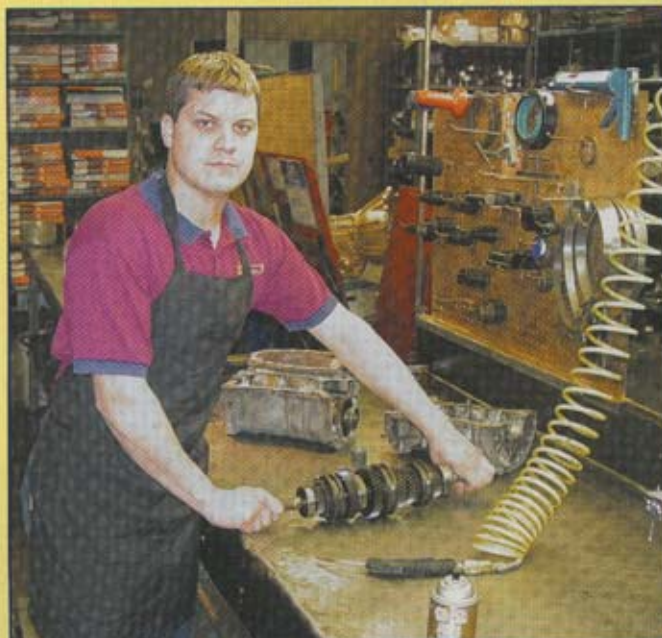
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since she was about 12, comes in after school to answer the phone and help with office duties. Vic's grandfather Tom, who was a mechanic but didn't work on transmissions, helped build several pieces of equipment used in the shop.

After graduation from high school, Vic attended Williamsport Area Community College, now known as Pennsylvania College of Technology, to study automotive technology. The first eight weeks of the two-year program covered transmission repair, and although Vic was supposed to rotate to a different class, he approached the instructor to see whether he could continue in the transmission class.

"I liked it and thought it would be nice to just specialize in one thing instead of trying to learn a little bit about everything," he said. The administration worked out an arrangement allowing him to concentrate on transmission repair, and he stayed with the same instructor and became an unofficial student assistant.

"He'd get a fresh batch of kids and he'd say 'This is how you do this,' and then he'd put me on it and he'd say 'Watch Vic do it.' He also taught night courses for the dealerships, and he would let me come for those for free. So I was sort of his right-hand man for two years. When I got out, that's when I wanted to do just transmissions, so it worked out very well."



Rebuilder Steve Cambria is the most-senior employee.



Vic shows off the waiting room, which includes visual aids to help customers understand transmission service.

After being the sole rebuilder in another transmission shop for two years, Vic opened a two-bay shop in nearby Mt. Carmel, in a building behind his mother's house. After expanding several times, he ran out of room there and in 1998 moved to the present location in Elysburg. With the completion in December of a two-bay addition, Vic's has five lifts, with the rebuilding area at the center so it's easily accessible from either bay area. Parts are stored in rooms to the side of the rebuilding area, and 30-40 rebuilt units ready for installation sit on shelves in the recently completed back area.

"We have a separate building where we have close to 300 cores ready to disassemble for parts or for rebuilding purposes," Vic said. "We also leased the lot right in back of the shop where we can park a maximum of 30 cars, so our parking area has increased also. That just happened in December also."

Vic is a strong believer in the value of training. He joined ATSG in 1986, he noted, and has attended the organization's regional training seminars every year. He also has traveled to Miami to attend training sessions at ATSG headquarters, and this year he and all the technicians went to Philadelphia for the ATSG seminar. "Also if other seminars come up, from Steve Younger or people like that, we'll go to them. I pay for everybody to go, and even the installers get to go."

The dedication of his technicians is evident in their willingness to attend training sessions on their own time, Vic said. For example, the staff recently stayed after work for a three-hour session to learn more about the Snap-on MODIS scan-tool system that the shop acquired about a year ago.

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Greg Barkus is a rebuilder who also performs general maintenance services.

The technicians are ATSG certified and their certificates are displayed prominently in the customer waiting area, which also includes a cutaway transmission to show customers how a transmission operates and a rebuilding kit to help show what goes into a unit when it's rebuilt.

Vic says he won't quote prices over the phone and tries to get prospective customers to come in so they can see the shop. The shop shuts down at 3 p.m. every Friday so the employees can scrub the floors and wipe down all the equipment and benches. When customers come in, "they see a nice, clean, well-organized shop," with friendly employees who try to make them feel comfortable, he said.



Technician Bob Snyder scans a pickup to diagnose a problem.

Before starting a repair, Vic explains what the job will entail and provides a free estimate. "If there's any add-on work, where if we might see a CV joint or something like that, we'll call them first so they're not surprised when they come in."

The nationwide ATSG warranty is a good selling point, Vic said, and he recently enrolled in Car Care One, a program offered by GE Consumer Finance that provides no-interest financing for 90 days on purchases of more than \$150. In addition to giving customers another payment option, Car Care One includes a free one-year roadside-assistance plan.

Another selling point, Vic said, is the shop's Web site, which includes pictures of all the technicians, a brief history of the business, warranty details and directions to the shop.



Tim Brouse is an R&R technician.

The Web site doesn't directly bring people to the shop, "but it is nice for a selling point when I'm trying to sell them a job. And I won't give a price over the phone, but I'll say, 'If you're having a little apprehension or if you would like to learn a little more about us besides what we're telling you, here's our Web site. Take a look at it and tell me what you think,' and I seem to get a nice response from people."

Vic believes there's a bright future in the transmission-repair industry for shops that stay up to date with training and equipment.

"The nice part about this business is it's constantly changing," he said. "You're never bored. It can be frustrating at times, learning new things, but everybody likes what they're doing here." **TD**