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## **Self-motivation keeps Nebraska shop owner passionate about repair business**

By Stephanie Skernivitz

Eric Dawson, 36, owner of I-CAR Gold Status AA Collision Repair in Omaha, Neb., has barely had time to pack up the party trimmings from the open house of his newest baby, a second shop – Shadow Lake Collision Center, five miles from AA Collision Repair in Papillion, Neb. The grand opening in May 2008 drew more than 300 people, including the city's mayor, fire and rescue, and state troopers. The opening also allured potential customers.

"The publicity instantly helped our business. People realized that we were open," Dawson says of the shop that opened in April across the street from a large outdoor mall also bearing the Shadow Lake name.

Dawson had no idea he'd be opening a second shop after just buying AA Collision Repair – an existing 35-year-old business – a mere five years ago.

One thing he does know, however, is that the love of car repairs runs in his blood. His father owned a truck shop in Des Moines. While growing up, the younger Dawson spent summers helping in the shop. Later, his dad sold the shop. Dawson's career path took a different route. He attended college for agriculture business.

"But as I began to think about things, I decided to do what I was ultimately good at – working on cars. I got a car repair job in Maryville, Mo., paying \$6 an hour in 1993. And now – 15 years later – I own two shops."

A critical element driving the success of the two shops are 18 highly regarded employees, all of whom have access to I-CAR training and ASE opportunities. Painters also are trained through PPG. In fact, one painter, Jeff Shoemaker, was the PPG Painter of the Year in 2006, a distinguished honor for his shop. As Shadow Lake grows, Dawson plans to hire more. Even though his employees are more than capable of keeping the shops running smoothly, Dawson still loves to be involved with the daily nitty gritty. However, he says he's near ready to relinquish the 12-hour days he's been working.

Of course, his drive to beat the competition might keep him coming back to the office. Competition is definitely an issue for the AA shop, although Dawson notes that his business has the most market share. For Shadow Lake, he says that the large shops in the area really can't compete with him. However smaller ones do make an impact with their loyal customer bases.

As part of his equipment investment Dawson has asserted his green commitment by choosing USI Italia waterborne compatible paints.

"Use of waterborne paint is the reason I define my shop as a green shop," Dawson explains. "The main reason I went to water is that I wanted to have the paints running now – not switch later. And I wanted to market that I'm a green shop.

"In a suburbia location such as where we are, people notice these subtle differences," he adds. "Ultimately, being green is icing on the cake. Having someone care about the environment can help promote your business."

Being green means as much to Dawson as staying on target with marketing, enough that he hired a full-time marketing person. Dawson is no stranger to newspaper ads, especially for the new shop, as well as television ads, along with community-related promotions.

"For a new facility you have to let people know you're open. Not to mention, because my landscaping wasn't done, many were convinced the shop was not completed," he says. Of course, now that the landscaping is done and the open house has passed, I'm going too fast," Dawson says half jokingly.

The revenues bear that out. In June, the new shop brought in \$130,000 in just its third month of business. Dawson predicts \$1.5 million in the first year, compared with the 2007 figure of \$1.8 million for the AA

Collision Repair Shop. "But Shadow Lake is easily a \$4-million location," he notes. Currently, AA Collision Repair has some well-established DRPs driving the business. Shadow Lake is not as entrenched in that end of the business.

The "real" million dollar question may be: Will Dawson's twin boys have a passion for the business like he does? At the tender age of 7, it's much too early to predict, but so far, he says they love the shop.

Their pending involvement is one of the reasons Dawson didn't keep the AA name for his latest shop. "That way, if one son is interested, and one son isn't, we can always sell one shop off," he says. "I want them to know if they want a piece of it, it's there."

"Another reason not to name Shadow Lake after AA – I want this shop to be a name they remember," he says. As for AA's name, he said it was the goal of previous ownership to have a name that would ensure the shop was listed at the top of the phone book listings.

Business names aside, the customer remains Dawson's top priority. The shop is even open on Saturdays.

"It's convenient for people to pick up a car on Saturdays. From our perspective, if you can land one extra job on Saturday – that's \$100,000 in sales a year," he says.

What sets the shops apart is the cycle time and the little extras such as cleaning every car. "But what I feel really sets me apart is the work on the inside of the vehicle," he says. "When you open that hood and see matched work, brush-touched bolts and undetected repair, that's what sets me apart."

He tries to steer clear of folks who speak poorly of the industry. "There's a lot of opportunity in this business, but only if you want to work hard. I'm pretty self-motivated. If I get something in my mind I see if I can do it. Once I accomplish that, I move on," he says.

As for online presence, Shadow Lake's site is still being ironed out. In the meantime, Dawson receives his share of feedback from the AA shop site ([www.aacollision.com](http://www.aacollision.com) [<http://www.aacollision.com/>]), which was recently rebuilt. "It's now easier for people to find us, which has paid off," he says.

## SNAPSHOT

**SHOP NAME:** AA Collision Repair and Shadow Lake Collision Center

**LOCATION:** Omaha, Neb., and Papillion, Neb.

**YEARS IN BUSINESS:** 35

**NUMBER OF SHOPS:** 2

**SHOP SIZE:** Shadow Lake: 14,200 square feet; AA - 10,000 sq. ft.

**NUMBER OF BAYS:** 25 in Shadow Lake; 15 in AA

**EMPLOYEES:** 18

**VOLUME:** Shadow Lake – 55 cars a month; AA – 66 a month or about 800 a year

**AVERAGE REPAIR COST:** \$2,300

**ANNUAL GROSS SALES:** Shadow Lake – month of June: \$130,000 and estimated \$1.5 million for year; AA–2007: \$1.8 million





Photo courtesy of Shadow Lake Collision Center

## GREAT TOWN USA

# 'Location is everything'

**L**ocation, location, location. Eric Dawson, owner of the newly built Shadow Lake Collision Center in Papillion, Neb., and 35-year-old AA Collision Repair in Omaha, reveals at least one secret to his swift success.

His newest shop is located in Papillion, the sixth best city to live in in the nation, according to *Money* magazine's 2007 list.

"The location for this shop certainly makes a difference," Dawson says. Not to mention, the Shadow Lake facility is strategically located across the street from a 900,000-sq.-ft. outdoor mall. He says he intentionally chose this location; traffic would be steady during the mall's open hours.

So he's got one foot locked in to an affluent suburban locale and another in a more established part of town. The two-shop owner also runs AA Collision Repair in Omaha. Dawson is observing how the location for AA Collision Repair is affecting the business, especially DRPs as there's a shift from some of the better insurance companies to some higher risk insurance companies. Nevertheless, the shop is "pretty hooked up to DRPs," Dawson says.