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Midwest Edition

Q&A: 2007 NACE CHAIRMAN
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The \$6 MILLION MAN

**Trinity Restoration's David Miller
aims high and scores big**

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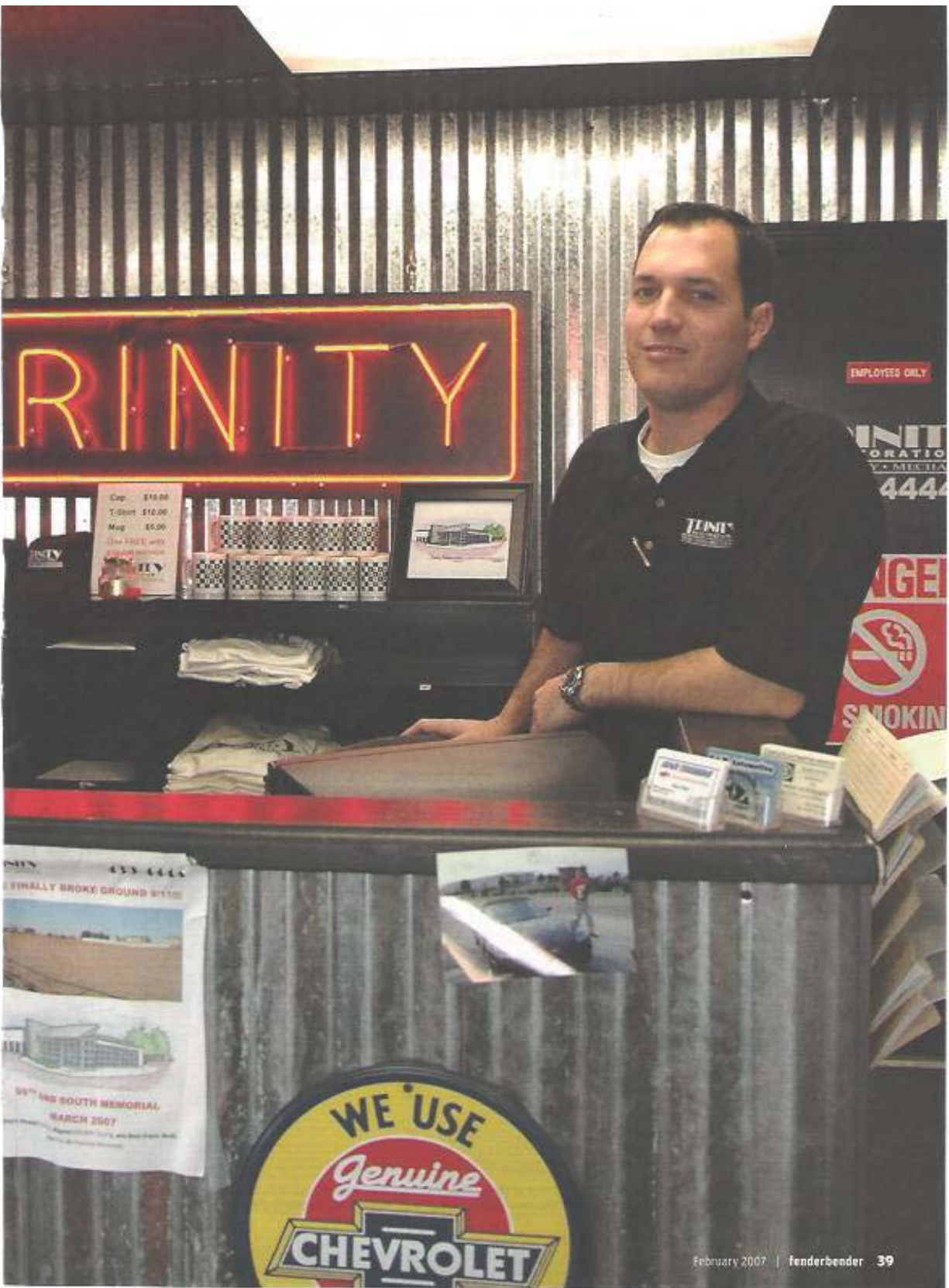
How David Miller took a business to new heights without using superhuman measures.

By Carin Rosengren
Photos by Jason Sales

THE \$6 Million MAN

IT SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE THAT A 30-SOMETHING with no experience as an automotive repairer could take a body shop and restoration business and quadruple its sales in three years. But that's what David Miller did, and a conversation with the swiftly speaking entrepreneur reveals that while he likely would've bested the competition no matter what company he bought, Trinity Restoration is exactly where he is meant to be. ▶





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"I think it's fun," said Miller, a 38-year-old native of Tulsa, Oklahoma, where his business is located. "I had an insurance adjuster come up to me the other day and he said, 'Miller, I can tell you're new at this because you still think it's fun.' I said, 'It is fun, what are you talking about? It's cars and people — what's not to like?'"

"He's just been doing it for 20 years. You see a lot of these guys and they're just burned out. It's just a job, and they don't even like cars anymore. My message to those guys is, cheer up or get out. Do something different. I think it's fun, but maybe I'm crazy. And I try to hire people that think it's fun. I try to hire people that actually like cars."

"[If] someone rolls in with an old Ferrari, I want someone who goes, 'Wow, that's cool,' you know what I mean?"

The shop that Miller bought did collision repair and restoration but now, thanks to business instincts that had him grabbing opportunity that popped up along the way, it offers complete kit car builds and a mobile repair unit that can fix just about anything that doesn't need a frame machine. The diversity of

Terms are Spelled Out in No Uncertain Terms

At Trinity Restoration in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a set of "Restoration Guidelines" proclaims itself to be "by no means all-inclusive" and requires the signature of every restoration customer before work on their dream vehicle will begin. It sets straightforward parameters on paying and plainly states that flexibility is a mandatory part of the process.

"As we're sure you know restoration work is a specialized process that very few companies even attempt these days. We here at Trinity Restoration love classic vehicles and will be very proud to work on your restoration," the guidelines state. It continues with a no-nonsense list of what a restoration is, including:

- **Billed at \$50 per hour as actually worked by the clock hour and NOT priced in advance**
- **Booked and worked on as capacity permits**
- **Slow to finish and can even take months to complete (so please don't drive us nuts with update calls or impromptu visits every day, but do feel free to arrange weekly visits or photo updates)**
- **Unique and therefore require a special case-by-case, limited warranty on work**

Your restoration work is important to us, the guidelines conclude, "but it requires us to be very honest and up front with you. We greatly appreciate your business, but please be understanding with us and we will return the favor."



THEY START ROUGH: David Miller estimates Trinity Restoration has done close to 15,000 cars since it opened in 1987. Once Mustang-exclusive, the shop now restores all makes, models and years of vehicles, does collision repair and will add full mechanical services this spring.

the facilities at Trinity, including three paint booths (one's not heated) in three buildings each dedicated to collision, restoration and kit car builds, also lets Miller accept some "oddball" paint jobs that other shops can't afford to have jam up production.

With all three facilities running at peak now (his 5,000 square-foot collision shop put out \$190,000 in collision work last December), Miller is ready for more. Last October crews broke ground on what will be the biggest collision shop in town, with two and half acres of parking and a 25,000 square-foot collision shop, plus 10 bays for mechanical repair work. Miller doesn't have any direct repair programs now but when the dealer showroom-style shop opens this spring, with a rental counter inside, they'll apply for that status.

With more collision, more mechanical, more room for restoration and a mobile repair sector that alone is likely to reach its \$50,000 goal, Miller anticipates an overall sales jump from \$1.6 million in 2006 to \$6 million in 2007. There's an unknown money-maker in the mix, too: a cable TV network is working to sell a

national show called "My First Ride," which would use Trinity to surprise unknowing subjects with their beloved first cars in all their original glory.

BUSINESS RENAISSANCE

It's difficult to imagine now, but the reinvigoration of Trinity Restoration almost didn't happen.

His dad was a mechanic but Miller followed his mother's career path, eventually earning three business degrees and spending 12 years in the roller-coaster telecommunications biz. He'd been commuting to work by airplane every week, and after his third layoff in 2001, he told his wife, "I've got to do something different."

In fact, the bug to own his own business already was in his blood: his parents had owned their own businesses and so did his wife, and in his MBA classes it was all that anyone talked about. He decided that he would find a business owner who wanted to retire and Miller would become his own boss.

"So I started looking at anything and everything within a certain price range," Miller said. "I looked at steel,

pharmaceuticals, dry cleaning, fast food — you name it — I was willing to look at anything."

(He nearly bought the steel company but the owner's wife talked him into pulling it off the market. "I almost wish I had that, though. The price of steel has tripled," he said. "The guy's made more money in the last five years than he did in the first 20.")

Then, Miller decided to buy an industrial fasteners company: "You know, for construction, like big nuts and bolts and stuff," he recalled. "Don't know anything about it, but it's kind of interesting."

With a verbal deal but nothing signed, he decided to see what other businesses were available, just one more time. That's when he saw Trinity, which Miller's broker didn't mention because he didn't think Miller was into cars.

"Yeah, I love cars!" Miller told him. Preferring cars to nuts and bolts, Miller confessed to being a "total car freak." He said, "I like the smells and the sounds — I love the sound of air tools, I like the smell of Bondo, and gas, and paint, and you know, I'm sick."

He talked to the shop's owners ▶



READY FOR A CLOSEUP: His large new shop will have a showroom, so that "while [a customer is] waiting for their oil change they're staring at an incredible paint job, so they're going to know we do restoration," said Trinity owner David Miller.

The \$6 Million Man

and liked what they had to say. A short time later, in 2003, the business was his. First opened in 1987, Trinity started as a Mustang-only restoration shop, but had evolved to include all-model restoration, collision repair and kit-builds. The shop works on classic and modern restorations, plus Corvettes, Porsches, Mustangs, Ferraris and Lamborghinis.

"We solicit fun, different, weird,

interesting, picky customers," Miller said. "But you get paid better to do that. Those guys have the money; they're willing to spend it as long as you do a good job for them."

Based on the numbers that Trinity puts out for restoration and collision, the job its employees do is "good" to say the least.

Trinity's average collision job is

about \$2,500, Miller said, and even without its new facility in place it does about 75 cars per month. On the restoration side, an average job almost doesn't exist: depending on what the customer wants, one project can range from a few thousand dollars to \$50,000 or \$100,000 or more.

In a year, Trinity sees about a dozen restoration projects towed into the shop and driven out the door complete, Miller said.

Painting the Town

Doors, vacuum cleaners and turtles? Oh, my!

Once a Mustang-only restoration shop, Trinity Restoration in Tulsa, Oklahoma, has evolved over 20 years to offer everything automotive, including collision repair, restoration, mechanical and mobile repairs. But owner David Miller isn't limited to that when it comes to using and selling the resources of his business to make a profit.

"It's mostly cars, don't get me wrong. Ninety percent of what Trinity does is just passenger cars," Miller said.

But with three buildings and a fourth underway, Miller has the luxury of juggling various collision, restoration and "oddball" paint jobs amongst his three booths. Without this, he said, the unique work would only get in the way of production.

Nonetheless, some shop owners aren't willing to consider this when it comes to using their paint booths. But as long as it doesn't interfere with collision repair or restoration work, this energetic entrepreneur is happy to slap paint on just about anything:

• **One customer, citing Trinity's advertising claim that they paint anything, produced a canister-style vacuum cleaner, which she wanted painted to match the color of her Lexus.**

He told the woman, who wore a fur coat and had a poodle in her purse, to bring the appliance to her "vacuum guy," have him take it apart and bring him the case, which was all that needed paint. "I will paint that and you bring it back to the guy and have him put it back together. That way if the vacuum doesn't work, it's his fault, because I don't do vacuums," he told her. The two-hour job made a happy customer of the woman and extra revenue for the shop.

"It wasn't hard. It wasn't very big," Miller said. "Her nephew got rear ended six months later and he came in because of her."

• **Another customer brought in big, old closet doors that were made of metal and had rust holes; they couldn't be replaced and needed major repairs.**

"She said, 'Can you weld these up and paint them?'" Miller recalled. "Sure. We welded them, grounded them, painted them and charged her a little more than we would've because of the time and trouble."

• **And most strangely, perhaps, was the prospective customer who brought in a dead, stuffed sea turtle, and asked if Trinity could put a clear coat of paint on it.**

Miller's response? "Sure. Couple hundred bucks later he's got clear on his turtle, he's happy, we're happy," he said.

He continued, "That's not for everybody; I think it's for some people. I'm a little outside the box. I don't even see the box. I'll try anything."

DRAWING BUSINESS IN

One of the first things Miller did when he bought Trinity was buy a second building, moving the restoration out and allowing room for more — adding staff along the way. While filming the TV pilot last July he acquired a third building, away from the others for noise reasons. With a six-month lease he kept the building and started building kit cars. The new-construction site, on the south side of Tulsa, will be among the first shops to preside over an untapped market.

"That's the direction Tulsa's growing, so that's where all the new dealerships are, and that's where all the high-dollar, big neighborhoods are," Miller said.

Not only will the two businesses feed each other, the mobile service is likely to gain business allies in at least some of those automobile dealerships.

Miller described the mobile operation as a "dealer-fleet set up" that's capable of bumper jobs, dent repair and more — "little things that body shops just don't do well, including us," he said.

The mobile unit is offering faster and cheaper repairs for dealers and fleets. That's what dealers want, and if Trinity can take care of their little stuff it's going to get them the dealerships' larger jobs, too.

"We pick up all the hard hits off those accounts," Miller said. "And that's really the bonus round; that's really the gravy; that's really why it's worth having."

The mobile unit's also designed to fix ATM machines, gas pumps, poles — anything a motorist can run into that can't be brought into the shop. Bringing welding, dent repair, paint services and more right to the job site allows Trinity to charge double or even triple what the work would cost inside the shop.

"It's kind of an interesting niche," he continued. "There are people that do that all over the country, there's just nobody else that does it in Tulsa." ▶

The \$6 Million Man



EYE-CATCHER: With Trinity Restoration's logo and phone number plastered all over it, shop owner David Miller's sleek Corvette turns heads when he drives around Tulsa, Oklahoma. "It drives the old 'Vette guys crazy," he chuckled. "It's just a sticker."

Beyond impeccable service and repairs, Miller's always looking for ways to bring customers back in, including free detailing on vehicles that have left the shop. He's also pondering an automated car wash where regular service customers would use a card or a code for unlimited free washes.

"We're trying to think of things that really lock them in so that they come back," Miller said. "Because collisions just don't happen that often ... most people have a wreck every five, six, seven years. But if I'm changing oil and doing brake jobs, I can have them in every 90 days for a good reason. If they get a free wash, they'll be in every week."

Despite having roughly 500,000 residents, Tulsa still has a small-town feel, and Miller has tried to keep that spirit at the forefront of his business. Every staff person talks to customers as though they are family or friends, asking them their situation and finding

out if they can help. "Is there insurance or not, are they a single mom with no money, do we need to cut them a really special deal?" Miller said. "We actually ask all that stuff. How do we help? And sometimes we take a loss. I've done some jobs for losses — little old ladies or people who really need it. I'll just tell them, 'Do me a favor. Tell everybody you know about me.'"

GETTING THE WORD OUT

"Tell everybody" is exactly what Miller did when he purchased Trinity Restoration. The previous owner didn't do much marketing. He had a couple of dealerships feeding him business and was content. But Miller asked his advice on how he might help Trinity grow.

"He said, 'Get out and sell. People in the body shop business do not get out and sell,'" Miller said.

So Miller sold and sold, and Trinity grew and grew. The first step, he knew,

was to create a new buzz about the established business. This included making a nice-looking logo, getting a catchy phone number, running ads, and getting out to meet, greet — "shake a lot of hands, kiss a lot of babies, cut some deals, get some flyers and some business cards," he said. "You want to sit and wait for business to come in? Those are the people that are not going to be here in 10 years."

But to spread the word and build a buzz about a shop, getting outside its doors is crucial.

"I'd go out and ask for business: 'What do I have to do to get your business?'" he'd say. "And I ask customers that when they're here. What do we need to do? Do you need help? We've got loaner cars, do you need a car? We've got a car for you. Do you need a ride? Whatever it is, if I can do it, I'll try."

Miller also built a buzz by meeting everyone in town who might send business his way. ▶

The \$6 Million Man



COME ON IN: By spring, David Miller's 5,000 square-foot shop in Tulsa, Oklahoma, will house only part of his business, while the collision repair and mechanic services are relocated to a new shop five times the size of the original.

"I met every insurance agent in town. That took awhile," he said.

Before he knew the formatted information could be found online, Miller broke out the phonebook and created a spreadsheet with all the local agents representing all the big insurance companies. After organizing them by street address, he started knocking on doors and spreading his business message. That was?

"To let them know we're trying to do a good business, I'm a good guy, give me a shot," Miller said. "Give me a car, and if that goes well, give me another. That's the biggest thing. If you're not in a huge market — and most shops are not in Phoenix, or Chicago, or Houston — they're in Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Little Rock, Arkansas, places where you can get out, and if you spend three months meeting every insurance agent in town it creates a buzz. Because a lot of these guys know each other."

For Miller's insurance-agent sweep, the results were typical for sales, Miller said: "meet 10, three are interested, one buys." He added that typically, insurance agents, if they liked his pitch — or the little gifts that he brought, would send him a customer about 25 percent of the time.

Miller continues to maintain friendly ties with mechanics, paintless dent repairers and auto dealership service managers, and isn't shy about asking whether they've got a deal with another body shop. He hands out sticky pads, pens, cards and donuts, and his contacts even call sometimes to ask Miller for more.

Important above all is to get the name of a business into the minds of the customers in its market.

As examples, Miller refers to giants like DuPont, McDonald's, GE and Kleenex, which have built "top-of-mind awareness" with their worldwide brands.

"Everybody rolls their eyes and says well those guys are big, we're small," Miller said. "Yeah. But could you be the 'Kleenex' of paint and body in your market?"

"McDonald's is spending a bunch of money because they're McDonald's worldwide. You don't have to be McDonald's worldwide, you have to be the McDonald's of Tulsa. That's do-able. Don't roll your eyes. Be one of the two or three guys everybody knows in your market. That doesn't take that much. It takes work; it takes money; it doesn't take McDonald's-sized money." ♦