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Virginia Auto Service: A phoenix from the ashes

A lot of positives can come from a negative situation if you have the desire to make it happen.

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Contributor



Outside of the daily vagaries of life, you rarely have to face rebuilding after a devastating loss, and hopefully never will. But if you ever should, come back better than before.

In 2004 an arsonist torched the majority of Matt Allen's Virginia Auto Service. By 2010 his Phoenix shop was one of Motor Age's Top 10, honored again other awards garnered in the years since (2010 Best Auto Repair Shop, Phoenix, 2011 Impact Business of the Year in Response to Adversity, semiprofessional Arizona State University's Spirit of Enterprise Award). As of last year he became a talk show on a local radio station. Allen credits the fire, or rather the struggle to

recover, with redefining his priorities.

"It took a year to rebuild," Allen reports, "and that was the catalyst to me really paying attention to how things operate, not just winging it and doing it because it felt like the right thing to do." Contending with no income, Allen had loyal employees with families relying on him. "It was really a wake-up call for me to get on top of this?"

business runs, how to manage the increasing expenses but I think 'how could I

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Finding Inspiration

Named for its street address, Virginia Auto Service has a long history on this corner near downtown Phoenix. Started back in the 1940s by a returning World War II veteran, it had been rebuilt once, then occupied on and off from 1962, when the founder retired, till 1994, when a young, enthusiastic Allen came across the boarded-up store. "I had never been this far south (in the city)...I wanted to be in business, and I found this place."

It was instant karma for Allen, who had divided his youth between Phoenix and Virginia's D.C. area. A former employer back in Virginia who would take old rundown gas stations and revitalize them also inspired him.

"He'd go in there, clean it up, paint the curbs, plant the flowers, turn it around--boom, it's busy the next day," recalls Allen. To him this shuttered business looked like the perfect challenge. "I saw the diamond in the rough, so to speak; I knew that I could do this."

He had the store cleaned up and running within a month, retaining the shop's name even though it now held little legacy within the community. "At that time I was 24 years old," Allen explains. "I was a mechanic; I wasn't thinking about marketing. To me marketing was putting my name on a coupon for a \$15 oil change. My focus was taking this horribly presented building, which hadn't been painted since it was built in the '70s, and turn it around and make it attractive to the people driving by, to the business community."



The subsequent shedding of "blood, sweat and tears" paid off. Starting as a one-man shop, by 2004 Allen was well established and ensconced with a skilled staff. Virginia Auto Service worked on all makes and models of cars and light trucks, doing their best to "do the right thing" by the customers. But late one June night came the call out of a nightmare scenario: his business was on fire, and by the next morning Allen was faced with not only re-restoring his business, but rebuilding a good portion of it. Fortunately three bays remained intact, but he had to struggle for two weeks to get power restored, temporary offices set up, and insurance claims settled.

Gaining Strength

For the next year they "limped along" as the shop was reconstructed. "It was a tremendously difficult time and we almost went out of business," says Allen. "It was then that I realized that if I was going to succeed I needed to start taking my business more seriously than I had in the past."

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len enrolled in mentoring programs with successful business owners, like those offered through the Automotive Management Institute. "I also joined Bottom Line Impact Group, or RLO training if you will. I just joined those groups and got around my peers in the industry nationwide."

Rededicating himself to the job, Allen started off by learning how to read his own balance sheet, then began looking into marketing and business planning "for the first time in 10 years." Riding high on this learning curve, he decided to invest in marketing and related technology, "alloca(ing) roughly 6 to 10 percent of annual sales revenue to marketing expenditures," he reports. Now annual marketing plans are prepared, tracked and adjusted.

To that end Allen began employing the services of a marketing director, a move unusual for an independent shop his size--but considering Phoenix is the sixth largest city in the U.S. and one of its fastest growing, perhaps not.

"I think I started using an outside marketing resource in 2007," says Allen of Wendy Kenney, "someone who is expert in the field. She does surveys with customers, and we bounce marketing ideas off her, strategies to get attention for the shop. She's good at getting us exposure, everything that builds buzz for the business. And with the advent of Facebook and Twitter, she manages that too, because otherwise it just wouldn't get done."



When the U.S. housing market collapsed in 2008, Phoenix was particularly hard hit, but Allen and his staff had the business so well organized and managed it's actually charted growth throughout the economic turmoil. "In hindsight, I'm glad the fire happened," Allen reasons. "If not, I wouldn't have been in the strong position I was in 2007-08 when things started going hay wire."

In the final analysis, does Allen think Virginia Auto Service could have been a Top Shop before the fire? "Probably not," he says after some thought. "We had all the materials to be a Top Shop, they just weren't all connected."



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