

For G&C AutoBody—Advertising is an Investment, Not an Expense

by Ed Attanasio

Advertising is always a tricky matter, especially for body shops, because there are so many intangibles to consider. *What media should I use? How often should I advertise? What should my ads say?* Many shop owners feel like fish out of water when it comes to marketing and advertising, and understandably so.

One collision repair group in Northern California has perfected its approach to advertising and is flourishing as a result. **G&C AutoBody**, with three locations in Santa Rosa, Petaluma and San Rafael, has been running ads on radio and cable TV for several decades and is currently repairing approximately 500 cars per month as a direct result of it, according to G&C Owner **Gene Crozat**.

Crozat told *Autobody News* he spends more than \$40,000 per month on broadcast advertising. G&C is saturating the markets they're in while negotiating great rates from cable TV and radio stations in the process. It's a formula that's proven to be very successful for Crozat and his shops, but it didn't happen overnight.

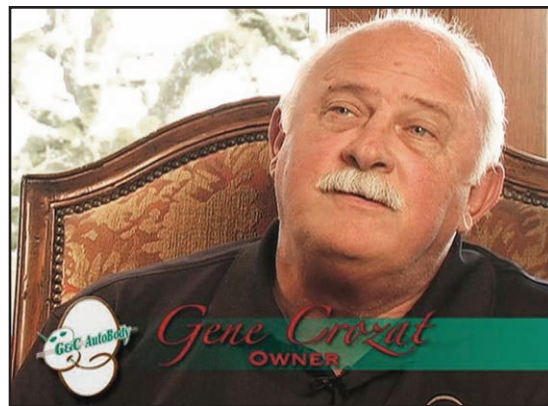
"We've learned what works and what doesn't over the years," Crozat said. "It took us some time to find out where the best results come from. We track all our results regularly through an ad tracking form we use with every customer. For each job that comes through here, we know how they found out about us, whether it's from a referral, radio, or cable TV."



Gene Crozat, owner of G&C AutoBody, acts as his own spokesperson in all his cable TV advertising.

Crozat looks at his advertising as more of an investment than an expense, he said. "The advertising we do on radio and cable TV pays for itself, or we wouldn't be doing it," Crozat said. "A lot of businesses will pull their commercials and cut their advertising budgets when revenues drop off. *But that's the last thing they should do.* What you're doing when you stop advertising is allowing your competitor to take your place and capture that business. When we start doing ads with a station, we make a minimum commitment of one year and stick to it."

Tom Nelson, owner of Xenon Marketing in Santa Rosa, is a 30-year veteran



G&C advertises on almost every radio station the North Bay, in addition to dominating the local cable TV market.

of the ad game. He's been producing radio ads for G&C for 20 years, he estimates, having created more than 45 commercials per year for the company during that time, he said.

"Gene Crozat's theory is to dominate the market and saturate it with his ads," Nelson said. "He's on almost every radio station in the North Bay on a consistent basis. He spends a lot of money, that's for sure. Sometimes he jokes that when he buys ads from a station, they can count on him to pay their power bill every month—that's how much he spends. Gene wants to be the biggest advertiser in each region he's in, and in most cases, he is."

Nelson cites three reasons why broadcast advertising has been such a successful vehicle for Gene Crozat and G&C AutoBody.

"Any business that wants to advertise could learn some very valuable things from Gene," Nelson said. "First, he pre-pays for all his ads. Stations are more willing to work with a company that pays up front. Second, he buys in bulk. If you're making a big purchase of radio or TV time, stations will normally give you a better rate. And third, he buys consistently. He

purchases a schedule and doesn't deviate. All of these things appeal to radio and TV stations, and consequently G&C gets great rates and saves money."

Nelson said that the types of commercials Crozat runs is also an important reason for his overall success. "G&C runs two very different types of radio ads," he said. "Some are educational and informative and others take a humorous approach. I try to use him as the company spokesperson as much as I can, because it humanizes him and makes him a recognized figure in the community. We try to make the basic

content of every ad the same, so that we can benefit from a consistent message."

The three things G&C stresses in all its commercials are: 1) A lifetime warranty on every repair. 2) A \$1 per day car rental program for those customers who need it, and 3) A customer appreciation program where G&C's clients can get money back on certain repairs, Nelson said.

Keeping the commercials fresh and informative is another way that G&C leverages its advertising dollars, Nelson explained.

"We're re-doing his ads all the time, using different themes while stressing the same things, such as quality, superior customer service and reliability. In the end, it's all about the offer and we never lose sight of that when we're producing G&C's ads."

G&C has done so many ads over the years that the company's name is implanted in the local community's subconscious, Nelson said, offering an example.

"I was working with someone here in town in an advertising capacity and that individual made it known that she wasn't particularly enamored with Gene's ads, let's put it that way," Nelson said. "One day, she got into a fairly serious accident. She was okay, but was out of it for awhile and had to be taken to the hospital. After she was released, she asked the Santa Rosa police where they had taken her car. 'Right where you told us to take it—to G&C,' they told her. She had Crozat on the brain and didn't even realize it. Now that's branding."

Don Mills, owner of Sound Designs in Santa Rosa, produces one or two new cable TV ads for G&C monthly, he said, something he's been doing for 20 years.

Mills believes that Gene Crozat's dominant presence in the markets in which he advertises is the key to his burgeoning business.

"Gene Crozat dominates the airwaves and makes it difficult for his competitors

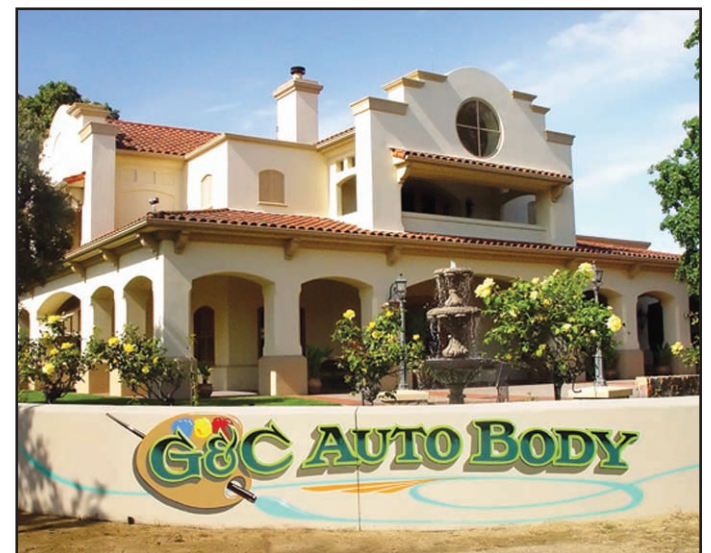
to capture any significant portion of the market," Mills said. "I've seen other shops try and go up against him here in town, and they've all failed. No one can compete with Gene, because he does too many ads with too much frequency. Plus, his commercials get people's attention and hold on to it. He's built a brand over the years, and it's tough to beat a brand."

Mills has developed a unique technique for filming G&C's TV commercials that has proven to be a real winner, he said.

"I basically turn on the camera and let it roll while Gene just talks," he said. "I let him ramble for about an hour, and then I take what he's given me and turn it into one or more spots. It works well, because he's got such a vast amount of experience and expertise in this industry—so much knowledge to impart—that it really comes across in the ads."

Barbie Whitbeck has been an account executive for Comcast Cable in Santa Rosa for 10 years and has been selling cable TV airtime to G&C for the past five years, she said. She strongly believes that using Crozat in his own ads is a brilliant move.

"By being his own spokesperson, Gene is able to connect with his customers," she said. "Everyone knows him around here, because they've seen him on TV hundreds of times. When they bring their car into G&C for a repair, they feel like they already know him. So, he creates a comfort zone with his customers."



G&C AutoBody repairs approximately 500 vehicles per month through its three locations in Santa Rosa, Petaluma and San Rafael.

Whitbeck also thinks G&C's creative commercials help him attain and retain new and existing customers, she said. "Gene is always thinking outside the box," Whitbeck said. "He's very innovative and never afraid to do something that will help strengthen his relationships with his customers and marketing partners."