

# Southern Viewpoint

**Inkerman Panels is one of Australia's oldest and most well established family crash repair centres. Based in Victoria, for over fifty years, spanning three generations of hands-on management, Inkerman Panels has led the industry in quality workmanship and customer relations. Despite its age however, it is not behind the times and last year won the Australian Achievers Award for Excellence in Customer Service in the Car Panel Repair & Trim Services category. Justly proud of Inkerman Panel's achievements, Managing Director Andy Holzer agreed to provide a brief account of the company, the repair industry in Australia and some comments on its operations.**

Different to the UK and Europe, there are very few crash repair centres in Victoria owned by motor vehicle dealerships, and in fact few large crash repair centres in general, compared to the UK and Europe. The average crash repair shop here would consist of approximately 10 to 12 employees.

Inkerman Panels was pioneered by Mr & Mrs Holzer senior in 1950. Management has always been retained in the family, with skills, knowledge and experience passed from parents to son. Management and staff are 'extended family' with many senior staff being employed between 15-35 years. Mr Holzer senior, a highly skilled tradesman, introduced his wife to the business in the early 1950's and relied on her to do all the office work and estimating. In a totally male dominated industry it was rare for a woman to do the estimates, have a very good understanding of what needed to be done, how long it would take and have the ability and knowledge to negotiate the repair figure with the insurance assessor. So her reputation spread far and wide and Mrs Holzer became a highly respected figure in the industry.

In 1988 the Holzers recognised that with motor vehicles becoming more sophisticated, the building and facilities in which they were operating had to be upgraded to cater for the new technology. Andy's brother Erwin, a qualified structural engineer with an extremely good understanding of the panel beating industry, canvassed Inkerman Panels staff for their input and with international consultants designed a purpose built crash repair centre. Many in the industry thought was unnecessary and 'over the top' and competitors jokingly referred to it as the 'Taj Mahal' of the car repair industry.

## Setting the Benchmark in Australia

"The Inkerman Panels philosophy is simple: to offer clients the most professional and qualitatively superior service available today. By combining cutting-edge technology with highly skilled specialists we aim to exceed our customers expectations and have been recognised with numerous awards both locally and overseas. The Australian Achievers Award for Excellence in Customer Service is a testament to the calibre of our staff and their dedication to excellence. The win has had an effect on the entire team, although morale is always high, public recognition is always a good boost to the operation.



Andy Holzer, centre, receiving Inkerman's Award

The success of the business is a clear reflection of the relationship we enjoy with suppliers and all the major insurance companies in Australia. Long-term ongoing relationships based on trust and faith are the cornerstone of our business, and to this end, we enjoy relationships with suppliers spanning many years. Now, we wouldn't even contemplate using alternative products and suppliers. One case is our exclusive use of the PPG Paint. Our faith in and loyalty to the brand is well known in the industry. PPG Industries know exactly what my demands are and the level of service I expect so I have no reason to look elsewhere.

## Working Relationships

Repairers and insurers need to openly discuss their needs with each other and together reach agreement on operational matters. Too many times communications break down because repairers and insurers see themselves on either side of the fence, virtually doing battle with each other. This is counter-productive. We have got to work together as partners aware of each others' needs, to the mutual benefit of both parties. Profits have never been so wafer thin as they are in the industry in Victoria today. While costs are skyrocketing in the industry today, parallel payment increases are nowhere in sight. Although those shops who are technically advanced and have World's Best Practice as their guiding light will ultimately survive, the industry as a whole is going through very tough times".

## Company Profile

Inkerman Panels now has a purpose built crash repair centre with a floor space of approximately 28,000 sq ft and employs 30 staff. There is underground car storage for up to 40 vehicles, two dry floor bake ovens, three paint prep areas under construction and a dataliner laser beam measuring system. The company was one of the first Lexus/Toyota Australia approved crash



repairers in Victoria, the first Eunos/Mazda Australia approved repairer in Australia and an approved factory repairer for Peugeot. It also repairs many corporate fleet, company vehicles, prestige vehicles and of course a sprinkling of older vehicles, with some clients now third generation customers.

## World's Best Practice

"I recently travelled on a study tour to see quality crash repairers that are able to produce volume work at a competitive rate in Southern California and was introduced to the PPG Industry's maximum velocity performance 'MVP program'. Since 1994 PPG has brought together information from nearly 3000 crash repairers world wide and benchmarked their performance to identify procedures and practices which best contribute to productive body shop performance.

Information from body shops of different sizes, ownership structures and markets in Europe and North America has made it possible to identify procedures from the most forward thinking collision centres around the world and share this information with MVP participants in order to improve their own businesses.

I believe that our company is the first in Victoria to embrace the entire MVP program. The bodyshop performance assessment stage 1 & 2 have now been completed. We have identified areas that require improvement and have set action points, reviewed every person's responsibilities, defined chain of authority and respective responsibilities, determined Key Performance Indicators for each position, conducted many meetings with our staff and are all excitedly looking forward to further implementing this program.

I have no doubt that just as in 1988 when we were viewed as excessive for having built the 'Taj Mahal', we will be viewed as being different just for thinking out of the box. However, I believe that today, with competition the way it is, one has to be a competent tradesperson, a public relations person, a marketer and have a good knowledge of business management, and that is probably just entry level for survival".

