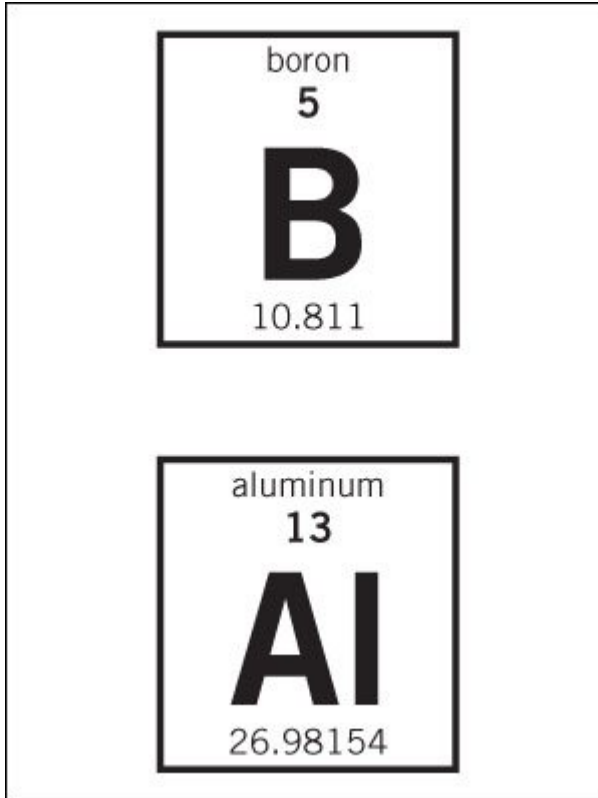


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# Tech Solutions That Sizzle

Metal management, e-commerce and Web-estimating are the hottest technologies going now. What really sizzles? The technology that's right for you.

NICHOL NELSON



In an industry experiencing constant technological change, there's always something new clamoring for your dollar. These days, three areas of technological innovation are worth considering:

- equipment for fixing new metals,
- anything related to e-commerce, and
- Web-based estimating systems.

With e-brochures clogging your inbox and company reps vying for your business, how's a business owner to know what to consider when weighing the purchase of new technology? We talk to industry experts and shop owners who've been through it to give you some tips for choosing what to invest in—or whether to invest at all.

One thing is certain: Amidst all the change in the industry, it pays to know your shop's identity well, and to stick to your central business plan. In other words, it might not be necessary to run out and buy the most current equipment. "There's always a ton of stuff that's available, some of which is just this side of Billy Mays," says Barry Dorn, owner of Dorn's Body & Paint in Mechanicsville, Va., and chairman of the Society of Collision Repair Specialists. Every shop owner has to know the needs of their business, Dorn emphasizes. "There are business models that need the current and latest technology, and there are models where [shops] don't necessarily require it. I think that whatever the model, you need to make the investments to ensure that you're doing the repairs correctly, and I mean that whether it's a Maaco or a Mercedes certified shop. They are totally different segments in the market that need really different equipment, tooling and training."

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— George Avery, State Farm Insurance claims consultant, on the increasing importance of Web-based estimating

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After all, as the new metals demonstrate, keeping up with new technology isn't just collecting the latest whiz-bang tools and equipment—it can literally be a matter of life or death. Aaron Schulenburg, executive director of the SCRS, says that rapid advancements in the industry and in vehicle construction have presented a significant challenge for shop owners. "Investing in the equipment, training and knowledge necessary to fix today's vehicle is absolutely necessary," he says.

### Heavy Metals

When Greg Horn, vice president of industry relations at Mitchell International, joined the company a few years ago, he says he realized there was a knowledge gap between estimators and technicians (see sidebar). He oversaw the creation of Mitchell's Tech Advisor program, which displays photos and videos of the proper repair procedures and features estimating software that identifies the makeup of whichever metal the technician is working on.

check out Tech Solutions that Sizzle—Waterborne for info from Global Finishing Solutions on the latest in waterborne paint booth technology.

"It was truly a duty of ours to say, 'Look, if you're going to be working with this kind of stuff and you make a mistake, not only is it expensive for your company, but it can be dangerous,'" he says.

The rollout of boron-infused steel, he says, is one example of why the program was created. "If you apply heat to boron, you change the metallurgy and make it very brittle," he says. "But you would never notice because it doesn't change color and it'll still take primer and paint. And you can put that car back together with a very brittle frame rail and the only way you'll notice is if it's hit again. We need to know what type of metal we're working on, and understand what the manufacturer says are the proper repairer replacement procedures."

Current information about new metals is critical, although staying informed can be a financial stretch for some shops. "Several sources are available, whether direct through the OEM, or through a third-party provider offering a system or package to the shop. But having the information at your fingertips is essential to how well a repair is performed," says Schulenburg. "With vehicles advancing in construction and design every year, it is important for shops to adapt. Not every repairer is equipped to be able to handle every repair, or every make and model. Knowing what the repair requires is crucial in making that decision."

The issue is only going to become more widespread, Horn believes. Since the Obama administration has pushed up the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards goal of 35 mpg from 2020 to 2016, automakers are scrambling to achieve compliance. "I think that has a lot of automakers kind of worried, because they don't have a lot of new product design cycles to get ready in four years' time," he says. He believes that the most likely scenario is that automakers will shed weight by replacing steel with aluminum. (The loose formula is that for every 220 pounds in weight savings, you gain 2 to 3 percent in fuel economy.) "So it may be an existing vehicle, just with a lot more aluminum on it than before," Horn says.

And for repairers, that can be a recipe for disaster: The metallurgy of aluminum and steel dust is such that if they're combined with a small amount of moisture and heat, they can actually create a thermite explosion. "The danger comes if you're a technician using your dual-action sander grinding down the metal to the door, and you go over to the aluminum fender and it's sucking the dust through an exhaust ventilation system," he warns. "Mix aluminum dust and steel dust in a vacuum when it's swirling around, and you're going to create heat."

Dave Gruskos, president of Reliable Automotive Equipment, says shop owners should mind a few specific areas. "One of the first key items they want to be looking at now for all the new metals, the new steels, is the spot welder," he says. He recommends a welder that has an output of 13,000 amps or more, but cautions that it's important to certify what the magnetic field coming from the cables is, since "as the welders get more powerful, the magnetic fields get so great that they can be cancer causing." However, the upside is that the newest welders actually use less power to achieve the higher output, so they're more efficient. The newest generation of spot welders will be able to test and tell you the material you're welding, as well as documenting the weld. "When

people first were getting wheel alignment printouts, everyone thought that was crazy—why did you even need it?—and now it's the standard," Gruskos says. "Now printouts are going to be the standard for welding."

He also suggests investing in self-piercing riveting guns. This type of rivet is more expensive than a standard pop-rivet style, but they're capable of re-creating the actual factory build of some models, and therefore worth the cost, he says.

## E-Commerce

Creating and storing information electronically is perhaps the most reliable and efficient way for shops to keep up with the changes in car manufacturing. As a whole, the auto collision industry has largely embraced the digital age. The Collision Industry Electronic Commerce Association (CIECA) is now 16 years old, and its initiatives have been wildly successful.

"E-commerce allows the owner to stay in business, to be competitive, and, for the early adopters of technology, to be ahead of the rest," says Fred Iantorno, executive director. "A shop owner would not think to open his or her business without the necessary tools to repair a vehicle, and e-commerce has become one of those necessary tools."

CIECA Business Message Specification (BMS) facilitates electronic business-to-business communications. "The BMS is designed to provide greater data security and privacy, says Iantorno. "In the past 12 years, we have seen a rapid growth in the data and information that is required to be exchanged in the life cycle of repairing a vehicle: car rental data, parts data, status reporting, and CSI (Customer Satisfaction Indexing)," he says. "The BMS has been designed to exchange only the data necessary to perform a specific business function. This improves efficiency as well as provides greater privacy, since only business function data is exchanged, and not all the information."

## Web-Based Estimating

While it's difficult to imagine the industry without e-commerce, another digital tool may be even more important to the overall health of collision repair: Web-based estimating. Over the course of the past decade, it's become impossible to envision a business model without this crucial link between repairers and insurers. And as mobile estimating platforms have become the norm, companies are scrambling to supply collision centers with their newest request: systems that provide even more flexibility.

Mark Fincher, who works in market solutions at CCC Information Services, says that 17,000 repair facilities use their product. But while the current model, Pathways, runs locally, their new offering, called One, is Web-based, which gives users a whole new level of flexibility. "Now, the repairer can access information from anywhere in the world as long as they have an internet connection," Fincher says. "They can go off-site and make that estimate, and if they have a connection off-site, they can see all the estimates back at the shop. If they don't have a connection, they can still write that estimate off-line and as soon as they come back online, whether they go back to the shop or not, then that will sync back up with the estimates at the shop."

Another perk? Many mobile estimating systems now integrate shop management into their programs, highlighting job costs and organizing information for repairers. CCC's One takes things a step further, actually creating tasks for users and cutting out the need to dip into each repair order to see what needs to be done. One "pushes" that information into an electronic "dashboard" for a parts person, giving

## Knowledge Gap

With new auto body materials and repair methods surfacing all the time, even small gaps in knowledge can lead to disaster, says Barry Dorn, owner of Dorn's Body & Paint in Mechanicsville, Va., and chairman of the Society of Collision Repair Specialists. (See our story "Material Matters" on the importance of training techs to deal with the new metals.) He recalls a frightening example of how things can go wrong when repairers don't understand the new metals they're working on:

"We had a case a while ago where another shop had tried to replace ultra-high-strength rocker panels in a Volkswagen, but they couldn't do the work appropriately because they didn't have the correct equipment," he says. "That type of steel is very tough and very brittle, and the shop didn't know it. Within a month, the customer brought the vehicle back to the shop because it was rusting so badly. And frankly, had the owners been involved in a

them a rundown of what needs to be ordered and what hasn't yet been received. "The estimating and the shop management all becomes one application," Fincher says. "It eliminates the redundancies and need for duplication."

And it's not only shop owners who benefit from Web-based estimating. Insurers have come to rely on it as a means to communicate with repairers, and believe it strengthens their relationships with their customers by cutting out red tape and paperwork. "Back in the 1980s, we transitioned from handwriting to computerized estimating," says George Avery, of State Farm Insurance. "It really saves the estimator time, whether they work for an insurance company or a repair facility," he says, "because every minute someone's writing an estimate, that's taking away time from their core plan, which is to fix cars." He's got a point. No matter how materials and tools change, the goal for shop owners today is the same as it's always been: Fixing cars correctly and getting them back on the road.

## Spend Wisely

So it comes down to this: What does your shop really need? As you weigh the options, consider your specific customer base and workflow to determine what investments will likely net you the largest return. Obviously, it's important to keep abreast of the latest vehicle materials and acquire the tools to fix them safely. Beyond that, it's a matter of figuring out whether the whiz-bang estimating and management systems make sense for the size of your operation. In short, don't fret about having the latest and greatest: It's the quality of the repair that counts.

collision, that part would have fallen out."

The warning is important for shops of all sizes, Dorn says: "It's a safety issue without a doubt, and I think shops need to be aware of that. Not only for the customer's safety, but for the liability of their shop."