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## CHOOSING AN ENGINE BUILDER

Before you choose SED to build your engine you should understand our objectives, peculiarities and requirements. It's kind of like dancing, we have to move together, but one person needs to lead, in order to make the dance a successful and pleasant experience. If I can lead well you may ask me to dance again. You may even tell someone else that I am very good to dance with.

Building a performance engine is an expensive undertaking. When somebody places enough trust in our company to give us their money to create something that they expect to live with for a long time, we do not take that responsibility lightly. We all want to build an engine we can be proud of. That means, the engine has to operate outstandingly in it's intended environment and have a unique appearance. Interestingly enough, these can be the easier of the goals. The harder job is to not give the customer any surprises in the form of time and cost over-runs.

An engine builder, on the other hand, doesn't want any surprises from his customers. Surprises such as; "I can't pay my bill," "don't cash this check for three months," "I'll pay you as soon as my tax refund comes in," etc. Certainly, we understand that things can happen that are beyond control, such as, illness, death, divorce and jail. This is why money is required in advance to order parts. SED is not a lending institution and doesn't have the ability to finance someone's engine until they get around to paying. Therefore, we require the cost of the parts up front and eighty percent of the estimated labor costs. If you can't afford that, you should delay your engine the project. In addition, the deposit on labor is not refundable if, for example, should you half way through the project, have a change of heart. We can't end up doing a lot of work for nothing. The balance of the labor is due when you arrive to pick up your engine, not after you drive off.

Most manufacturers of custom built parts, rods, cranks etc, require a deposit before they start whittling. However, since we have been doing business with some of these people over twenty years they may not ask for a deposit. In this case, you should see the trap that our company could fall into. A customer once wanted me to build a race motor and insisted that I could trust him. I ordered a custom block, crank, rods, and pistons only to have him say "to hell with it" when I gave him the bill for the incoming parts. Being in business is certainly a learning experience. You have to deal with people, you make mistakes and misjudgments, but you must learn.

I'm the first to admit that I'm no great businessman and I don't pretend to be. Other people have noticed this also. Therefore, I feel I can get taken advantage of all too often. People get the illusion that I love what I'm doing and that is why I work all day and half the night seven days a week. It can happen to anyone in any profession where you reach a point that you realize you aren't going anywhere. Spinning your wheels. I think my attitude would be different if I could be better paid for what I do. I mean, get paid for the time I put into it. Some people may think that being an engine builder is such a low-life profession that his time isn't worth much.

Since we're talking about low-life professions lets consider my attorney (they like to be called lawyers). These guys usually spend six years learning their profession. Lawyers are a dime-a-dozen and I'm certainly not naive enough to think mine is the best in the business. When they oppose one another in court one of their customers (they like to call them clients) has to lose. Does the lawyer who lost not get paid? I don't think so. You can bet if I gave one of my customers bad advice he would be back and I would have to "eat it," or risk losing reputation at least. Anyway this lawyer gets \$150 per hour just for talking - no parts. If I call him on the phone to get a quick word of advice I get a bill for every minute that we talk. Do you think I could get away with that even though I have spent 25 years learning my profession? I have probably ten times the work and experience invested, and I don't even drive a BMW. Just because I didn't go to college to learn my profession doesn't mean I have less invested in my education. He probably doesn't have \$150,000 worth of tools and equipment, just a secretary, tailor made monogrammed shirts and that overpriced BMW.

I believe there are a lot more lawyers around at his level of expertise than there are engine builders at my level. They have an education and a so-called, "code of ethics" to hide behind just like doctors. Unfortunately shops at our level of experience often get lumped in the category of ordinary engine shops where they have those awful dreaded "mechanics" working. I'm not a mechanic, I'm an engine builder, and I'm touchy about the connection because of what the name implies. A dope can find work at a gas station and be called a mechanic.

People think because I'm always here anyway, that it's no big deal to call and spend ten minutes of my time talking on the phone giving them free advice about their engine, boat or car. I really am glad to help out a friend but sometimes I wonder how many of them would be my friends if I billed them for my time, like a lawyer/doctor. Maybe our shop appears to be too casual, that I'm doing it for fun? Making a living is always serious business. I have customers who even come around on Sundays to get free advice because they know I'm in the shop working. Anyway, it's because of all those ten minute phone calls that I have to work the day shift, the swing shift and weekends. It's a double edged sword. If I didn't try to be such a "Mr. nice guy" I wouldn't get as many of these distractions, but on the other side of the coin, I get business because I have the reputation of being "accessible" and willing to talk. I bet my lawyer doesn't have this problem. I can't get away from it and I'm not getting paid for it. However, even if I was making as much as my lawyer, I wouldn't drive a BMW.

Some customers are blind to the value of my time and services. They seem surprised when they're billed for anything other than parts. People apparently don't like to pay for services unless it's from someone who has a piece of paper hanging on the wall. It's like they think only their time is worth anything, or, maybe they have so much free time they don't think anybody's time is worth anything.

Another pet peeve of mine - as long as I'm getting all this off my chest - is that it seems like any engine or car I've ever worked on, especially if I have built the engine, the customer feels I should be obligated for life to tune, adjust and work on it free. It's true that I can get emotionally involved with some of my patients, which are engines, but as with everything, there must be limitations.

I have always tried to keep the costs down on parts and to help my customers by only charging ten percent or so over my cost. This use to be thirty percent less than they could buy it for. I figured this would be added incentive for them to do business with us. I have come to realize that a lot of the time it costs me more than that ten percent to get the part in my hand because of phone calls and time. I want customers to come to us because of our talent and unique-ness and not because I can save them a buck. Above anything else I have always been fair, usually too fair. As far as parts go, I can usually save the customer money but increasingly often there is some part that I cannot buy any cheaper than he can. However, he should be fair enough to realize that time is money and that if I had not searched it out and gone to get it he would have had to, and he would have wanted to charge somebody for his time. Anyway, the bottom line is , I'm going to charge more for parts. I'm still going to be fair about it and still save the customer money in the big picture. I think it deserves saying again; I want our customers to realize that "our value is in our knowledge, experience and ability and not because we can get parts the cheapest."

The "time" problem is something else I need to talk about. There is only one of me here to do all the normal building and rebuilding. The race stuff is different, I get a lot of help with that. I am certainly not going to turn away a good job because I'm backed up a little. I am honest when I tell people how much time I think it will take and that sometimes shocks them. Sometimes delays are beyond control. There seems to be a coricopia of problems with parts suppliers, the machine shop, or some other crisis that slows the process. I once had a set of custom built race pistons come in two weeks late, after their normal four week lead time, only to find they were the wrong size (manufacturers fault). I almost lost one of my best customers over that one. These are things that I obviously cannot predict. Sometimes, it is my fault because I take on more than I can do quickly and bottlenecks occur when I start trying to keep several customers happy at the same time. I try to make it first in first out, but if it's the middle of race season, I try to give priority to my race customers (they don't stop the racing and wait for you). I normally will be doing several engines at once, so if a customer comes in and I'm not working on his or her engine at that particular instant, I would appreciate a little understanding.

The cost of parts, especially race engine parts, can be ridiculously expensive and sometimes it embarrasses me to tell a customer what some parts cost. I can't do anything about this, except

use a part that costs less. Sometimes I won't use a part that cost less because I don't trust it or I've already been bitten. So if you're paying for my judgement and experience you may end up with a part in your engine that may cause someone to say "gee, why didn't he use so and so's wonder widget because they're almost half the cost of what you have in there." The parts I choose to use may also cost more because they may be one of a kind. I like original and unique looking engines and I especially like the engines I build to look professional. Most people realize that something special and original is going to cost more and take more time to produce.

If I were building cookie-cutter motors (which could be more profitable) I would know how much each part and machine operation was going to cost and could give a pretty accurate bid. Because of the custom nature of the high performance engine I can have trouble predicting a accurate price. In over twenty years I have only once built two engines that were the same. Everyone wants something a little different and even if they didn't, no two engines ever require exactly the same machine work. On top of that prices are constantly increasing. So I will give you a wild-ass guess as to the cost of the project, which is only reasonable for a person to want, but I also expect you to realize the variables involved and that my estimate is just that, an estimate, and not a fixed bid. It seems no matter how much cushion I leave for cost over-runs something changes to exceed these estimates. I don't want to get too carried away making sure the estimate will not be exceeded because I then run the risk of scaring the customer away with the estimate. He will then give the job to some one who gave a lower estimate. Six months later he and the other engine builder will be having trouble because it took twice as much time and money as he thought it would. Experience and honesty can minimize these problems. Often it is a customers fault because half way through the project he reads about some new gadget and wants to try it. This is fine with me, but it causes delays, extra money and sometimes a new learning curve. He must expect to pay for this extra time.

Don't misread this to conclude that I still don't take a lot of pride in what I can do. What keeps me going in the face of low respect and profit is the fact that the internal combustion engine is a wonderfully fascinating and complicated machine that I learn more about every day and always wets my appetite for more.

So, if you decide to choose SED as your dance partner I'll try not to step on your toes by surprising you with things that I would not want to be surprised with - extra time and money.

Pat Usher