

A 1.7L Honda Civic manifold converter



A 2001-04 Mazda Tribute/Ford Escape manifold converter



A Toyota Camry manifold converter

A converter and flex-pipe system for 2000-02 Volvo s 40 and v 40 turbo models



Ray Surprenant



Having What You Need

By Jim Wilder
Undercar Digest Editor



Davico has moved to a 32,000-square-foot facility that used to house a major department store.



This sign was found inside Davico's new facility during remodeling. Although it was more than 40 years old, the slogan remained timely and was put on display for the workers.

To those who play golf, New Bedford, Mass., is where the Titleist golf ball was invented. To those who love to read, it is the port city mentioned in Herman Melville's "Moby Dick." But to shop operators around the country in need of hard-to-find catalytic converters, the city of 90,000 is home to Davico Mfg.

Davico has gained a reputation over the years as the place where distributors and shops can obtain hard-to-find direct-fit catalytic converters not yet available from other aftermarket manufacturers and sometimes not even available from new-car dealers. The company has grown considerably since its start and just over a year ago moved to new headquarters, enabling it to enhance quality control and implement even more production efficiencies.

Davico President Ray

Surprenant notes that the company has evolved into a state-of-the-art business. Davico started in 1987 in a service bay of a muffler shop operated by his great-uncle Dom Surprenant.

Ray's second cousin David Surprenant designed a direct-fit Y-pipe catalytic converter for Subaru models. Because the car had four-wheel drive and also was fuel efficient, it became quite popular in New England. The OE converter system, however, didn't last long because of the harsh winters. New England's demand for replacement converters was higher than in most other regions, but the Subaru unit had been a dealer item only.

Davico sales took off in the region, and shortly afterward David had a national customer base and a number of import specialists that bought the units in bulk. This en-



Robert Hamel, new-part development, builds a prototype converter system for a 2003 Mitsubishi Galant.



All parts are pressure-checked before being shipped.



Davico uses a water-jet cutting machine for prototype and single-order flanges. It produces 50,000 pounds per square inch of pressure and eliminates distortion that a plasma cutter can cause. The unit also is used to cut flanges for motorcycle exhaust and to make surgical-tool handles.

abled Davico to buy more equipment and move into a 4,000-square-foot structure to produce other hard-to-find units. Ray was hired as a teenager about 1989 to help package them. He worked after school and during the summer. Later, he became a distributor, and he bought the company in 1998.

"We've come a long way from the one-piece direct-fits," Ray said. Today, the company offers more than 1,300 part numbers. The majority are direct-fit catalytic-con-

verter systems, with many applications entering the replacement stage, while others are on the opposite end where requests still exist but the larger manufacturers no longer carry the units. About 250 of those part numbers include front flex pipes and resonator pipes.

Davico took a major step in April 2008 when it moved to a new 32,000-square-foot facility in downtown New Bedford, after using what had become a 15,000-square-foot facility that was burst-

ing at the seams after more than 20 years. The company had added to the plant wherever possible to increase production, moving manufacturing functions to whatever space was available.

"After a point, lean and efficient manufacturing was in jeopardy," he said. "In addition, we wanted to add automated welding equipment and a water-jet cutting machine. We were just out of space."

The search for a new facility took time, and at one point Ray considered moving out of New Bedford, and possibly out of state. Most of the available buildings had been textile mills and nearly all had wooden floors, which wasn't feasible for a company using welding equipment. Finally, city officials pointed Ray to a brick building with concrete floors that had housed Arlen's, a local department store. Although it had been the "Macy's of its day," it had closed nearly 40 years earlier.

"It was great having one open rectangle to set up an efficient floor plan," Ray said.

The first floor is actually a basement. With only half its exterior wall exposed, it's easier to heat in the winter and stays cooler in the summer.

"The building owner was looking for a tenant, and we gave him a year to build it out for what we considered an extremely good rate to keep our overhead low," Ray said. "It was custom designed to



Michael Goncalves labels and wraps a system for overnight shipment.



Ray Surprenant goes over some bookkeeping with Liz Demedeiros.



Michelle Uzzell takes a phone call.



Fixtures for every part number are kept on hand to guarantee a perfect fit.

our specifications as far as electrical and heating. Everything is new, from our offices to floor layout. Secondly, the city offered a tax-increment package to keep us in town."

Ray noted that the new facility allows the company to go to the next level in productivity – and to the second floor as the business expands.

"Before we moved, we studied with the Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership, which is a quasi-public organization designed to keep jobs in the state," Ray said. "We sat with a boardroom full of floor

employees who do the work. We charted where they walk to every day and where the waste comes from. It's a difficult process, because there are different opinions on how things are done and how they can be done. We broke it down to where the equipment should be and where the raw materials should be. We've tweaked that layout since we moved here, but that process was invaluable."

They also did role playing, building a clock, with parts and machinery set up the old way and the new way so all 40 employees could experience the benefits of the efficiencies.



Carol Gutowski checks an order.

"In this economy, all of us feel very fortunate to be in an industry that is growing," he said. "Many of the workers also were relieved that we didn't move out of the city or the state."

Many live in the remodeled three-story tenements so popular in New Bedford. Built by mill owners years ago, they allow many workers to walk to work.

Davico's continual upgrades in processes and technology have enabled the company to grow every year. The company uses highly

loaded catalytic converters supplied by major manufacturers but designs its own pipes using 14- and 16-gauge tubing from Atlantic Tube and Steel. All units are pressure-checked before being shipped. Also, its customer-friendly policy of creating a first-time application is almost unheard of, he said.

"I think we are somewhat unique in our ability to have our customers – for one flat rate – send us an old converter-system sample from a car that is probably still on a lift, and we design a new one in a day or two and ship it out to them. We keep the old one as a prototype so we can ensure quality control down the road. Otherwise, our customers would have to go to the dealers. We can save them multiples in what they would have paid, make them look like a hero to their customers, and we're able to add a new application. It's a difficult process because we don't know what's coming in the door. But we have some really talented people who can turn that out quickly, even if it's one of the newer manifold/catalytic converters.

"We always hear about other manufacturers coming out with new catalogs, but I really believe for the more than 20 years that I've been involved, we continually stay ahead of the market by the way we add new applications. At any given time I think we have 200 or so more part numbers, and that translates to thousands more applications that we can cover that no other company can cover."

Although it varies among part numbers, Ray believes on average Davico is about two years ahead of most competitors. "We manufacture all of our listed applications right here, and that in turn translates to us having the best pricing on the entire width of the line.

"We have WDs who really market us to their shop customers," Ray said. "As a result, Davico may

receive as many as five converter-pipe configurations each week with the customer in need of a replacement. Many of them are familiar with the routine and know to send the system intact to make it easier. They don't hesitate to call me on my cell phone or any of our people. The same goes when they have an application question or a pricing question – they can always get their answers fast."

Customer satisfaction also plays a big part in Davico's growth.

"Even our standard-load catalytic converters are much more heavily loaded than they were a few years ago. Anytime you're talking about post-2000 applications we use a much more heavily loaded catalyst, and the brick sizes are larger so there is a much larger surface area. Plus, we are continually pushing for better education as much as we can with technical bulletins and handouts that point out symptoms and what to look for, and the importance of having a properly tuned vehicle. The technicians are much more educated than they were even a few years ago. Decarbonization of an engine can now make the difference on whether the malfunction indicator lamp comes on."

Davico serves about 100 WDs in North America as either a primary or secondary supplier. Davico also offers its primary customers protected territories and competitive pricing. The company continues to seek quality warehouse operations in various markets.

As part of Davico's pledge to work as a teammate with its customers, for the past year Ray has set a goal of visiting at least two customers each month.

"And we've done that whether it's a car drive or getting on a plane," he said. "I still act as national sales manager, and I enjoy talking with our customers. I can address details on the spot, and that is an asset to us and them."

The company also uses manu-

facturer's reps in most of the eastern United States. "They have been very beneficial in helping us grow," he said.

"I think some traditional warehouse operators are still surprised when I tell them, 'Even if it's not on the shelf, I can ship the same day.' We're open from 7 a.m. to 3 a.m. the next day. We can have an order shipped from here to Virginia the next day at a very reasonable price. Generally, stocking orders go out in three to four days. Order fill is 97% or higher. All of our work orders are bar coded, and we have the ability to track them in house. We can tell the customer exactly where the process is."

Because Davico has two work shifts, the company can "jump" on a stock order. Even if the order comes in late in the day, the product can still go out early the next morning.

"We're in 49 states, and we are awaiting approval on some new applications for California."

Davico is entering the California market for two reasons, he said. First, it can fill a void for hard-to-find units that resulted when the California Air Resources Board made it illegal to sell what were known as reconditioned converters obtained from salvage yards and then tested before being sold. The company also wants to prepare for the future, since many industry veterans believe the U.S. eventually will adopt emission regulations similar to California's.

"We'll be ready when that happens," Ray said. **UD**



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