



Auto Tech On Wheels

Take the most difficult system diagnosis job in the shop for weeks. Now do ten of them a day, every day. That's John Anello's program for his one-man rolling shop. He's Montclair, New Jersey's "Auto Tech On Wheels."

“ This is John Anello. Talk to me! Talk to me! Pick up your phone, man!” He shouts over the message on his next customer's answering machine. It's raining the day I tag along, so while he's enroute Anello wants them to shove a problem car backwards into a bay and clear access so he can reach everything from his truck's rear doors and not waste precious time. He's simultaneously scribbling schedule notes to himself about the day's upcoming work, reading messages and phone numbers from his beeper, and planning his next stop, all the while using his Ford van to fight (and defeat!) sullen swarms of surly New Jersey motorists. John has the most unusual automotive business I know of. He's a mobile automotive electronic diagnostician.

You know those nightmare cars, the ones you roll into the far bay and return to with leaden resignation whenever there's nothing else to do and the owner is on the phone nagging yet again? John Anello does ten of those every day, and he doesn't even have a shop, much less a graveyard bay to dump them in. Instead, other shops call him whenever they have a stumper, when they get a car in for which they have neither information nor diagnostic equipment, or where they just can't noodle the problem out. Anello usually can.

His diagnostic menu is beautifully simple: his prices are fixed regardless of the problem or the amount of time he spends, long or short. For just under \$50, he'll do any sort of electrical troubleshooting from a horn that won't blow, through a charging system glitch, to a DIY-bollixed trailer con-



John Anello, the Auto Tech on Wheels, does diagnostic consulting for about 500 shops in the area around Patterson, New Jersey. He handles ordinary electrical troubleshooting, ABS and airbag systems and driveability—all for flat fees and payment only if he succeeds. Anello collects for his work over 95 percent of the time the first time he sees the problem.

nector. An ABS or airbag/SRS problem costs shy of \$75, except for cars whose makers won't release diagnostic information or tools, and for them he'll tell you there's no way for an independent to do the job. For an engine management or driveability problem, you pay a tad under \$100. In each case, if he sorts it out, you pay. Right now, on the spot. If he doesn't figure it out in an hour, the price is zilch, but he'll come back the next day after he does some homework.

Anello usually doesn't fix the car; he just finds the correct problem—of course sometimes the fix is simply a wire-splice or the like and he does quick things that don't need parts or where shelfstock parts are ready to hand. With his combination of experience, energy, and brains, he does most jobs very quickly indeed. In a few cases, he's had to go back repeatedly before he got a problem solved. In other cases, such as one the day I visited him, the problem is a missing fuse in the fuse block - same \$50 charge. Overlooking the obvious is expensive!

Anello is not in competition with the shops he helps with diagnostic problems. The only customers he accepts are professional shops, not retail customers. This has advantages for all concerned: the shops understand the problems are complicated and difficult, or they wouldn't have called John in the first place. He has few problems with collections because professional shop owners have seen those difficulties and don't cause them themselves. They also respect the way he treats everybody alike; on the day I made the rounds with him, we stopped by one shop that was so upscale and squeaky-clean they might have been customizing executive helicopters (they race-prep 911s), and we stopped by



To be efficient, you have to be organized and orderly. Anello knows where everything in his truck is; there's no rummaging around looking for tools or interface cables. He has everything he needs, and he can put his hand on anything in under a second in complete darkness.



The business end of Anello's van gives access to his diagnostic arsenal, including just about every tool you could want, from a full SIMU-TECH array to the Bosch Hammer. He runs his computer and fluorescents through a voltage inverter, transforming the electricity in a deep-discharge marine battery into sine-wave 110 AC. He built a small canopy to protect from rain and to shield the computer screen from glare.

another where I was forcefully struck with the thought that a .45 in a belt clip might make a fashion statement at once graceful and useful. Anello worked just as hard in both shops, treated everyone exactly the same, and charged the same.

Anello's business is not one you could duplicate everywhere. Patterson, New Jersey, is part of the New York City urban area, with a population density comparable to Japan's. Because he realizes how much time could be lost in transit, Anello won't chase a car more than fifteen miles from his home



Anello also uses computer-based information for electrical troubleshooting, routinely printing out the circuit under investigation for the car he's working on. Ordinarily, he outlines the specific wires with a contrasting marker and explains the circuit to the shop he's working with. Nobody will have to call him twice for the same problem on different cars as long as they pay attention to what he says and does. As he troubleshoots, he constantly explains what he's doing and why.



In the densely populated Northern New Jersey suburbs of NYC where he lives, Anello counts about 500 shops as occasional or regular customers. One of the regulars is Al Ponterdolph at Lakeview Brake in Clifton, New Jersey. Al calls John in for problems outside the shop's ordinary specialties.

base. What's more, while he makes an appointment for a specific day, he usually won't pin the time down until that morning, when he has every stop listed and can calculate the shortest route between them. He keeps to his schedule of about ten cars a day—if he doesn't finish number four in the hour allotted, he goes on to number five and reschedules number four for the next day, giving him 24 hours to mull it over in the back of his mind. If the problem is intermittent, he'll putz with the car for twenty minutes trying to get it to stumble; after that he's gone until the contracting shop can get the problem to recur. If the intermittent is still elusive, Anello will ask the shop to arrange for him to use the car over a weekend. By the time things have come to that, most owners will agree. They've tried everything else.

On the job, Anello is a ball of fire, a blur of purposeful energy. I've been in shops for almost thirty

**For just under \$50,
he'll do any sort
of electrical
troubleshooting from
a horn that won't
blow, through a
charging system
glitch, to
a DIY-bollixed
trailer connector.**

years, working for other guys, running my own, visiting shops all over the country for different articles and photos, so I know how to keep out of people's way and work. Twice in the course of the day I spent with him, he jumped up or spun around and crashed into me before I could move. Clearly it was not at all unusual. Shops that called him regularly were already onto that, and the guys stood back, keeping their hands and feet clear but listening to all of what he had to say.

While working furiously, Anello has another trait, a trait of some of the best teachers: he can't exhale without talking. Between

telling people to turn the key on or get a length of fuel line or turn the shop radio off so he can hear whether a relay clicks, to thinking aloud about the possible causes of a problem, there's a constant stream of patter, interesting, difficult, useful and instructive to anyone who wanted to learn how to



Very serious about his independence and his business, Anello works about twelve hours a day, six days a week, regardless of weather. He keeps focused on the work, here comparing what he sees on the scanner with what the SIMU-TECH screen shows. By dint of constant heads-up practice, he has become incredibly fast at difficult electrical diagnosis.

approach diagnostics in the most time-efficient way. I know hundreds of good mechanics who can diagnose the most complicated problems on cars; none of them are as fast as John Anello.

Part of his speed comes from his equipment, the very best available. His truck carries over \$90,000-worth of diagnostic tools, from his full-bore SIMU-TECH to his Bosch Hammer. He is so good and so fast with this equipment that several highly respected toolmakers provide him with early releases of diagnostic tools, as a beta-tester before they are released to the general trade. It must be a start to the people who design some of these tools to find very quick, very detailed critiques of their equipment, with no guff and no marketing blather. Bells, whistles and flashing lights are nice, but Anello can provide a fast check on whether the tool will actually find problems with cars.

The shops that call him range as wide as the industry, from corner gas stations or tire stores to dealerships. He told me the shops basically fall into three categories: borderline shops that run into a problem they can't solve and just want to know what to do with it; shops that don't see enough of a particular problem car to make it worth their time to learn the systems or their money to buy the special tools; and high-line shops that take pride in being able to do anything, but sometimes find one they can't fix.

And what does superdiagnostician John Anello do when he can't figure out a problem car? He brings a thorough description of the problem to the other superdiagnosticians in the CompuServe CARS forum, section 13, "For Techs Only." Anello has found, as have many others, that access to that forum and to the iATN have just become essential tools for anyone at his level. That access is your most important tool after your head.

Naturally, he's not superman. Some cars he doesn't find the problem on. While he brings a good deal of self-confidence to each job, knowing full well how many problems he's solved before (10,000 in the last seven years, he says), he doesn't forget that his is fundamentally a business, not a hobby. If a problem doesn't yield to his efforts within a reasonable amount of time, he doesn't anguish over it or make it into a crusade: he walks away from it. Much of this, of course, is because he has a schedule of other jobs he has to meet. But he's discovered that the best use of his time is to work for a limited time on a specific problem and then go on to another, coming back to the tough one the next day if needed. He must occasionally drive his wife crazy by sitting bolt upright at three o'clock in the morning, muttering "Alternator ripple! Alternator ripple! Why didn't I look for alternator feedback ripple on that Buick?!"

Can there be other businesses like Anello's? He's asked himself that question often. Part of the challenge requires population density: if you live in rural Montana, there's no way you can charge enough to offset your travel time. Most of the challenge comes from the skill of the diagnostician himself. Even if Anello trained someone to do the same job, he couldn't make it into a franchise because the man he trained would no longer need him. But whatever the business growth challenge, John Anello's is certainly the last word in virtuoso automotive mechanics and diagnostics. He's too good and too independent to work for anybody else. ●

—By Joe Woods