

» MISSISSIPPI LEADERS by Martin Willoughby

'Red carpet' man

Estel finds success through strong customer relationships

"Thank you for your business. You could have gone anywhere, and yet you chose us. We appreciate that!" I took note of this heartfelt statement by a recent vendor that I was dealing with. He was right. I could have gone anywhere, but I chose to do business with his company.

Consumers in today's world have a lot of choices. Businesses who take customers for granted can quickly become extinct.

However, businesses that "get it" and provide consistent and reliable service are sustainable over the long term.

I recently interviewed Rick Estel, owner and president of Rick's Pro Truck, who has over 30 years' experience operating successful businesses. Estel knows the value of his customers and giving them the "red carpet" treatment. Estel grew up in Jackson, and in the early 1980s he started a re-chrome and bumper business in Jackson. His company thrived because of good relationships he'd developed with body shops and dealerships in the region that referred him customers. He sold that first business in 1988, but he his entrepreneurial instinct allowed him to notice that the demand for truck accessories was catching on around Jackson. After surveying the competitive landscape, Estel decided to open Rick's Pro Truck where he'd sell, install and distribute the products truck owners were looking for. He started small with two employees and one delivery truck. He steadily grew his business and opened up a second, larger location in Flowood.

In 2002, Estel's entrepreneurial



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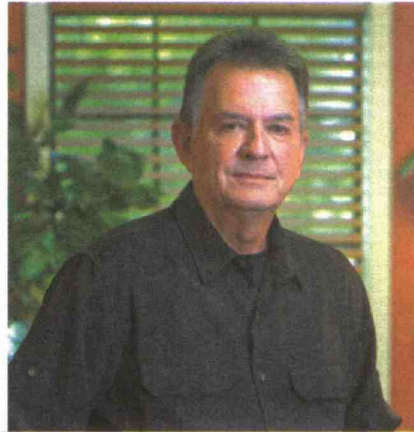
Up Close With ...

Rick Estel

Title: Owner and president, Rick's Pro-Truck and affiliated companies (ProCoat, RPT Wraps, STP Internet Store and RPT Distributing)

First Job: "My first job was as a grocery clerk."

Proudest Moment as a Leader: "Every day I come into the office I am so proud of what our team has built."



vision signaled again with the help of his manager, Brad Stevens. Brad realized that spray-on bedliners we're becoming a huge profit center. Estel went from buying bedliners to starting his own line of high-pressure spray-on bedliners called ProCoat Spray-In Bedliners. Estel shared, "We sell the machines, the chemicals and everything related all across the Southeast. That was one of the biggest changes in our business that helped it grow. It literally changed our whole corporation." Estel has continued to grow his operations by doubling the showroom floor in the Flowood store, and relocating his warehouse and corporate office to a new 60,000-square-foot building. Estel noted that it is important to explore opportunities to diversify your product line. He said, "With 14 trucks running routes to about 500 customers, we're still looking to diversify with more product lines. Being able to add more lines brings another facet of a target market in because ultimately RPT should be a one-stop shop."

For Estel, building, managing and growing a successful business boils down to one simple act — developing and sustaining good relationships. He said, "The thing that sets

us apart is that we base our business on customer satisfaction and good relationships. You've got to take care of your customers and learn to read people. It's all about the people."

Estel also pays attention to the details. He shared, "You must keep a clean place of business and an even tidier restroom. The hidden areas of your business can make just as much of an impression as the open areas."

Estel acknowledges that the entrepreneurial path is not easy. He admitted, "Entrepreneurship can be scary. Finding the right product line, service niche, customer base and initial investment can be a daunting undertaking for any start-up business owner." However, as a strong word of encouragement to other entrepreneurs considering making the leap he said, "But when you can identify a need for a service or product, you've got the take that idea and run with it!" I hope others in our state will continue to follow Estel's lead in having the courage and commitment to building great companies.

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