

BICK By Mike Davey BY COX

Christopher and Margot
Birecki and the staff at
Carrossier ProColor
Montreal Ouest have built
by always moving forward.



ABOVE: Christopher Birecki. INSET: Margot Birecki.



here are advantages to starting small. You can concentrate on a particular focus, and you may not have to depend on anyone other than yourself. That was the case for Krzysztof (Christopher) and Margot Birecki, owners of Carrossier ProColor Montreal Ouest. Located at 11A Westminster South in Montreal, Quebec, the facility currently occupies approximately 30,000 sq. ft. in a three-storey building completely owned by the company.

It's a large operation, employing a staff of about 20 people and producing more than \$3.5 million worth of business a year. But it wasn't always this way. In fact, there was a time when almost nothing about the business was the same: it wasn't part of Carrossier ProColor, it wasn't in the current building, and it wasn't even a collision repair facility. It was a car wash.

"Margot and I needed to support our kids, so we bought a small car wash in Lasalle," says Birecki. "Soon I started partnering with some of the local dealerships, and doing the detailing on their cars."

Birecki worked as both a ship mechanic and later a truck mechanic after immigrating from his native Poland before making the decision to go into business for himself.

There's no question that it was a big step, and the new business didn't have much to work with at first. One thing it did have were owners who believed very strongly in customer service and running an ethical business.

"It's important to look in the mirror and feel that you're needed," says Birecki. "So many people come in, and you recognize them by name, and they know you. Customer service isn't just good business, it's my motive and my engine."

It wasn't long before the Bireckis expanded beyond car wash and detailing. Soon the small facility was offering paint touch-ups and repairing minor dings. A body technician and a painter were added to the staff, and within a year the business had moved into the building it currently occupies.

"We grew up gradually, one day after another," says Birecki. "Building a business

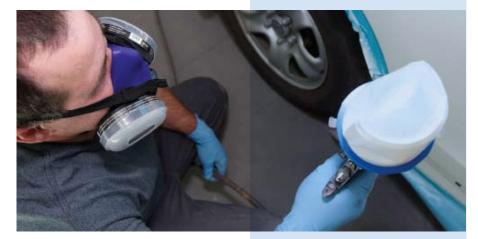
is just like building a wall. Put one brick down after another."

When the facility originally moved into the building, it only occupied the second floor. Today, the business has expanded significantly, and occupies all three floors of the building.

Today, Carrossier ProColor Montreal Ouest occupies every floor and has continued to expand, or as Birecki might put it , they've put more bricks in the wall. In addition to collision repair and refinishing, the company also offers full mechanic service as part of the Unipro banner.

Birecki and his staff are highly experienced when it comes to adding services. After all, it's how the business has grown from a car wash into a full-service automotive repair and service centre. However, every step of growth has its own challenges.

BELOW: Quality and customer service are important to every member of the team. They're aided by some of the latest in equipment. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** The team at Carrossier ProColor Montreal Ouest.





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"We train our mechanical section to be versatile," says Birecki. "There are basically two seasons when it comes to auto service: pre-winter and post-winter. Those times we're very busy, but the volume quickly goes down. You need to rely on regular maintenance and emergency repairs for breakdowns."

Birecki and his team are dedicated to offering efficient and timely service, so it's vital that the mechanical section is fully staffed during the busy periods. But what's a business to do when those hands aren't needed? The answer for some businesses is simply to lay off those employees. The Bireckis follows a different path.

"We don't lay off people. We train some of the techs to work in the body shop section instead. Mechanics are trained on assembly and disassembly, how to apply compounds and buffing, and other tasks," says Birecki. "We keep people working instead of sending them to the unemployment office."

It's a strategy that has a number of benefits. For one thing, there's less need to search for replacement staff when the mechanical business picks up again. For another, knowing their position is secure means employees are more loyal. There's little reason to search for a new job when you're satisfied with your current one. There's also the increased productivity.

"If you can increase the number of production hours, you're automatically increasing your productivity, and we need very high productivity during the busy season to keep up with the flow of work," says Birecki.

High levels of production need a lot of logistical management. That's Birecki's

main role; making sure that production keeps flowing.

The facility is covered by cameras and hands-free speakers, so Birecki can talk to his staff on every floor. He can be in instant communication with his staff any time they encounter a problem. Even when those problems aren't work related, Birecki gives his time.

"Don't just be the boss. Be a human," he says. "Your staff have a lot of things going on in their lives, and you have to learn how to help them be successful in life. Do that, and they'll be successful at work too."

It's a strategy that gets results. Birecki has had the same group of people working for him for more than 15 years. The number of staff has grown as the business has expanded, but the recruitment philosophy hasn't changed.

"Take a young guy on for a placement, and see if he loves the job," says Birecki. "You need to love this job to do it well. You can't do it just for a paycheque."

It may be that passion that has led to a string of awards and acknowledgements for Carrossier ProColor Montreal Ouest. The facility was the Bronze winner of the Carrossier ProColor Insurer's Choice Award for Western Quebec in two different years. Winners are determined by a compilation of survey responses received from our insurance partners. If there's an environmental certification available, then Carrossier ProColor Montreal Ouest has it, including recognition under Quebec's Green Key program.

When it comes to equipment, Birecki believes Carrossier ProColor Montreal Ouest is one of the best equipped facilities in the city. He says they've increased budgets for both equipment and training every year since they started operations.

However, it's likely the recommendations from the Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) of which the Bireckis are the most proud. The facility is CAA recommended for both collision repair and mechanical service and repair.

"You have to have very high standards to get that recommendation," says Birecki. "Every six months CAA comes in and makes sure you're hitting all of the targets. You have to be constantly on top." CRM