

Blast from the Past...



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by Ralph Birnbaum

I called to congratulate Chris Ayers on his new web magazine venture, Master Technician online. The dust hadn't settled on "hey how are ya's," exchanged with raucous laughter by two old friends, when CA dropped another little bomb, telling me he was about to resurrect his first publishing venture (and my first publishing job), Import Service magazine. Hearing my deer-in-the-headlights silence over the phone, he went for the kill, asking me to write the first editorial for the new mag. He always could talk faster than I could say "no."

For those of you too young to remember Import Service, a little history is in order. IS was first published in late 1987. We were the junk yard dog of auto trade magazines, and proud of it, nipping at the heels of bigger, more influential publications. Children fathered the month IS came out are now voting, amassing huge tuition debt at major colleges, and looking at old goats like me suspiciously. Two decades: it feels like yesterday.

The original idea behind IS was simple: provide detailed information about how to repair and maintain import vehicles. Tear cars apart; take pictures; tell stories. To that end, CA hired me, a dealership technician with no publishing experience, and gave me the inflated title of Technical Editor. Oh, baby.

So it was, that with grease still oozing under my nails, I was schooled by editor Dan Marinucci about the ins and outs of publishing. Knowing no fear bred of failure, I wrote step-by-step photo editorials after tearing cars apart; in garages and parking lots. We typed articles on typewriters because we weren't all that comfortable with computers. We shot pictures using cameras containing film. We developed those images in trays of chemicals that undoubtedly led to my current eccentricity, and other character flaws too numerous to mention.

To construct the actual magazine, we cut and glued images, text, and photos onto big white boards. More aromatic chemicals. We sent those boards to a prepress house where they were converted into big sheets of film. The film was fed into the maw of a huge printing company, and magazines magically emerged from the other end. Two decades ago, the magazine business was in the stone age.

And the cars in 1987? There was no OBD: I or II. Cars had computers, but compared to today's networked, multi-module vehicles, they were little more than pocket calculators. No-code diagnosis was still common, and many components were repaired, not replaced. Two decades ago, the auto repair business was in the stone age.

So here I am, back where it all began, busting a bottle of words across the bow of a new Import Service magazine. Only this time its timely information is carried to readers by electrons, not ink on paper. And this time, it rolls down the ways to a sea of new technology in the middle of the most exciting period of automotive innovation in my lifetime.

The 21st century version of Import Service has its work cut out for it, but somehow, I think it'll do just fine. ■

