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Filling the Converter Gap

By Jim Wilder
Undercar Digest Editor

When a distributor of exhaust-system parts has trouble finding a direct-fit catalytic converter for a shop customer, chances are he hasn't tried Davico Manufacturing in New Bedford, Mass.

That's the advice from Ray Surprenant, Davico president, who takes pride in his company's converter coverage and in the quality of its products.

"Our niche is replacing the OEM product with completely direct-fit," Surprenant said. "We believe that the term "direct-fit" has been loosely used and abused over the years. We look at the integrity of the raw materials and try not to use any slip-fit flanges or slip-fit telescoping pipes. We make them so the installer need only unbolt the old unit and bolt on the new. Quality 14- and 16-gauge aluminized steel is used in making all the converter systems."

Taking the Ford Taurus as an example, Surprenant said: "Unless you're a magician with a bender, you're not going to be able to install a universal converter. We make seven or more variations for Taurus – more than anyone else in the industry. Those are the types of applications that we come out with first. We realize that that's our position, to be the one to come out with direct-fits first. As a result, there are many times that a converter application can be found only at the dealer or through Davico."

Davico was founded in 1987 by David Surprenant and his assistant Diane Stevens, both second cousins to Ray. The manufacturing company first specialized in making Subaru Y-pipes that were available only through the dealers. As a result, the name Davico became familiar to import distributors, and later with undercar-parts distributors, as Davico expanded its lines to include other hard-to-find front pipes and a



Ray Surprenant (left) holds a Davico direct-fit replacement converter and exhaust manifold for 1996-2000 Honda Civics, while Bob Hamel holds the OE unit. In the foreground are converters for 1999 and 2000 VW Jetta applications (left) and 1997 and 1998 Dodge Caravans.

complete line of direct-fit converters for import and then domestic cars, light trucks and vans, especially late-model OBD-II units.

Ray started with the company more than a dozen years ago, working after school and during summer vacation. His duties included bending pipe and welding with other workers in the plant, and over a period of time he started taking calls in the office and getting involved in sales.

When David decided he wanted to change careers, Ray jumped at the chance to buy the company. He was put in charge of operating the business four years ago and became the full owner two years ago.

Faith Goguen (standing) checks some converter orders on the computer with Andrea LeBlanc.





Davico's 22,000-square-foot manufacturing facility recently was remodeled and is expected handle the company's growth for the next several years.

Many customers and potential customers already are familiar with the Surprenant name. Before Ray's involvement, and even before the company was started, many in the industry knew Ray's great-uncles, Dom and Conrad Surprenant. The two had been involved in the muffler-shop business for nearly 50 years and also had operated MSA Mfg., a company that made muffler-system adapters and then catalytic converter testing pipes in the 1970s.

Davico's strength has been in the production of direct-fit catalytic converters that have been requested by distributors and their shop customers, Ray said. In some instances, the customer will send Davico the old OE converter assembly. When that's not possible, Davico has developed ties with new and used-car dealers to get the OE units for R&D purposes.

"Today, Davico has more than 650 true direct-fit catalytic converters – which we believe to be far and away more than our competitors," Ray said. "There are some who call their units direct-fit, but they need to be tweaked or need to be clamped together because they come in multiple pieces. Davico's are all one-piece units – something we are very proud of. We

don't cut any corners. We understand, from our strong family background, what makes a direct-fit truly fit on a vehicle. The only additions are gaskets and spring-bolt kits when necessary."

Although nestled in New England, Davico ships as far west as California. In many situations Davico acts as a supplementary supplier for distributors that already carry another line of converters. In other instances, the distributor carries the complete line of Davico products. The company also private-labels specific applications for other manufacturers.

"Thanks to our advertising in *Undercar Digest*, we've been able to go with some of the best distributors throughout the country, and we continue to seek quality warehouses for our products," Ray said. "Likewise, if a shop calls, Davico refers the shop to a nearby distributor.

"The distributors that stock our product lines shallow and wide have the biggest success rates," Ray said. "That is, they stock nearly all of our part numbers, but not necessarily large quantities of every application. That's because we can ship new product to them with very little lead time. In the past, converter applications stayed pretty much the same for many different years of the same models. From 1981 to 1987, the Dodge Aries used the same converter part number. You can't do that with later models, and you can't use universal items, either. Davico emphasizes the importance of availability to all its customers as a key to making the most of a line like ours."

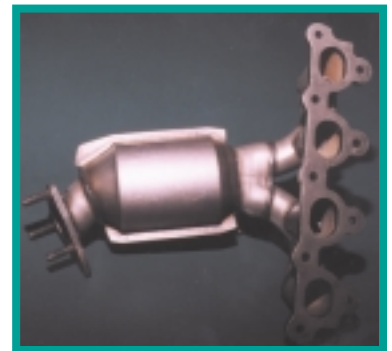
The shapes and lengths of late-model converters vary dramatically depending on the application,

with some being short and stubby and others 6 to 7 feet long.

Although Davico does not stock large quantities of finished goods, it does stock large numbers of components. If an order comes in, the production crew has all the prebent components on hand to as-



Bob Hamel (left) and John Medeiros check the fit of a Davico converter assembly. The replacement unit fits into the jig exactly the same as the OE unit in the foreground.



All exhaust manifolds are laser cut.



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semble and weld.

The quality of the products and the service provided by Davico's distributors also have paid off, Ray said. In the past several years, Davico has experienced sales increases averaging 12% to 13% a year. So far this year, the company's sales have increased by more than 35%. Ray also compliments the 20 employees at the plant who make the converters and maintain a service-fill rate in the high 90s.

Under the direction of Production Manager Bob Hamel, the plant has set up procedures to guarantee proper fit. Floor managers Mark Pacheco and Joe Mendes monitor production in process. A jig, made to exacting specifications, has been produced for each part number. The part will fit in the jig only one way. Every part is tested in the jig before it is shipped, and an OEM prototype is kept nearby for immediate reference.

"We take up a substantial amount of space with all of our jigs, but it is a quality-control must," Ray said. "Whether the part number was made yesterday or four years ago, each piece comes out the same."

Modernization of equipment also has enhanced quality at Davico. The tape-driven analog computers in the plant's two Eaton-Leonard computerized pipe-



Teamwork is the key to the company's success. Davico employees include (standing on floor, from left) Francisco Oliveira, Robert Oris, Robert Hamel, James Surprenant, Raymond Surprenant, Jacques Fernandez, Faith Goguen and John Medeiros; (standing on stairs, from left) Edison DaCosta, David Gomes, James Ribeiro and Joseph Mendes; (sitting on stairs, from left) Hermes Valentin, Scott Avellar and Mark Pacheco.

bending machines have been replaced with PCs that can communicate with other computers at the plant.

Customers calling in to Davico usually talk directly with Ray or with Faith Goguen, who is in charge of a variety of administrative, sales and marketing functions. Numerous user-friendly services are now available, thanks to the efforts of Faith and her staff. An easy-to-use 100-page catalog features descriptions and digital photos of Davico converter and front-pipe applications.

Electronic catalogs also are available through CCI/Triad.

The latest innovation is Davico's new Web site, www.davicomfg.com. Faith noted that the Web site is locked and available only to customers, allowing them to place orders, view updates to the catalog, look up interchanges and check on pricing.

"We add so many new part numbers each month that this Web site should prove to be a very useful tool for our customers," Faith said.



Jacques Fernandez bends a converter-assembly pipe with an upgraded Eaton-Leonard computerized bender. In the background are shelves full of assembly jigs used to guarantee proper fit.



Joe Mendes, floor manager, measures angles while building a prototype pipe.

Davico's growth has been continual, with the company adding a minimum of 75 new applications each year, Ray said. Until about four years ago, the company offered only import converters.

Ray said it was important to have superior domestic coverage before the company even announced it. "We spent two years building domestic product and jig templates before selling one piece," he said. "We knew we had to be a full-line supplier to be attractive to some of the more-traditional warehouses. That's really where a lot of growth has been in domestic products as well. We have every A and B number, but it's the hard-to-find number that has made a name for us."

Ray noted that one new customer – Frank Supply of Houston – came onboard as a result of visiting with Davico at Showpower 2003. "They were impressed at how just one phone call to Davico solved their problem of obtaining hard-to-find units.

"The key is making the units fit exactly like OE," Ray said. "We try to stick with the OEM design unless it's a piece that fails easily, such as the front pipe on the VW Scirocco with double flexes up front. We

know we have to strengthen that piece."

Government regulations, more than likely, will strengthen sales of direct-fit converters, Ray said.

"Now that CARB (the California Air Resources



Edison DaCosta prepares converter assemblies, which include flex pipes, for shipping.

Board) has set standards for OBD-II converters in its state, we think other states will, too, making it more difficult for universals to be used. At Davico, we're already preparing for those types of changes."

The company now uses more than 20,000 square feet of manufacturing space. With its current growth rates in sales and coverage, the company likely will be ready to move into larger facilities within a few years.

Although applications and sales will continue to grow, Ray said his commitment to quality products will remain.

Davico now has a customer-friendly Web site.



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