

On the Level

By Jim Wilder
Undercar Digest Editor

Strutmasters, a company that offers cost-efficient replacement parts for vehicles that use air-bag or electronic suspension systems, is in existence today because of a choice the founder made in buying a used car.

That's how Chip Lofton explains the start of his ever-expanding business in Roxboro, N.C. In the late 1990s he had become a mortgage broker and knew that an older Chevy van wasn't the type of vehicle he needed when visiting potential customers.

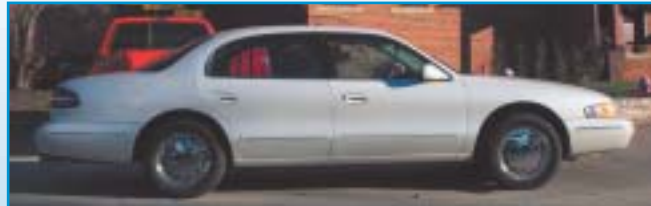
"I purchased an '89 Lincoln Continental from a good friend of mine," he said. "It was a nice, clean car. Its body style still looked current, and I really thought I had gotten a great deal. The first thing that happened to it was the head gaskets blew on it – a \$1,280 repair. Then the starter went and that was \$500, and then the alternator went and that was another \$500. It started to cost a little bit, but after a

"When we got to Gatlinburg and were driving around town, people would ask, 'What do you have, two dead men in the trunk or are you hauling moonshine?'"

Once the vacation was over, Lofton took the Continental to the local Ford dealer and learned that he needed four suspension air bags and a compressor for a total of \$3,500 – money that Lofton didn't want to spend on a car that he paid \$4,500 for and that he learned had a blue-book value of only \$1,900.

"It was a long way from having a good investment," he said. "I thought, 'It's not a problem. Surely someone has found a way around all of this to fix these old cars.'"

After about two months of religiously surfing the Web, he determined there wasn't an aftermarket solution. He and a neighbor, who was a mechanic, gathered some coils and struts to try to fix it. The first



Here are before-and-after photos of a Continental with the old leaky air-bag system and a new strut-and-coil system.

while I thought I had caught everything that was going to go wrong."

Unfortunately, Lofton's problems had just begun. He hadn't taken his family on a vacation in years, so with the "better" car, the family headed for "Dollywood."

"We were 60 or 70 miles down the road and pulled into a gas station to fill up, and the rear end of the car went down. I thought at the time that it was making some type of adjustment. I did have two children in the back seat and a lot luggage in the back."

The car didn't come back up, so Lofton read the owner's manual, checked the fuses, played with the wires and bounced it up and down a few times. When he slammed the door in frustration the car leveled out and they were off. Within 10 minutes the car's rear was nearly dragging the pavement. After stopping several times and slamming the doors to level it out, Lofton finally gave up.

attempt looked good, but the car went down as soon as his children got into the back seat. The spring rate wasn't right. But after a second try it worked.

"I had done this only to save \$3,500 on my own car," he said. Somebody else in town heard I had done this and asked me if I would fix their car. I explained to them I was a mortgage broker and not a mechanic, but they followed me around and begged a lot. So I figured my contribution to mankind would be to fix it for one other person. One led to 10 and 10 led to 100. Toward the end of 1999 I put Strutmasters on eBay for just one body style of car, which was the 1988-94 Continental. Within just a few months I had sold about \$53,000 worth of parts."

One of his mortgage customers built a Web site for him. Lofton, in turn, began to sell hot rods and muscle cars for friends, along with his Strutmasters product line. He got so many hits that the Web site moved to the No. 1 slot under Lincoln air-suspension sys-

tems. Finally, he added a phone number and sold \$53,000 in products the first month it was listed. Then people started contacting him about their Town Cars, Mark VIIIs, Mark VIIIs and others. One by one he started adding applications, and his business started growing by 20% each month. Sales reached \$1 million in 2001, \$2 million in 2003 and \$3 million in 2004. They are expected to exceed \$5 million by the end of this year.

With business booming, Lofton moved from a barn building on his family farm to a 16,000-square-foot rental building that he thought he could never fill. A year later he was looking for more space. Today, Strutmasters occupies a former yarn mill that has 220,000 square feet and plenty of room for expansion on its five-acre site.

Strutmasters now offers replacement suspension air bags and compressors for Lincolns at about half the cost of OE replacements. He notes that motorists won't experience some of the electrical problems that are common with other OE replacement bags and that the warning light on the instrument panel will stay off. Many compressors are near failure by the time the car owner finally decides to replace the air bags. That's because the compressors continually try to refill the leaking air bags. The remanufactured compressors have been improved, with capacities of 165 psi compared with only 120 psi for the OE unit.

His business of selling coil- and strut-replacement units just keeps growing. He's learned that the rubber bags on air-suspension systems have an average life expectancy of four or five years, about the same as for electronically controlled suspension systems.

"Now we do all the Lincolns, all the Cadillacs, a few 1980-84 Chrysler New Yorkers and Dodge Dynastys, Range Rovers, Jaguar, the Subaru, Subaru XT, the Infinity Q45 with hydraulic leveling and Lexus."

Looking down the road, he already knows that a



Buck Harris, Chip Lofton and Matt Lofton of Strutmasters examine a replacement coil-and-strut system.

variety of vehicles, including the GMC Envoy and the Cadillac Escalade, have electronic suspension systems that will be costly to replace at the dealer.

One of Strutmasters' best customers is a Ford dealer who would rather replace the OE parts with Strutmasters' strut and coil kit because there is less chance of a comeback. Price is a factor, too, because the OE replacement sells for \$3,500 compared with the Strutmasters kit, which is \$529 delivered and has a lifetime warranty.

Another replacement system that is becoming popular is for the Infinity Q45.

"When it goes bad there is oil everywhere and it is nasty," he said. "The only people who can

work on them are Infiniti dealers, and it's a \$9,000 repair. "We sell a kit for that car delivered that is \$795 with a lifetime warranty."

Strutmasters sells to a variety of markets, including DIYers and direct sales to shops, and even made a special strut-and-coil system for a heavily armored Mercury Navigator owned by the CIA. O'Reilly Automotive, a popular parts-store chain in the Midwest, contacted Strutmasters to obtain the line, as did a variety of warehouse distributors. The company also is an approved vendor for Meineke, which has experienced great success with its more than 800 shop locations, Lofton said. Meineke officials have

told Lofton that the product has enabled them to get customers they normally wouldn't see, which in turn enables them to get additional undercar sales because the customers are so happy.

Although the company started by selling to consumers, it has learned that aftermarket distribution channels make more sense for repeat business.

"This is a profit center for shops," Lofton said. "Before we came along, the shop would have to say, 'This is a dealer item only; I'm sorry.'"

A fair installation charge for a shop is about one



The Strutmasters sales staff includes (from left) Brent Suddreth, Garry Moore and Darnell Carver.

Strutmasters

hour for each wheel, although an experienced technician familiar with the product probably can do the job in about half that time, Lofton said.

One question that always comes up is, "Do motorists have to sacrifice the loss of a better ride?"

Lofton's son, Matt, answers the question: "I like to tell these people that they probably have a 10-year-old suspension on these cars. Anytime you take a 10-year-old suspension off of a vehicle and replace it with new parts – whether it be the replacement air suspension or electronic systems or our conversion kits – it's going to ride better just for the fact it's new."

The senior Lofton noted that his company is more involved in designing and packaging than being a manufacturer. He and his staff have found that coils made from cold-rolled steel work better than those made from hot-rolled, and they also have learned that one major brand of strut may work better on a specific vehicle but that another brand is the best choice for another vehicle. When there's a need for a new kit application, the company tests a variety of spring rates and strut valving until it finds the right combination. Struts used include Gabriel, Monroe, Sachs and Tokico.

"We know people want a luxury ride, and we're mindful of that," Lofton said. "We get a lot of comments back that the car has never driven so well."

That makes sense on the cars originally equipped with air bags if you think of a banked race track, he said.



Connie Gill checks a remanufactured compressor.



Fred Long prepares UPS shipments.

"When you go through turns with 17° banks, those cars with air bags would try to level themselves and make the cars push. When we put our coil/strut kits on, the cars just hug the curves. A Mark VIII will really corner. With air bags a Mark VIII will squat on a fast takeoff. That won't happen with our kits."

Buck Harris, Strutmasters general manager, noted that the company now offers about 100 part numbers making up about 35 different kits.

"Our biggest chore has been to educate people that we exist and that our product exists," Lofton said. "By advertising in *Undercar Digest* we've educated a lot of shops to know that there is something out there."

Visitors to the plant soon recognize that the customer-service and sales staffs do more than just take orders.

"When a call comes in, our main focus is to educate the customer on what could be wrong with the car," Harris said. "If they call to order a solenoid, we could just write an order and sell them a solenoid, but we know for a fact that maybe



Wayne Pruitt tests a spring rate.

one out of 100,000 solenoids go bad. We know that he has something else going on."

The company always goes the extra mile for the customer, Lofton said. If something doesn't go quite right, whether it's the company's fault or the customer's, Strutmasters will do everything possible to make it right, including shipping product overnight to help the customer. In addition, the customer will receive a personal letter signed by Lofton, apologizing for the inconvenience. For orders received by 4 p.m., the company ships product the same day – if not, Lofton said, someone at the company is going to hear about it. Order fill is basically 100%, unless it's a new part under development.

The company recently opened a distribution center in Los Angeles to meet the needs of its California customers, cutting delivery time to one or two days. Another distribution center is expected to open near Jackson, Miss., in the next several months.

Shop operators have found that the skill level required to replace a worn suspension system with one from Strutmasters is similar to that required for a brake job.

"It's a bolt-on product," Lofton said. "Everything fits in exactly the same place. We've taken care of all that."



Strutmasters' office staff includes (front row, from left) Brenda Hart, Carla Hodgkin and Laura DeJesus; (back row, from left) Sarah Crutchfield, Lisa Grubbs and Robin Calhoun.

Orders are received from 8:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. eastern daylight time, seven days a week. When a consumer calls about the product, the staff will ask for their ZIP code and then tell them the location of the closest shop that installs the systems.

Harris noted that this is a strong market niche for shops that take advantage of it. Through a computer search, he found that at least 11 million vehicles on the road today eventually will require replacement of air-bag or electronic suspension systems. Strutmasters helps the shops with marketing materials that include generic bay banners explaining that the shop repairs Lincoln and

Cadillac suspension systems. It also offers scheduling calendars for shops, and vehicle enthusiasts can find information about Strutmasters on the Web site of popular TV auto technician Sam Memmolo.

Strutmasters' niche continues to expand, Lofton said. Because the company is involved in stock-car racing, it has developed a rear air-bag suspension system



The company's latest prototype product is rear air-bag suspension kits for 1-ton pickups.

for one-ton trucks that pull heavy trailers. It also has developed a level-select air-suspension system for 1962-72 Chevy pickups.

"The business keeps on growing," Lofton said.



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