



Joe Public — The Most Important Customer

# Accurate Engineering's Berry Wardlaw

**I**NDUSTRY INSIDERS KNOW BERRY WARDLAW AS THE supplier of choice for quality vintage-era engines. His firm, Accurate Engineering, was featured in many high-profile venues including Discovery Channel's *Biker Build-Off* and Jay Leno's *Tonight Show*. Despite his rather illustrious reputation, Berry remains refreshingly humble and keenly focused on the basics. Recently he sat down with us to discuss why Joe Public is still his most important customer.

survived by providing basic service work, but now we have our own dynos, flow benches, CNC equipment, mills, lathes, and welders. We do our own coating, polishing, and painting in house, as well.

**ML:** So it's really a true full-service shop.

**BW:** Exactly! Right now, we're busy restoring engines from a 1926 J all the way up to some special motors for Artistry In Iron. So it's really a one-stop shop that's unique in its resources.

**ML:** You've led this business from its humble beginnings in 1984 to the prominent position it has today in the domestic motorcycle engine niche. If you knew then what you know now, what would you have done differently?

**BW:** I started in the motorcycle business full time when I was 18, and I'm

**ML:** Can you give us some background information on Accurate Engineering?

**BW:** I founded Accurate Engineering in 1984 in Phoenix, Arizona. We've been in Dothan, Alabama, for 12 years now, where our facility has grown from 3,000 to 16,000 sq-ft. Our employee count went from a high of 16 to five total today.

**ML:** Compared to your original capabilities, how do you think the business has evolved over the years from a manufacturing point of view?

**BW:** It's night and day! In the beginning we



50 now, so I've seen some changes. In retrospect, what I think is missing most of all from today's shops is a fundamental understanding of business. We all started full of idealism and passion for motorcycles, and many of us consistently make the same mistakes because we don't have a solid foundation in running a business. I'm talking about budgeting, financing, marketing, forecasting, production, strategic thinking, and so on. Long-term success isn't made of the expensive tools and fancy projects you see in glossy magazines or on TV. You learn the hard way that those who stand the test of time have taken the less glamorous approach of staying focused on the business end of things.

**ML:** But you've been actively involved in many high-profile projects, such as the *Biker Build-Off* shows on Discovery Channel. How has participating in those affected the business?

**BW:** Let me be blunt about the *Biker Build-Off*: You wouldn't believe how small the impact was on actual sales. Following the shows, we were avalanched with phone calls from curious people who had lots of questions, and we spent our time answering them. But that effort did not translate into sales revenue.

**ML:** So TV is not necessarily the Holy Grail of marketing that everyone assumes it is.

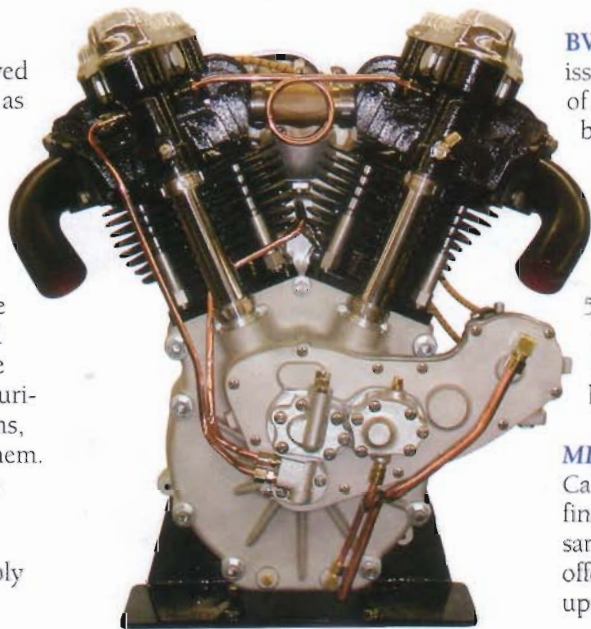
**BW:** Right! Doing those shows was quite expensive because we had to buy all of the parts and do all sorts of work. The business itself gets neglected because everyone's busy being star struck, and that's ultimately the opposite effect to what we had hoped would happen. Arlen Ness once told me that after a big show on TV, you've got a two-week window to capitalize on it, and he was so right. The phones rang and the e-mail picked up, but all we did was sell a few T-shirts.

However, TV can have an enormously positive effect. For example, we built the 103" V-twin engine for Jay Leno's Orange County Choppers Brough bike, and we affixed a tiny 1.5" x 0.5" Accurate Engineering emblem on the nose cone of the ignition cover. That was the only mention of the shop anywhere. The motorcycle debuted on the

*Tonight Show* and the emblem was visible for five seconds at most, but you wouldn't believe the phone calls we got after that show! That five seconds created more real sales than the whole *Biker Build-Off* series we were involved with ever did. The bottom line on TV fame is that while we've supplied motors to many high-profile projects and famous builders, it's ultimately Joe Public who keeps the shop doors open.

**ML:** As demand continues to increase for your products and services, how do

### ► Accurate Engineering's Crocker Motorcycle engine



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you achieve balance between increasing production and maintaining the build quality you're known for?

**BW:** I'd rather hear someone complain that a job is late than to ship something substandard on time. We won't compromise on quality, and sometimes that results in longer lead times than we'd like. We modify every single component that comes into our shop, and it only takes one late vendor to throw off the whole production schedule. It's a chain reaction and managing it is a continual balance job that has turned my goatee grey! The challenge has taught me about myself and also about how to run the

business, and I'm still learning. Our situation evolves constantly and what's true for us today may not be true next year.

**ML:** The only constant thing in business is change.

**BW:** Exactly. But what we always hear from our customers is that "it was worth the wait." We always try to give just a little more than they expect.

**ML:** What new developments within the industry are important to your company, especially with regard to the tightening EPA standards and their effect on the types of motors that you offer?

**BW:** The EPA situation is the biggest issue by far. If we analyze the segment of the population that owns the types of bikes we produce engines for, there are only a handful of people who actually ride the motorcycles over 5,000 miles a year. So here I am making 200 to 450 engines per year, most not being run for even 5,000 miles annually. C'mon! How much am I polluting in the grand scheme of things? This is just politics hurting the little guy!

**ML:** We all remember how the California Air Resource Board (CARB) fined Jesse James hundreds of thousands of dollars instead of accepting his offer to bring his so-called "dirty" bikes up to compliance levels. If the environment were truly what this was all about, wouldn't CARB want the bikes on the road compliant rather than the fine money in government coffers?

**BW:** It enrages me! Panzer Motorcycle Works used fully legal EPA certified Panheads that we supplied to them, but Panzer paid for us to push the motors through compliance. We don't have that kind of money on our own, and I'd like to know why the government doesn't offer incentives to help small businesses like mine meet the standards. Worse, the EPA regulations often don't differentiate between visual and mechanical changes. This means that a motor that's mechanically identical to a compliant motor but with some purely cosmetic differences is considered by the EPA to be an entirely new motor that must be recertified all over again. You tell me where that's driven from!

## ▶ On Your Mind

**ML:** What does the shop owner in your position do?

**BW:** I want my son to breathe clean air, too. I've proven it can be done with the legal Panheads on the Panzers. But it's going to take our industry and government working together instead of in a fractured way. I've tried to unify small shops, but it's like pulling teeth. We business owners collectively need to stop bitching, and start throwing serious energy at actually solving some of these problems before they're "solved" for us!

**ML:** Tell us about the new Crocker motorcycle project.

**BW:** I came out of the womb a motorcycle fanatic, and to my teenage eyes the Crocker motorcycles were just about the most beautiful things I had ever seen. Fast forward 37 years, and now I've had the opportunity to build the new Crocker engine prototype. I'm just so excited about it! We've stayed true to the original Crocker design concepts, using real Crocker engines and the original drawings to take measurements for our version of that motor. After enormous effort, our Crocker motor fired up for the first time at 4:45 pm on June 3. We've performed very thorough engine testing right here in the shop, and we think we've designed something Albert Crocker and Paul Bigsby would approve of. Since they're both heroes of mine, I don't state that lightly.

## SOURCES

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**ML:** Given Accurate Engineering's current status, how do you divide the pie: reinvesting in research and development, production, marketing, and other important aspects of the business?

**BW:** That pie changes as the market changes, but there are some fundamental principles that help guide us. First off, I can't overstate the importance of proper budgeting: Don't spend what you haven't got! Next, it's critical to establish short- and long-term outlooks based on what we've seen other successful businesspeople do. Others have blazed the trail long before we got here, and we can learn from them. A basic management textbook from any bookstore can help a great deal in this regard.

You don't want to open a shop expecting a 9-to-5 type of life, because it's going to consume most of your time and energy. You don't want to get into crazy debt because you've decided to finance a massive Snap-on tool chest and all the latest gadgets for your workbench collection. Get back to basics! Perform quality work, keep your shop clean, and invest in your service area. You need cables, fluids, filters, brake pads, and tires. When the economy tanks or the industry is in a slump, the

demand for fancy paint jobs, glitzy accessories, and other nonessentials will dry up too. Many people are finding that out the hard way right now. It's crucial to never forget Joe Public who will pay for simple maintenance in good times and bad. If you want to survive for the long term, cater to Joe Public instead of only chasing the TV and magazine crowd.

Finally, roll with the punches. Accurate Engineering followed a trend and got into a niche I had never planned on, but when it got there it became our livelihood.

We small shop owners absolutely must talk to other business people. It doesn't matter if they're in this industry or not, because there's plenty we can learn from others who run prospering businesses. Some of the concepts and techniques they use to thrive are universal, and we can use them at our shops, too.

**ML:** What are your plans for the future in terms of new products and strategies?

**BW:** Plenty! We're going to start supplying quality American-made components for the early-style engines, using some unique materials. We're going to attempt to take Joe Petrali's Land Speed record at Bonneville using our motor, and that bike will showcase some of what we're coming out with. Our last land speed bike, much like the Jay Leno OCC Brough bike, was an incredible marketing success. It wound up in all the magazines, and you wouldn't believe how many real sales came out of that press coverage. Hopefully, we can duplicate that. **AIR**

