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Rolling through the years with Plonk Tire

DAVE BLANTON
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Tim Plonk has seen all the trends.

From low-riders in the 1980s and 1990s and more recently to what are called "tuners" - ordinary cars tweaked, modified and painted up to look and sound racy.

Along the ways he's witnessed the rise of the SUV, the monster truck - jacked four or even 20 inches higher than the factory setting - and everything in between. Fads, he calls them, with smiling eyes.

"It's always something different," said Plonk, who's owned and operated Plonk Tire Inc. for two decades. "There's always some new style on the street."

He's also noticed other changes: the people who buy tires and have other service done at his shop downtown.

"The customer base has changed," he said. "Fifteen or twenty years ago, it was pretty much all male." Now that breakdown is about 50 percent or more women, he says.

Of course, the tires have changed too. There are more breeds, brands and sizes on the market than were available a generation ago. And, take it from an expert, they're getting better.

"The quality control (at the factory) is much better," he said while tracing his finger along a tire's sidewall recently at his shop, which he runs with long-time business partner Dale Treece. "Tires last longer."

Most of what Plonk knows about automobiles he learned working alongside his late father, Wray, who owned the business before him. In that era, the Plonk family owned car lots and

distributed heating oil. The scope of the family businesses changed in the 1960s and 1970s. It left the car sales and oil business and focused on tires. Then, in 1980, it broadened the business to provide more automobile services - from oil changes, state inspections and "anything ride/suspension related."

Plonk, like his father and other family members involved in the business, are tinkers. They like to build things, take them apart, rebuild them to their liking.

If you peek back into the folds of Plonk's large shop, you might spot the final big project his father, who died in 2008, poured many hours into: a copy of a 1965 Shelby Cobra, a muscle car that is as roadworthy as it is beautiful.

It was that mechanical inclination and a desire to compete that led Plonk and Treece into street-stock class racing twenty years ago. Photographs of the race cars they built and drove in local competitions still hang in the waiting room.

Plonk and Treece don't race cars anymore, spurning the time-consuming and expensive hobby for other sidelines.

"Spending a lot to make a little," said Treece, referring to his past adventures with car and kart racing.

"I've got too many to list," Plonk says with a laugh, referring to his current hobbies. Chief among them is remote control model airplanes and woodwork. He also said he loves to bike.

Plonk has learned a lot about customer behavior in his line of work. But mostly, he said, it's that folks are loyal to a brand throughout their driving lives.

"You could give a Chevy man an F-150, but he's not gonna drive it."

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