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Wednesday, November 19, 2003



Larry Edsall / Special to The Detroit News

The Specialty Equipment Market Association's annual extravaganza has grown from a parts showcase into a major auto show, but it still draws inventors with ideas to sell.

Specialty equipment show launches dreams

Roush got his start in 1972 at event that drew innovators

By Larry Edsall / Special to The Detroit News

LAS VEGAS -- In 1972, a young engineer who had left a good job at [Ford Motor Co.](#) traveled to southern California to attend an automotive accessory and racing equipment trade show. In one arm, he carried an oil pan. In the other, a briefcase filled with parts he'd developed to improve engine lubrication.

But what Jack Roush really brought to the show were his dreams, one of which was to build race cars. To finance his passion, he resurrected other people's dreams.

"People started projects but didn't have the background or the time or the money to finish them," he said. "I would buy them, put the luster on them and then sell them."

Roush used the money he made to bankroll his racing. His specialty was building very fast and durable engines. At that trade show in 1972, Dick Moroso, whose company was known for its high-performance engine equipment, bought the rights to Roush's oil pan modifications and provided \$15,000 in equipment for the engines Roush would build for the 1973 racing season.

Roush met with several other companies at the show and returned to Michigan with a lot of parts he used to build three cars and 12 engines that helped carry his team to the 1973 National Hot Rod Association championship in the Pro Stock category.

As was his practice, he sold those cars and engines to finance more projects and Jack Roush Performance Engineering grew into Livonia-based Roush Industries, a major supplier of engineering expertise and components

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for the international automotive industry.

Today's young inventors and entrepreneurs -- like Roush in the 1970s -- can still find a future in the growing \$23 billion automotive custom and performance parts market, even as automakers, and some suppliers, are swooping in and stealing some of the spotlight from what was once a mom-and-pop industry.

The trade show that launched Roush's dreams was the Specialty Equipment Market Association's annual extravaganza, where makers of specialty vehicles, accessories and custom and performance parts showcase their products.

The show was launched in 1967 with 98 booths and five vehicles on display at Dodger Stadium. Earlier this month, this year's event overflowed three huge exposition buildings at the Las Vegas Convention Center. More than 115,000 people came to see displays from nearly 1,830 companies and 1,500 custom vehicles.

The show has become so big and influential within the auto industry that it has grown from a parts showcase into a major auto show, with huge displays and production and concept vehicle introductions by many automakers.

Major parts makers also participate. This year, Decoma showed a concept coupe based on the PT Cruiser; Bridgestone/Firestone announced Fuzion, a tire brand that launches next spring; and [Procter & Gamble](#) introduced the Mr. Clean car-washing system.

The automakers' presence can be a double-edged sword for entrepreneurs trying to gain or maintain a foothold in the industry. The automakers have brought extensive media coverage -- and thus greater public exposure. But the attention tends to focus on the automakers rather than specialty companies.

There also are tensions between vehicle makers and accessory parts companies, stemming from concerns about the quality and fit of parts that don't come from the factory, how vehicle warranties are affected by the addition of bolt-on parts, even worries about intellectual property rights.

"We were regarded as someone who was bastardizing perfectly good automobiles," said Alex Borla, whose Borla Performance Industries produces exhaust systems that are featured as standard equipment on many high-performance vehicles.

"We create the stuff to add to the enjoyment and efficiency of those automobiles," he said.

In 1998, to improve relations with automakers, the association hired former [General Motors Corp.](#) public relations executive Carl Sheffer.

A once adversarial -- if not hostile -- relationship has been transformed to the point that some automakers now share computerized engineering information with custom and performance parts companies so they can produce products that fit and function properly and become available at the same time that a new vehicle goes into production.

With so much attention on the automakers themselves, can a young Jack Roush still go to the show and pursue his (or her) dream?

Roush thinks so.

"Now we have the manufacturers looking at (accessory makers) and instead of being skeptical, they're forming partnerships," Roush said.

Having automakers at the show provides access that inventors and entrepreneurs couldn't get otherwise.

"The movers and shakers are all here," he said.

Today's dreamers appreciate their presence.

Recent college graduates Gordon and Kitter Spater and Ryan Meers of Brooklyn, N.Y., trekked to Las Vegas this year with Tire Tote, the spare tire cover they designed. Tire Tote lets you carry and change a tire without getting dirty.

Before the first day of the show was over, they had already welcomed

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several representatives from automakers and auto dealers to their booth.

Maybe in a few years, the young partners' Motivation Design firm will find success like Tim Dexter's Westside Research.

Dexter was an engineer in a plant that produced containment vessels for nuclear bombs when the end of the Cold War also put an end to his job. He had previously worked as a sail maker, so he combined his sewing and engineering skills to create cargo holders to prevent groceries from rolling around in the back of his pickup or his wife's car.

Now his Orland, Calif.-based company is a supplier to [DaimlerChrysler AG's Chrysler Group](#), [Toyota Motor Co.p.](#), Volkswagen and BMW.

Larry Edsall is a Phoenix-based free-lance writer.

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