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Stir It Up

Former chef Adds Flavor to Film Industry By Penny Stacey



Russell and Denise Haertl, owners of Sun Tint, pose with Tucker the dog, who greets customers when they arrive at the shop.

When you walk into Sun Tint in Austin, Texas, it's hard to believe you're entering a window film shop. In fact, the waiting room feels so much like a Starbucks that you want to order a grande caramel frappuccino and blueberry muffin. It's filled with soft, fluffy couches, wireless Internet access and a refrigerator filled with bottled water and sodas.

Sun Tint's owner, Russell Haertl, who has been in the industry for 25 years, started out making more than coffee and blueberry muffins, though. He began as a sous-chef and eventually found his calling in the window film business; but, he didn't leave his taste for hospitality behind completely. Together with his wife, Denise, who joined the business seven years ago, they have found their niche serving many of Austin's high-end window film customers. Haertl believes this high end experience begins in the waiting room, where customers

are greeted by a Golden Retriever names “Tucker” and await their vehicles while enjoying a cold beverage and surfing the Internet.

From the Kitchen

Haertl comes from a long line of cooks. He got his start at the age of 12, helping his father and grandfather- both of whom were chefs- in the kitchen.

By 20, Haertl himself was a full-time sous-chef at a hotel. He started out in Florida, where he would tint windows during the off-season for extra money. When Haertl was transferred to Houston in 1980, he decided he needed a break from the hotel business.

First he worked for a tint company in Houston and found that he appreciated the flexibility it offered.

“I was working 70 hours a week for [the hotel], and then I decided I’d rather work for 70 hours a week for myself,” he says.

After Haertl had been installing film for about three years, he got the opportunity to work for himself when he opened his own shop, Sun tint, in Austin. Despite familial ties to the cooking industry, his father was glad to see him move on.

“My father used to tell me, “get out of this business’,” he says. “He loved the idea when I was out of it.”

Likewise, he found a new freedom in owning his own business. “I do not miss the life of a chef, because there’s no freedom working in the hospitality business,” he says.

The Business Today



Though Russell, shown here, now works primarily with the management side of the business, he still occasionally assists his installers.

Today, Haertl is still enjoying that freedom. Sun Tint does automotive, commercial and residential installations on a daily basis, and Haertl mainly handles the management end of the business.

"I'm more on the business end at this point, but I still can go back and hang film with the guys," Haertl says. "I work more on the front end with customer service and making sure the shop runs efficiently."

Denise also works on the family business for part of the work week. The rest of the week, she stays home with their two-year-old son, William. The company has three automotive installers and one commercial/residential installer

Haertl also supplements this team in the busy summer months with a support staff.

"When we're busy, we focus on our support staff to get the car in and out. [They] go through a process of checking the cars and pulling the cars in or out," Haertl says.

In the summer, the shop tints up to 30 vehicles a day and around 16-17 a day in winter.

"We're booked solid by 11 a.m. on an average day," he says.

Sun Tint did not wish to release its annual sales volume. However, when asked, Haertl replies, "Let's just say that we keep a nice yacht on the Coast and are able to enjoy it."

Courting Customers

How does Haertl stay so busy? One way is reaching out to auto dealers. Twenty-two percent of Sun Tint's business comes from automotive dealerships with whom they have built a relationship over years.

We're blessed with the dealers we have now. When they call, they know it's going to be taken care of," Haertl says. "They play a vital role for us when we need them, so during the summer months we have to play a vital role for them as well."

Denise Haertl agrees, and says her husband's hospitable personality has also strengthened these relationships.

"We have been able to develop some really good relationships with dealers because of Russell's work ethic," she says. "Trust and reliability have developed over time. We have some good strong relationship in that regard."

Likewise, the Haertls chose dealers carefully.

"We stick with dealers who have pretty consistent managers," Haertl says.

The Haertls have worked with Jess Rolan, sales manager of BMW of Austin, over the past 15 years at several dealerships he has managed, including a Mercedes dealership and a Honda dealership.

"I've worked with them for a long time and they've done a great job," Rolan says. "They've taken very good care of us."

As is evidenced by his work with the dealerships such as BMW of Austin, Haertl concentrates on the high-end window film market.

"Austin has a very high-tech and professional crowd," Haertl says. "We're very professional. We're very prompt. Our market is the very-upper-end class of people."

Along with the automotive end of the business, Haertl has grown a strong business working with contract glazers, such as Morris Glass Co. in Round Rock, Texas. Owner Kerry Morris says he calls on Sun Tint about four to eight times a month.

“We do a lot of interior finish-out for tenets, as well as exterior, too. It seems a lot of the time on interior or finishes they often require some of the film to be put on exterior or glass, and [Sun Tint] comes to help us,” Morris says.

Morris, who as a glazing contractor works with his share of subcontractors, says he’s glad Sun Tint is available for his window film jobs.

“They have a really good attitude over there about the completion of a project. I wish all sub[contractor]s were like that,” he says.

Smoking or Non?

While Haertl goes out of his way to service commercial customers, he doesn’t forget about his retail clientele, as evidenced by his waiting room.

“I was exposed to customer service in the hospitality business which gave me a strong foundation for dealing with customers in the retail setting. Getting customers to come to you is only the first step in the process,” he says. “Because you will want repeat customers, you want your customers to go away realizing they made a wise decision and that they’ll gladly go back and justify their purchase to friends and neighbors.”

For Sun Tint, the second step lies in the waiting room- the customer’s first sight when he arrives at the shop.

“When people come in here, they expect a dirty little couch,” Haertl says. “We get the comment all the time that this place does not look like an automotive shop.”

Rolan says the appearance and comfort of the shop also makes this job easier, because he can send his clients (potential car buyers) to the shop to have them pick out their own film for their future vehicles.

“When you walk in there, it’s very clean, it’s very modern,” he says. “You have sofas and actual places to sit and wait. It’s a place where you can send our clients, who tend to be very particular. They see a nice area and are treated professionally, and it gives them confidence that they can leave their cars in these people’s hands and it will be OK.”



Sun Tint applied Solar Gard Stainless Steel 50 to the Stephen F. Austin Hotel (shown here) in Austin, Texas.

Haertl mentions that much of his business is repeat and referral business, thanks to the level of customer service his company attempts to provide

“A large part of the sale is justifying the expenses with you so that they’ll tell two or three of their friends,” Haertl says. “Seventy percent of our work is repeat and referral business. The formula that I like to use is one equals three equals nine equals 27.”

One benefit Sun Tint offers is a shuttle service to get customers to and from work or home while their vehicles are being tinted. If customers choose to stay and wait for their vehicles, they are able to enjoy wireless Internet access, soft sofas and cold sodas.

The service doesn’t end with the waiting room though.

"If the customer's paying a decent amount of money with us, we wash their car and vacuum it out for them," Haertl says. "The carwash is the chocolate on the pillow here."

The same high-end service is seen in the commercial part of the business as well, according to Morris.

"The reason [Sun Tint] was chosen [for their first job with us] was their attitude in the preliminary process of the project," Morris says. "I got to work with Russell hand-in hand on the project. I was really pleased by his attitude, his willingness to make the job go forward without any type of complaints, any criticism or anything like that."

The customer also gets a top-of-the line product. Sun Tint has the ability and salesmanship to provide its customers with high-end technologically advanced products, according to Russell Rader, manager of Bekaert's Houston Service Center. Rader has worked with the Haertls for the last 14 years in this capacity.

I'd say what sets [Sun Tint] apart is its ability to sell any product that we put on the market," Rader says. "They take it, they run with it and they are able to sell it no matter what the situation is."

Tough Times

Like any business, Sun Tint has seen its share of challenges. For Haertl personally, most of his trials have been spurred by his early start in the business..

"If you start young, you've got the challenges of trying to figure your way out as far as a manager goes," Haertl says. "Then you've got the aspect of youth and the ego that goes along with it. From employees to insurance, it's an undertaking-especially when you're as young as I was."

And demanding customers? Those aren't a problem for Sun Tint. Just as their waiting room is reminiscent of a Starbucks, their attitude is too.

"We have picky customers, but we love that," Haertl says. "That, in turn, turns into a lot more business for us. We allow the customer to embrace their pickiness. Sure, we have our share of concerns and problems, but that's taken care immediately."

The same for their dealership customers.

"Anytime we've has an issue with [Sun Tint], they've handled it almost instantly. They're exceedingly good in that respect," Rolan says.

Morris says the only issue he's had with Sun Tint is their excellent service- which isn't really a problem at all.

"The only problem we've ever had is that they'll do what was bid in the beginning and then when the tenet gets that work done, they like it and they want us to come back out and do more," Morris says.

As with many window film shops, the wintertime is probably the company's most challenging period of the year, but during these times, Haertl calls on his dealership customers to make certain the company stays ahead of the game.

"In the wintertime, we might start out with not many appointments on the books, but we'll stop in and call to check on our dealers," Denise Haertl says. "It's always on [Russell's] mind that this business has to support everyone that works for us.

And turnover? It's always an issue, but Denise Haertl says it's decreased over the years..

“This business is so seasonal that there are a lot of employees who think the grass is greener elsewhere –We have some people who’ve been with us for quite some time, though,” she says.

More Growth Ahead?

When looking ahead to the future of the film industry, after 25 years, Haertl predicts the industry will see more re-growth in the coming years. He notes that the rise in SUV sales over the past several years has decreased his automotive industry slightly, since many of these are sold with factory tinted glass.

“I think that our market will start to rebound from all of the SUV sales; that has definitely punched into our market a bit,” Haertl says, with sedans coming back on the market more.”

Despite its ups and downs, though, though for the Haertls, the business always comes down to people.

“The industry really has changed as far as some of the products out there, but the fundamental business hasn’t changed,” Haertl says. “For us, its always been a hospitality-based business.”

And what about Sun Tint- is it expecting more growth?

The Haertls seem to think that they could grow the business, but are satisfied right now with its success- and to this day appreciate the freedom that the business provides them, especially compared with Haertl’s past profession as a chef.

“We could personally make more money if we wanted to give up more of our free time,” Denise Haertl says. “If Russell and I wanted to be here six days a week we could do without tow or more of our people, but we choose to hire a management-type level position and customer service position because we want to be able to enjoy getting away and spending time with our son.”

“... and that is why every sale and customer is so important to us,” Haertl adds.