



Eric Laytin, who has always been good mechanically, founded Brake Masters, which was one of the first quick-service auto shops in Tucson.

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Tucson Citizen

Ful I speed ahead

▼ Brake Masters owners parlay one Tucson shop into chain of 50.

By JONATHAN J. HIGUERA
Citizen Business Writer

When Eric Laying opened a two-bay brake-repair shop in 1983 in a former gas station at East Grant Road and North Columbus Boulevard, he envisioned serving customers quickly and honestly. He had no idea it would lead to more than 50 stores in four states.

Now, along with his brother Shalom, who joined him a few months after he opened the first shop, Eric has even greater expansion plans for Brake Masters.

"Being in business, I saw the vision of where the business would go in the next 10 or 20 years," said Eric. "Cars needed less maintenance but they were still going to need brakes. Brakes and tires are never under warranty."

In late 1991, the Laytins began franchising their shops.

Now they have company-owned and franchised stores in California, New Mexico, Nevada, and Arizona, including 11 in Phoenix and eight in Tucson.

With the company's growth, the brothers' work has changed as well.

"Working now is more thinking, stargazing, making the right contacts, choosing manpower and still watching the day-to-day operations," said Shalom.

It made sense that Eric founded the brake shop. He is mechanically inclined. So much so that his mother instructed him not to dismantle any kitchen appliances while she was gone.

"I had to give him all my chocolate so he would fix my bike," Shalom recalled. "I didn't even like chocolate but I would keep it as a bargaining chip."

Now the brothers are business partners who take pride in saying the company started in Tucson. "I always wanted to put Tucson on the map," said Shalom.

In 1982, Eric was on this way back to Israel, because he didn't care for Los Angeles, when a friend invited him to visit Tucson. He fell in love with the place and saw an opportunity for business.

"When I came here, people didn't know what a 10-minute oil change was or a one-hour brake change, for that matter," he recalled. "I used to have to open the tire to prove to people we did the work," because they couldn't believe the work could be done so quickly.

The brothers opened a second shop three years later.

Shalom, who had been selling condominium conversions in L.A. before joining his brother here, got involved reluctantly.

"When I started, it was just answer the phone, go get the food," he said. "Then he asked me if I would write out the bills."

With Eric shuttling between two shops, Shalom began studying sites for expansion.

The Laytins also had to stay ahead of the competition.

BRAKE MASTERS

Business: brake-repair shop

Corporate Headquarters: 6179 E. Broadway

Owners: Eric and Shalom Laytin

Phone: 512-0000

1998 revenue: \$30 million to \$40million

In 1989, they began offering lifetime warranties.

"It takes some from the bottom line but it builds a good base of clientele," Eric said. "We don't take that for granted."

The duo have cut back somewhat in their work hours. Shalom's wife had triplets this year, and Eric's had twins. "Eric was a fanatic as far as work habits," said Shalom. "It was seven days a week. I was a hard worker as well but he had work habits that were tortuous."

They still travel a lot. About a year ago they invested in a twin-engine, eight-passenger plane so they could quickly visit their array of stores.

"It's a real working tool for us," said Shalom. "It's important to be in touch."

The brothers attribute a large part of their business success to the fact they don't pay their workers on commission. At the time they opened, the concept was an oddity in auto repair.

Mechanics routinely received commissions, which the brothers consider a conflict of interest.

"We're trying to satisfy the customer more than sell," said Shalom.