



THE SHIELD

A Canadian locksmith and safetech expands his business — and helps protect his financial future — by developing a unique weather shield.

By Don Sadler

You've probably read lots of interesting stories about how business owners and entrepreneurs started their companies. But there's a good chance you've never read about an owner who was literally *given* a business.

That's essentially how Andy Michie started Andy's Lock Service in southern Ontario. As Michie tells the story, he was working in pinball machine moving and repair in the early 1980s but was unable to continue after a serious car accident. "I was just sitting around bored to death when a friend who was a locksmith let me start going out on calls with him."

With his background in fixing pinball machines, it didn't take long for Michie to pick up locksmithing. Before long, his friend invited him to become a partner in his business. "Then, he just up and moved to the United States and left me holding the bag," Michie says.

Instead of panicking, Michie took advantage of the opportunity, incorporating the business as Andy's Lock Service in 1985. This year, he's celebrating the 25th anniversary of what turned out to be a very fortuitous circumstance — and he's finding success with a clever new product.

Evolution of the GrimeStopper

About 12 years ago, Michie took advantage of another fortuitous situation to begin laying the groundwork for what he hopes will be a successful second act for his business.

In 1998, Brinks Security, which was one of Michie's clients, told him they needed a durable cover to protect the ASSA rim cylinders on the doors of their trucks.

Since the plastic covers they were using were being subjected to constant road vibration, the coil springs they housed were breaking quickly. As a result, the covers were just hanging open and actually directing foreign matter into the keyway.



The GrimeStopper Weather Shield guards cylinders against environmental hazards by preventing moisture and dirt from entering the key way.

Michie says he checked with all of his suppliers in a vain search for a cover that could endure harsh environments, high usage and constant vibration. "Since I didn't want to disappoint one of my best customers, I designed my own application for them," says Michie. "I did the first rough drawing on the

back of a napkin after Thanksgiving dinner."

Six prototypes later, Michie had created a new, patent-pending invention: the GrimeStopper Weather Shield. "After numerous design changes, both on computer drawings and on actual working models, I finally hit on a concept that would satisfy



While the GrimeStopper Weather Shield's body is made from a rustproof metal alloy, the cylinder cover uses a dowel hinge pin and backing plate constructed from high-grade stainless steel.

“I WON’T BE ABLE TO DO SAFE WORK FOREVER. HOPEFULLY, THE GRIMESTOPPER WILL BE SOMETHING THAT WILL KEEP THE BUSINESS GOING WHEN I DON’T WANT TO TURN WRENCHES ANY MORE.”

my requirements and those of my customer.”

It didn’t take long for Michie to see the vast potential for his new invention in the world of locks, safes and vaults. “If I had focused sales efforts for the GrimeStopper solely on its use on armored vehicles, this would have drastically curtailed its sales potential,” Michie says. “I had to make sure the design was flexible enough so the product could be used in a wide range of possible scenarios, including locks and safes.”

His customers offered to serve as Michie’s test market, allowing him to install the GrimeStopper Weather Shield onto a variety of different hardware applications. For example, the original design was for use with all mortise and rim cylinders, but adaptor plates have now been developed that can accommodate ¾” cam locks and switch locks, along with some European cylinder applications, Michie explains.

“Many modern-day lock cylinders rely on internal electronics and precisely machined parts to ensure optimum security,” says Michie. “The GrimeStopper Weather Shield delivers the protection that these high-end cylinders require in order to continue performing in the harshest en-

vironments, year after year.”

Now, with marketing and sales opportunities in the U.S. and Europe and a new website devoted to marketing the product (grimestopper.ca), Michie believes everything is in place for sales of his invention — and sister com-

pany, AMLS Manufacturing — to take off.

“I’m still a locksmith and safe and vault tech, a wrench turner at heart,” he says. “Running both a locksmith business and a manufacturing company is time-consuming, to say the least. But I won’t be able to do safe work forever. Hopefully, the GrimeStopper will be something that will keep the business going when I don’t want to turn wrenches any more.”



A drainage port on the GrimeStopper — shown here in a municipal parking lot — directs moisture away from the cylinder, which can be helpful in extreme weather conditions.

“THE KNOWLEDGE I GAINED IN THOSE COURSES HAS OPENED COUNTLESS DOORS FOR ME OVER THE YEARS.”

Training Is First Priority

In the meantime, Michie continues to turn wrenches with Andy’s Lock Service, building on the education he started getting soon after initially acquiring the business. “I made the long trek down to Nicholasville, Kentucky, from Ontario to receive instruction from the Lockmasters Security Institute and some of the icons of SAVTA,” he recalls. “I’m talking about people like C. Allan Halverson and the master himself, Harry Miller, who brought some of his lock collection to class to show us. Harry could manipulate a Group II lock faster than I could tie my shoe.”

Michie says he was the only civilian in those training classes. “Everyone else was from the Navy. This was back when LSI was still doing training in the basement of Clay Miller’s house. If I’m not mistaken, I was the first Canadian to come down to that neck of the woods to receive training in safe lock servicing, penetration and manipulation techniques. The knowledge that I gained in those courses has opened countless doors for me over the years and helped solidify my company’s reputation in both the business and the safe and lock tech communities.”

After a quarter-century in the locksmith and safe and vault tech business, Michie remains primarily a one-man operation, although his daughter Aislinn maintains his website and handles IT work. “We’re a small but efficient operation — I’m the chief cook and bottle-washer,” he says. “When customers call, they always talk to me, and I’m the one who’s out in the field turning the wrenches. I’ve basically been on call 24/7 for the past 25 years.”



Andy Michie refurbishes safes such as this one from J. & J. Taylor Toronto Safe Works.

With his vast experience and solid reputation in his community, Michie says he doesn’t have to do a lot of marketing or advertising. “When customers find someone they trust, they’re usually loyal to that business, so I concentrate on providing top-notch service.”

Reaping SAVTA Membership Benefits

A learning fanatic, Michie says he has read every issue of *Safe & Vault Technology* magazine cover-to-cover for the past 20 years. “There are plenty of places to get information, but the hard part is categorizing it so you have access to it when you need it,” he says. “I three-hole punch all the issues and have created a categorized notebook on diagnostics that includes everything published in the magazine over the past 20 years.”

Michie has been a SAVTA member now (20 years) for almost as long as he has been

the owner of Andy’s Lock Service. He says his membership was especially valuable during the early days of his business. “SAVTA training gave me the knowledge I needed when I was starting out to service my customers with confidence.”

Diagnosing problems, he believes, is the key to being a successful locksmith or safe technician. “On a service call, it’s usually not that hard to open a safe, but can you figure out what caused it to break? SAVTA training and the SAVTA magazine have helped give me the ability to diagnose problems so that I can hopefully help customers avoid them again.”



Don Sadler is an Atlanta-based freelance writer specializing in business and finance. Reach him at don@donsadlerwriter.com.