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## 60 Years of Serving Shops



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Exhaust: Is Bigger Better?  
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# 60 years of Serving Shops

By Jim Wilder, Undercar Digest Editor



**Mike Creedon (from left) Ana Garcia and Rich Jolivet visit a shop and examine its work. Mike and Rich are both "Car Guys."**

**A**utopart International (AI) is celebrating its 60th anniversary of supplying professional service providers. And while the company has evolved dramatically over the past six decades its team members say they have to tip their hats to founder Steve Patkin for getting it all started.

Mike Creedon, president of AI; along with Rich Jolivet, vice president of global sourcing and product management; and Ana Garcia, vice president of operations, recently discussed the history and growth of this niche company with *Undercar Digest*.



**Autopart International President Mike Creedon**

Patkin founded AI's predecessor Foreign Autopart in the backroom of his family's Renault/Peugeot dealership in Massachusetts.

"They found that at the time it was very difficult to get parts," Creedon said. "The family also owned a Buick dealership so Steve would take his Buick station wagon and literally go to the ports of New York and other areas and buy spare parts for the family dealership."

Soon other dealerships started calling Steve and would send their customers to his dealership because they knew he had the parts to fix their cars. Steve realized there was a market in selling hard-to-find parts."

The company started with only Renault and Peugeot parts, but by 1963 handled OE parts for other foreign nameplates. Through the '80s and '90s the emphasis switched to Asian vehicles as that segment flourished. Soon Foreign

Autopart stores were opening throughout the Eastern Seaboard.

### Name Change

"The biggest move for the company was going into private branding," Creedon said. "So you look at a company going out in the aftermarket, having parts manufactured to OE or better spec and making Foreign Autopart, and ultimately Autopart International, as its brand."

"When I came here in 1999 the company had tinkered a little bit with the Foreign Autopart brand name," Rich Jolivet said. "We had brake-pad kits. We had a few odds and ends but nothing complete. Changing the name to Autopart International really helped broaden its appeal. If a shop owner wouldn't work on a foreign nameplate, he would never buy anything from Foreign Autopart. With Autopart International the company became all makes, all models, but did not lose its import her-



One of the early billboards in Massachusetts advertising Autopart International's predecessor Foreign Autopart.



Autopart International headquarters in Norton, Mass.

itage, our import niche. The change was driven by our store division and its wholesale global sales division."

Jolivet explained that AI sells direct to shops along the Eastern Seaboard from its 181 store locations but also sells outside the region, including the remainder of the 50 states, Canada and South American countries through WDs and jobbers. The popularity of its products has grown to a point that AI has presented for the past two years at the Latin Expo in Panama. AI also has a booth at AAPEX in Las Vegas to grow its global and state-side business.

"Our global sales division had a lot of demand for our products but those same WDs and jobbers were demanding better alternatives on their domestic applications," he said.

As a result, Jolivet and his team started developing domestic-application products just like the company had done for import



Autopart International Vice President of Global Sourcing and Product Management Rich Jolivet

products by obtaining OE samples.

"We're now a business that's 70% import and 30% domestic," Creedon said. "We really are an all-makes, all-models supplier."

### A Unique Position

AI, in addition to Carquest and WORLDPAAC, is owned by Advance Auto Parts Inc. Creedon noted that AI is in a unique position because it has the backing of one of the largest parts suppliers while keeping its niche. AI has also interacted more with WORLDPAAC because both are import specialists. "Both companies have spent the past 40-plus years developing a very real and tangible expertise in the import market, but when you look at Autopart International, we're now predominantly Asian import. When you look at WORLDPAAC, they are a heavy European import parts provider.

"We have a very complementary platform to provide to the professional shops. Between Autopart International and WORLDPAAC, and then of course, Advance, we believe that nobody compares with the Advance Auto Parts family of companies in terms of being able to offer the professional service provider the best inventory in the marketplace. We also offer tools and equipment.

"We have developed significant brand loyalty in our core markets (the Eastern Seaboard) so people will turn to the Autopart International brand," Creedon said. "We are OE quality or better. We provide for

the professional service provider, who doesn't necessarily want to provide a product that someone can walk into a retail store and buy. They want to provide something special to customers."

"We're wearing one hat," Jolivet said. "That's who we focus on in terms of our activities, whether it be promotional or whether it be service related.

"When you look at the most valuable service we provide, we believe it is our folks behind the counter," Jolivet said. "If those folks had to split their time between serving the DIY customer or serving the professional customer, you'd only have a certain amount of time to set the focus. One hundred percent of our training focus, marketing, promotion – everything – is dedicated to the professional technician.

"For us, we see AI as an extension of that customer's business," Ana Garcia said. "That's what we provide to them. We've got parts information and experts at the counter, and they are there for the shop to pick up the phone and



One of the 181 Autopart International stores along the Eastern Seaboard



**Autopart International Vice President of Operations Ana Garcia**

give them a call so we can solve their problems.”

Creedon noted that AI, in addition to WORLD-PAC, Carquest and Advance, is positioned to handle

the growth in import vehicles. “When you look back 10 to 15 years, import has significantly out-paced domestic and will continue to do so. We really like our positioning in the aftermarket and the expertise we provide in import.”

### Key Product Offerings

Jolivet noted that 70% to 80% of AI products sold are private label and are sourced from design and contract manufacturers of premium products. AI is also known as the undercar specialist expert to its customers in addition to its import emphasis.

“We started out really as an undercar company and when Steve founded the business some of the parts that we sold the most were exhaust, brake and chassis. Exhaust was a huge piece of our business so we were under the car from our beginnings. Mufflers lasted a year or two years at the most and people got four or five muffler changes over the life of their car.

“As the technology of vehicles expanded we continued to refine our product offering into other areas. As front-wheel-drive cars continued to increase, CV axles became popular. Catalytic converters continue to grow in vehicle applications, especially with CARB (California Air Resources Board) compliancy in so many states. Under the hood became important for us to focus heavily on engine-

management products and grow that side of our business.”

### Socially Responsible

Creedon, Jolivet and Garcia emphasize that AI’s suppliers are socially responsible:

- Manufacturers are ISO TS16949 certified – a quality-process standard emphasizing defect prevention through continual improvement.
- They are required to undergo and pass rigorous third-party social accountability audits annually.
- C-TPAT (Customs Trade Partnership against Terrorism) is a voluntary program AI is working to become certified in to protect our global supply chain and protect our ports from potential terrorist activities.
- Anti-terrorism screening – AI runs all potential new international vendors through “Denied Party Screening” as part of the onboarding process. Denied parties appear on dozens of lists created and compiled by U.S. government agencies – organizations of parties that are blocked or have been sanctioned by a government for illegal acts, such as involvement in terrorism, money laundering, weapons proliferation or narcotics trafficking.

• Green certification (ISO 14001) in progress – ISO14001 is a certification AI is working with its suppliers to obtain. Essentially this certification indicates the company manages the short- and long-term environmental impacts of manufacturing.

### Training for Service Providers

Keeping technicians apprised of technical advancements and diagnostic updates is an important function for AI.

“We offer throughout the year in all of our differ-

ent markets various training based on our customers’ feedback through surveys,” Jolivet said. “CTI (Carquest Technical Institute) provides the classes, but they are branded and brought to market through AI.”

“Our brothers and sisters at CTI even don our Autopart International shirts and logos when they teach the classes,” Creedon said. “It is one of the great things about being part of this Advance Auto Parts family of companies. AI also offers custom training provided through its vendors,” Jolivet said. For example AI customers will attend seminars provided by KYB for ride control and CATCO for emission controls.

Garcia noted that AI’s counter people are fantastic parts people. Many times they are “parts guys” and “car guys” who are the ones running our stores and are there to help shops. Most have a long tenure and are part of the community they work in. The only walk-



**Autopart International stocks thousands of parts with a mix of about 70% import and 30% domestic.**



**AI offers an optional batteries-on-consignment program for shops**

in traffic we ever get is the folks who are the technicians who come to us to buy directly when they are repairing their own cars.

"AI provides hotlines for technical issues beyond our focus.

"Our store teams can go in and put in a note because they know something," Jolivet said. "We then vet that note, before we release the added information."

### Customer Programs

AI has prided itself as being an extended arm to service providers, and with it the company has developed what it calls a very simple but robust customer program.

"Our loyalty program includes nationwide warranties and point-of-purchase materials that help shops explain to the customer the need for brake service, timing-belt replacement, serpentine-belt replacement and other items," Jolivet said.

Some parts, including mufflers, shocks and struts, come with a life-

time warranty. Bay banners are available

and there are options that allow shops to stock batteries on consignment, Creedon said.

One the biggest advantages for shops is AI's customized customer stocking program, Jolivet said. "It is customizable by shop and by market. We have shops with different specialties so we stock accordingly. We can handle markets with higher or lower vehicle populations, whether its import or domestic, and the different populations of vehicle makes and models."

### Speedy Delivery

Creedon said AI provides hot-shot deliveries in urban areas and also has rural-route parts deliveries. Both are normally accomplished within one-half hour of when the orders are placed.



**Point-of-purchase materials are available to help explain repairs to motorists.**

### First to Market

Creedon said AI is proud of its first-to-market approach because AI listens to its customers.

"The product is no good if it's not in our catalog, so we employ our own parts-information team who report in to Ana and we're also getting those OE crosses done as fast as we can. The catalog is updated as quickly as possible. It comes in and they can find it and sell it and be first to market knowing that this new Ford or Toyota part crosses to a part that is already on our shelf."

### Growth

Leveraging with its parent company and sister companies continue with Creedon noting that a few AI locations are behind Advance stores. Five new AI stores are opening this year and one will be side by side with a WORLDPAC store.

Although some customers may not realize the company tie-ins, they do appreciate the relationships AI builds with them. "You need the right parts, you need the right catalog, but most important you couple the technology with the relationships," Garcia said. "That's what wins our customers."

"We have to be fast and we have to stay ahead of the curve with all the changes," Creedon said. "That's ongoing with us. We call it AI-ness." ■



**SHOCKS  
STRUTS  
ALIGNMENT**



**Bay banners promoting AI private branding are available to shops.**



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