

Participants in John Deere's new earn-while-you-learn apprenticeship program will get structured on-the-job training and technical instruction with an experienced mentor at participating dealerships.



27 WAYS TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN TECH TALENT

by Marcia Doyle, Wayne Grayson, Tom Jackson, Don McLoud

“We’ll try anything.” When it comes to technician recruiting and retention, Ann Pollert, director of workforce development, General Equipment & Supplies in Fargo, North Dakota, is open. “One thing I love about this company is we never say no to trying new things. I feel like I have more lessons to learn rather than lessons learned.”

In part two of our series on the diesel technician

shortage, we talked about how the industry was partnering with tech schools. This time, we’re casting a broader net and looking at the tactics that seem to resonate with those involved on the front line of technician recruiting and retention, including those in other industries.

Some caution tape, however, should surround these tips. These are not easy buttons. Some ideas may produce great results in certain locations and nada in others.



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A Diesel Laptops instructor goes over automotive diagnostic software.

But the stakes are high and, as Pollert says, all ideas are welcome. “This will be one of the top three success factors in the construction industry over the next 10 to 15 years,” says Bill Chimley, Komatsu America director of training and publications. “Whoever figures out the workforce equation is going to be in the driver’s seat.”

RECRUITING TIPS

■ Go where the gearheads hang out

General Equipment gave a pop-up tent to an employee who regularly competes in truck mud-runs. The tent has a “looking for diesel techs” message along with General’s name and phone number. “Our thought is, who’s he hanging out with? Other mud runners,” says Pollert.

This illustrates the opportunities available at local motorsports events, such as sports car races, NHRA, motorcycle and motocross events. The spectators may not be trained diesel techs, but most of them have a mechanical interest.

Since it might be difficult to get face time with the drivers or crews during a race, consider sponsoring a car. For local races, the price for getting a sticker on somebody’s car isn’t prohibitive and it will get you access to the community.

Or step up your game (admittedly this is quite a step up) and sponsor a whole team. That’s what Al Niece of Niece Equipment did, creating the Niece Motorsports NASCAR Gander Outdoors Truck Series team. “It’s both a marketing tool and an employee retention tool,” says Niece, who heads the water and lube truck manufacturer. “It builds team unity. It gives us more Monday morning water cooler talk that is something outside of daily work.”

Two other likely gearhead hangouts are auto parts

stores and quick-lube places. Look for helpful counter people and good service providers. They’re likely not a trained diesel mechanic, but they know something about cars, engines and mechanic work, and they have the people skills.

Have a great technician recruiting or retention idea?

We’d love to hear it! The more voices on this subject, the better. Email marciadoyle@randallreilly.com.



▲ Niece Motorsports driver Ross Chastain has provided plenty of water cooler talk at Niece Equipment this year.



▲ Turner Mining's social media posts make a point of highlighting its people.



■ Look beyond just-out-of-high-school

"You have to think differently," says Tim Spurlock with American Diesel Training Centers. "Everyone wants the 17-year-old high school kid, and the real key is to look

out unbelievably well for us. The beauty of it is that it's all free. We don't spend a dime on any prepaid ads or sponsored ads, and we don't have anyone working full time on it. It's quick and easy."

Turner encourages employees to put up regular short posts of their jobs, milestones and success stories, which grow exponentially on social media. For example, a technician completes a rebuild on a big engine. He snaps a selfie standing next to his project and posts it to his account with a few comments on what a challenge it was. Ten of his friends see it and put the post on their sites, where 10 of their friends see it and post it. Before long, this one post has racked up hundreds of views – all positive about the company.

Occasionally, Turner will hire a professional photographer to photograph people in the field for the company's social media content. And office personnel make sure photos are taken for anniversaries, promotions and other celebrations, which quickly get posted to the company site. Those celebratory postings are a nice way of reminding family, friends and acquaintances that the person in the post made a wise decision by going to work at Turner Mining Services.

Turner relies almost exclusively on employees doing their own posts. There's a rule that you don't stop work or do something unsafe to get a photo, but he says it's not a problem. His workforce is smart enough to police itself. "Our people hold each other accountable," he says.

for that 25-year-old who's had some life experiences."

Spurlock argues that these people make great entry-level change-the-filter techs. "New hires don't need to know how to rebuild engines. You're looking for attitude, attendance and soft skills."

He continues: "Look for people who are perhaps working in factories making \$15 an hour running a punch press or fulfilling orders in an Amazon warehouse. The average age of people coming into our program is 26.7 years. We like mature people who have gotten their life started. They may have a family, they have responsibilities. The unifying thread amongst all of them is that they realize that this is their chance. Those folks are everywhere now."

"A lot of companies don't require a certification or a degree. We certainly don't," says Larry Cox, Sunstate Equipment's vice president of culture. "We just need somebody that wants to be a hardworking technician, and we can train them throughout their career."

■ Get good at social media...

"We've built our workforce 100 percent on the back of social media – Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn," says Keaton Turner of Turner Mining Services. "It's worked

■ ...but don't dismiss the tried and true

Old-school methods can still hold sway, including help-wanted signs on company property or trucks, word-of-mouth and employee referrals.



Photo: Dakota County Technical College.

One-on-one mentorships can be an effective way to transfer knowledge.

“We love the referrals from our employees, especially when they refer their brother or uncle or sister,” Cox says.

Sunstate also keeps track of what methods work. Within the first two weeks on the job, a new tech will get a welcome call from upper management, and one of the questions they get asked is how they came to the company.

“For many, it’s either been a referral, or ‘I saw your trucks,’ or ‘I drove by and saw a sign on the fence,’” Cox says.

■ Explore what’s available digitally

Bone up on how you can target an online audience, says Tyler Robertson, CEO of Diesel Laptops, which offers tech training software and hardware. “Unless you really know what you’re doing in terms of setting up your online ads, creating a landing page and cultivating that information, it’s going to be difficult,” he says.

Carolina Cat uses geotargeting on its Facebook tech recruiting ads. “People are moving away from traditional job boards and more toward social media,” says Lauren McMillan, the dealership’s recruiting manager.

The dealership also uses sites such as Glassdoor and Indeed, which allow users to read a review and apply while they’re in the app. “Techs have to be able to apply on their mobile devices,” McMillan says. “The easier you can make it to apply, the better.”

Some dealers have found success in using a targeted data set in recruiting, says Melissa Moss, senior director of digital services at Randall-Reilly. Using EDA data on tool buyers (example: individuals who have financed Snap-on and Matco tool sets), these buyers can be tar-

geted on Facebook, job boards and with search-engine marketing. “We like to have a multichannel approach,” she says. (Note: EDA and *Equipment World* are Randall-Reilly brands.)

“We advise clients to be transparent in their messaging,” Moss says. This includes being direct about starting base pay, hiring and relocation bonuses along with highlighting company culture.

But these campaigns will fail if there’s no timely lead follow-up, ideally within 5 minutes after a lead comes through, Moss says: “Don’t use text or email as your first touchpoint. These are good follow-up methods, but your first method of outreach should be a phone call. If they’re reaching out to you, they’re also reaching out to your competitors. When a lead is contacted by phone within 5 minutes, the chances of actually speaking to the person go up 900 percent.”

■ Make sure you’re inviting to women and minorities

“If there are any two topics that are closely intertwined, it’s diversity inclusion and workforce development,” says John Messe, senior director of heavy equipment at Waste Management. “When we’re doing a bad job at tapping into diverse groups, we are more likely to have a workforce problem.”

Current U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show women make up less than 4 percent of all maintenance and technician workers. The statistics are similar in Canada, says Jacqueline Anderson, director of stakeholder relations at Women Building Futures, an Edmonton, Alberta-based group working to educate and introduce

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women to jobs that have typically gone to men.

The group offers a four-week pre-apprenticeship program for women interested in becoming diesel technicians. After the initial four weeks are up, each budding technician spends one year working with one of four partners of the program, which include Cummins, Westcan Bulk, DFI and SMS Equipment. From there, their training advances.

At Waste Management, diversity in the workforce is a corporate goal, Meese says. “We recognize that the more diverse the company is the more viewpoints we have to tap into. It’s such a broad focus because our workforce has to mirror the community,” he says. “Our customers are all from diverse backgrounds and how can there be any empathy for a customer if you have not been around that diverse group that you’re serving?”

■ **Make it a company priority to grow your own techs**

It’s difficult to hire off the street and there are not enough tech school graduates to fill the need, Spurlock argues. This means it’s on you to grow your own.

Although it started as a brick-and-mortar operation, ADTC now takes the approach that diesel tech training needs to be embedded inside companies to meet the demand.

And always take time to train an inexperienced newbie, says Turner. “I really believe that if you bring in an 18-year-old kid to wash parts or sweep the shop floor, if he’s got a good head on his shoulders, he’s not going to be washing parts or sweeping the floor very long. He’s going to be standing next to the guy that’s doing the work and asking questions. If he’s showing that kind of interest, then it’s on you to help him develop his skills.”

■ **Up the ante**

Consider whether putting money on the table will make the difference,



▲ Jake Meenk gets hands-on experience in Sunstate Equipment’s apprenticeship program.

especially since your competitors for tech talent are likely offering everything from subsidized to free training, tool reimbursements and guaranteed jobs.

In some cases, Sunstate will offer a \$5,000 signing bonus. “It’s the kind of thing you have to do to get people to understand how serious you are about hiring them,” Cox says. “You have to be competitive – like professional sports.”

Sunstate recruiters make it a point to ask job candidates in interviews if they have education loans, Cox says. The company reimburses the student as the student makes payments, up to \$30,000. It also begins the reimbursement without a required period

of employment. “We’ll start it right away,” he says.

To help cover tool expenses, the company offers up to \$20,000 spread over a two-year period.

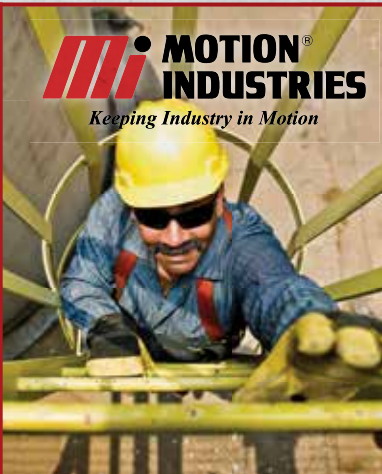
“We believe it’s our responsibility to create the environment where they don’t want to leave,” Cox says. “And so we’re not afraid to put an investment in these kids or adults, and we’re convinced that we can retain them.”

Spurlock says he’s seeing an 85 percent retention rate if students receive assistance from an employer, usually in the form of paid training. “The real issue here is a funding issue. If you remove the two barriers of time and money, it opens up a massive pipeline of people.”

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■ Have a recruiting plan

"If you're proactive with your recruiting strategy, you're not going to hire out of desperation," says Jay Goninen, CEO of the Find a Wrench technician search service. "Don't be like the 60-year-old who suddenly wants to start saving for retirement."

This includes active recruiting even though your shop is currently at capacity. Set a goal of tech interviews and come up with a plan to make yourself accountable for executing it. "Once you get caught up, don't stop," he says. "That's an absolute killer. Make sure you're consistently evaluating what works and what doesn't. Be intentional. Set up reminders to stay on task. The better you get at this, the better your business is going to be."

Eventually there will be a market correction, Goninen says, and if you have a plan in place, it will allow you to be aggressive and hire good techs when others might be laying off. "When people are running one way, try to run the other," he says.

■ Celebrate incoming tech interns

Washburn Tech in Topeka, Kansas, is credited with having the first National Technical Letter of Intent Signing Day in 2014, an idea that has spread to more than 70 institutions. Modeled after the NCAA's National Signing Day for athletes, students typically sign a letter of intent and don a cap featuring the institution or sponsoring employer.

The idea has spread to construction dealerships such as Road Builders Machinery & Supply, which held its first Signing Day ceremony in May with three incoming students. "Signing Days help solidify the commitment," says Doug Mehner, corporate service manager. "It gives them a vision and the knowledge they have an official spot."

■ Brag about the industry

Construction is dinged for being a technology laggard, but there's plenty of technology that's already here and

on the short horizon. "I chuckle at Elon Musk's fame for autonomous cars when we've had massive autonomous trucks running in mines for more than 20 years," says Komatsu's Chimley. "We have to tell that story."

Sunstate is also working on a plan to take about 100 students from Universal Technical Institute's Orlando campus to the American Rental Association's Rental Show

next year in Orlando. There they will be able to see the equipment, meet employers, and as Cox puts it, "Get wowed about what the rental industry is all about."

■ Talk about the long game but be honest

Successful diesel techs, with their innate equipment knowledge, can carve out a steep upward trajectory. But candidates have to earn the next rung on the ladder through old-fashioned effort. There's going to be hard work, grease and dirt involved. New hires are not going to get a \$70,000 job right out of tech school.

But also emphasize there's a career runway. "One of the things about

millennials is they want a lot of responsibility," Turner says. "They want it now, and they want to move fast. When you get the right ones, you won't have any problems with them begging for more responsibility."

■ Recruit the parents

"It's the parents that we've got to convince," says Greg Settle, director of national initiatives, TechForce Foundation. Host an event at your shop and invite the parents along with the students, he says. "Have your techs actually working in their areas and showing how they work on equipment, so they can actually see what they do and what it's like to work there."

Adds Chimley: "Recruiting talent is no different than a college football coach coming into somebody's living room and telling the parents, 'I'm going to take care of your son,' or a women's college softball coach coming in and saying, 'I'm going to take care of your daughter. When they come to us, we're going to make sure they do well.'"



Road Builders Machinery & Supply's inaugural Signing Day included incoming student/employee Zach Stanford (at the table) with, left to right, Alan Bell, HR director; Doug Mehner, corporate service manager; and Rusty Coons, Kansas City service manager.

■ Look into apprenticeships

Dealers and manufacturers are establishing registered apprenticeship programs, such as the one just started by John Deere. Apprentices who participate in this earn-while-you-learn program will get structured on-the-job training and technical instruction with an experienced mentor at participating dealerships. While in the program, apprentices will track and report their OJT learning and technical training time in conjunction with their employer.

Started a year ago, General Equipment's apprenticeship is geared to those who have been out in the workforce for a few years. The company currently has approved apprenticeships for a diesel tech, an aggregate equipment technician and for a parts technician. "We've been doing this informally for 35 years, because that's how we've trained our employees, but this just formalizes it," Pollert says.

■ Talk about the opportunities

Equipment technical requirements are creating new careers. "There's always been the sales person selling the machine and the technician fixing the machine," Chimley explains. "Now, right in the middle of those two, we've created a technical solutions expert, which serves as a customer consultant to the emerging technologies." The training and experience they receive as a technician is foundational to this and other career advancements, he says.

Another career possibility is becoming an equipment manager. The average member of the Association of Equipment Management Professionals manages a fleet of 1,333 pieces of equipment worth \$21.3 million and has an annual purchasing authority of \$1.85 million. This level of fleet management obviously isn't taught at your local tech school. AEMP fills this training and career gap by providing high-level education and certification for up-and-coming technicians to help them achieve the job of fleet manager.

■ Hire a hero

Know that the Reserves and the National Guard are sweet spots for recruiting because their units are all locally based. Their members work and serve in your community – a phone call away.

These are the "weekend warriors" who pull one week-



Photo: NDSCS



General Equipment student Grant Davis and a North Dakota State College of Science instructor go over a repair.

end of active duty service a month and one two-week mission a year. The rest of the time, they are civilians with civilian jobs. Not all Guard or Reserve units have mechanics and technicians, but a high percentage of them have motor pools.

Sunstate created the Sunstate Foundation in partnership with Universal Technical Institute (UTI) and TechForce Foundation to set up scholarships for veterans. In addition to the scholarship, the foundation also pays the gap between discharge and when G.I. Bill benefits take effect, usually around \$1,200 to help cover living expenses.

"There are a lot of great technicians coming out of the military, and so we spend a lot of time at the recruiting and career fairs at military bases in our area," says

Kathy Taylor, chief people officer at Carolina Cat. “The good thing about military people is that they are used to moving, so they might be willing to move to the job location.”

■ Get to know...really know... your local educators

Sunstate has become a premier employer with UTI, which refers the company to students, according to Cox.

That 10-year relationship with the tech school is bearing fruit, bringing in not only entry-level mechanics but experienced ones as well. In a recent survey of its 500 technicians, Sunstate found that 20 percent of them were UTI graduates. “That did not mean that they graduated from UTI and found us,” Cox explains. “They graduated from UTI and then went to work and then changed jobs or got laid off, and then they found us.”

Sunstate, like many equipment rental companies, has been experiencing rapid expansion. “When we go into a new territory, we get to know the UTI campus director,” he says. “Having that relationship with a school allows us to walk into the campus – and they know us – and talk to their students about the options that exist in our company and our industry.”

■ Take back the high schools

High schools can be a tough recruiting challenge, says Sunstate’s Cox. Students typically rely on guidance counselors who may not know that high-paying jobs are going unfilled in their local area.

“The students aren’t going out and talking to employers when they’re a junior in high school or a sophomore,” Cox says. “They’re talking to counselors.”

Cox went so far as to write a letter to 3,500 guidance counselors and educators in Arizona. He was surprised at the feedback, with many of the comments along the lines of, “I had no idea.”

Deere dealer 21st Century Equip-

ment goes on more than 80 high school visits a year to connect with students in Nebraska, Colorado and Wyoming, says Wayne Brozek, corporate vice president of aftermarket. “There’s enough talent inside our own fences; we don’t need to try to poach from other places,” he adds. “We just need to educate the people who are at our back door.”

And before they even get to high school, Fox Valley Technical College introduces younger girls to diesel tech and other trades through summer camps, says Jennifer Fuerst, coordinator of K-12 programs. “If students can figure out which cluster they are interested in before leaving middle school,

she says. “What does a job look like? What are they going to like doing every day? I know that when I stand in front of a classroom of 22 students, that maybe only two are interested in exploring being a diesel tech. My goal is to find those students and then get them to visit our shop and explore what they’re interested in.”

In the meantime, she’s also giving value to the rest of the students and hopefully leaving the impression that General Equipment is a good place to work.

■ Never stop recruiting

“The dealers that have dedicated HR resources for recruiting technicians



▲ Dineah Lucero left the automotive world to join Sunstate Equipment’s apprenticeship program in Denver, where she has advanced to field service mechanic.

they can head into high school knowing which classes are most relevant for them to take,” she says.

■ Take back the high schools, part 2

Pollert makes general presentations on career exploration, teaching high-schoolers how to research and choose a career and a company. It’s only tangentially about diesel tech careers.

“I go into what does a four-year college degree look like versus a two-year or a one-year certification,”

are the ones filling their jobs,” Chimley says. “They wake up and that’s their focus.”

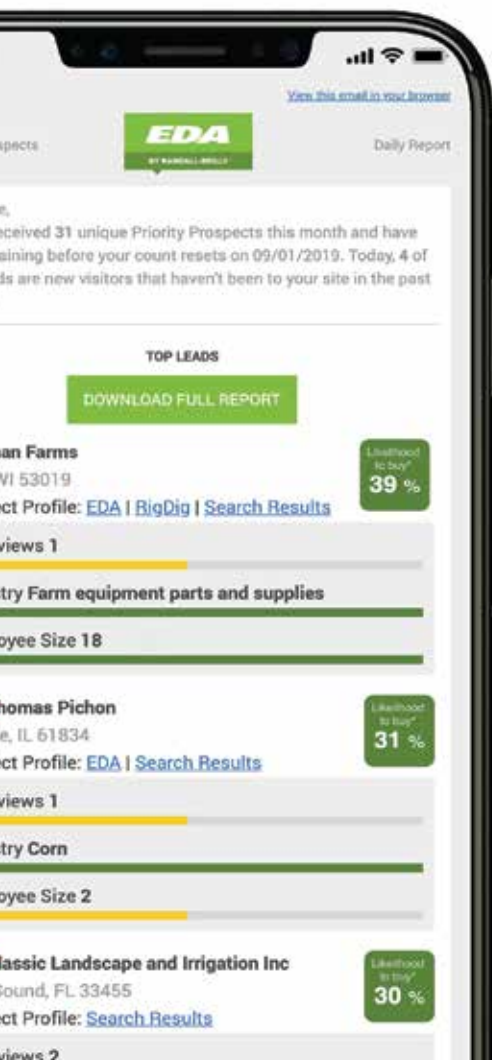
Adopt some tactics floating in automotive circles. Have a business card made up with your elevator pitch on it, outlining the top three reasons why people should work for you. Or make it simple: show a piece of construction equipment with text that reads, “Your next job here” with your contact info.

Hand them out with a comment such as, “I’m Joe, and I hire diesel technicians.”

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Newman Tractor's "Deconstruction" video series feature technicians such as "Kickin' Kenny" Young.

RETENTION TIPS

"The number one key to the tech shortage is retaining the techs you have," says Duke Fancher, vice president of aftermarket for Lonestar Truck Group. Here are some ways to keep your techs:

■ Culture, culture, culture

"Culture is how we feel when we are at work, and what drives us to do a better job every day," Fancher says. "You need to make them part of the family."

Lonestar has started sending each new technician a handwritten note welcoming them to the team and telling them they've made a great decision to join the company. Included in the note is a business card with all the important company numbers that the techs can keep or hand to their significant other. "We're at full capacity with the exception of a few jobs," Fancher says of the company's 23 stores. "How did we get there? I think it really boils down to culture," Fancher says. "You gotta let them know you care."

"One of our biggest successes is just doing our best in our communities and making sure people know that General Equipment is a great place to work," Pollert says. "It all ties together with culture, because I wouldn't encourage my friends to work here if I hated to work here."

■ Thoroughly examine your internal processes

"Companies really need to focus on being as efficient and productive as possible in their shops," Diesel Lap-top's Robertson says. "If you can decrease the amount

of hours you need to troubleshoot, for example, you can free up your techs to do other things."

Carolina Cat used technician focus groups at all its branches to delve into its technician retention processes, says Taylor. "We asked them what we needed to be considering," she says. "We really got a good sense of where some of the pain points were for technicians." One of the messages was techs wanted more career progression. "We realized we were using some artificial requirements," she says. "Instead, we've made it more competency-based."

In examining its employment data, Carolina Cat also discovered that turnover was most likely to happen in the first three years of employment. So it adjusted its compensation package for this group.

Look at your on-boarding process, Fancher says, and at the ways that you make someone feel welcome. For instance, don't make techs wait for a uniform until a trial period is up. "Think about how that makes the new employee feel. You're literally saying 'you're not part of the team' until they get past their initiation."

■ Listen

"I ask all the time: 'What can I do to make your job better?'" Pollert says. Sure, there are quick-come-back answers, such as more Dilly Bar Fridays, but there's also gold to mine.

For example, the techs asked Pollert why they couldn't wear jeans. She explored the question and found the no-jeans decision was rooted in a 15-year-old problem with cleaning grease from denim. Since there are now solutions to handle those stains, the techs can now wear

jeans. Simple question, simple solution, yet it added to the job satisfaction of those working in the shop.

Lonestar Truck Group asked its techs in one facility about installing air conditioning in the shop. “The technicians got together and said, ‘If you really want us to be more productive all year around, we could use some overhead cranes,’ Fancher says.

■ Designate a mentor

Road Builders Machinery established a formal mentor program about six months ago and is already seeing the benefits, Mehner says. “A lot of students coming in now need consistent feedback,” he says. “Mentors give them someone to turn to; they are part psychologist, manager and friend.” Mehner emphasizes that mentors need to volunteer for the job and that they need to go into it thinking they can learn as much from the student as the student does from them.

Mentors are critical, agrees Fancher, especially during the onboarding process. “They tell them how things are done, how to navigate their way around the big learning curve,” he says.

■ Make female techs welcome

Your culture and employment policies should already have a welcoming atmosphere in place, but also pay attention to these potential snags, says the TechForce Foundation: Don’t ask your female techs to wear a man’s uniform. Make sure you have a dedicated women’s restroom and changing facility. And look at additional flexibilities you could offer to single moms (and dads) to help keep them in your employ.

■ Make your techs your rock stars, part 1

Celebrate each progression of the tech’s journey via social media. “Anytime I can plug my students or their stories, I’m there,” Pollert says. Any tech that gets certified through the Association of Equipment Distributors Foundation’s Certified Technician program has their name on General Equipment’s “Wall of Fame.”

Technicians are the stars in Newman Tractor’s “Decon-

struction” videos. Using work that’s in the shop at that moment, Newman technicians speak directly to the camera on such topics as rebuilding the valves and cam bearings on a Cummins engine or repairing an artic’s suspension.

“My goal is to not slow them down while they’re working,” says Justin Newman, who serves as company videographer. “I’ll just occasionally say, ‘Tell me what are you doing’ while filming.” The videos showcase the technician’s expertise. Not only do they tell their audience what they’re doing to fix things, they explain why

a component failed. To entice viewers to keep watching each video, Newman puts in outtakes and bloopers at the end. “We realized people will engage if we’re more vulnerable,” Newman says. Another rule: no hard sales pitch.

The series has netted its technician stars a small amount of fame. “Our guys have been recognized when they’re out,” Newman says. “And when you’re getting numbers like 40,000 views on a video, people are paying attention.”

■ Rock stars, part 2

Sister companies Mack Trucks and Volvo Construction Equipment each sponsor global dealer tech-knowledge contests. Volvo CE’s Master Competition is 30 years old, and now the children of the original competitors are in the fray, with one former winner’s daughter making it to the finals in March. “Not only does the contest identify the best of the best, it also boosts the reputation of hard-working dealers

everywhere and shows just how much skill is needed to deliver a world-class service to our customers,” says Hans-Juergen Salau, Volvo CE global manager of technical training.

The Mack Masters contest wrapped up earlier this year with more than 500 dealer teams and 2,000 techs competing for the honor. This time, the contest also featured “apprentice” teams in which the combined experience of all four team members could not exceed 16 years.

And trucking firm Ryder awards a \$50,000 first prize during its annual Top Tech contest from among its 6,300 U.S. and Canada-based technicians. **EW**



Left to right, Justin Malone, Joey Wardrip, Aaron Toomer and Ted Pfister from Bruckner Truck Sales won this year’s Mack Masters and landed on the cover of this Mack publication.