



**BY PHIL SASSO**  
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

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# Want to be the **toolman to the stars?**

Selling specialty tools to restoration, restyling and performance shops

I met Chip Foose, the celebrity king of hot rod design, at Automechanika in Chicago a few months ago. If you're not familiar with Foose, he's the star of Velocity's reality TV series *Overhaulin'* and founder of Foose Designs, an automotive restyling and product design company.

I decided to walk up and introduce myself.

We didn't have a long talk about tools. We barely talked at all. I just stood there starstruck. I asked him for an autograph for my son, thanked him and walked away. That was it.

I've never been one of "those guys" hung up on celebrity. But I was that day.

I wished I'd asked him: "What are some of your favorite tools and where'd you get them?"

So, this month my focus is on selling tools and equipment to the custom shops. Think of them of as the Rock Stars of the automotive aftermarket.

**Q. Is there money to be made selling tools to custom shops?**

**A.** There's no more money to be made selling tools and equipment to custom shops than to your average neighborhood repair shop. But, some tool dealers pass over custom shops because they're smaller or may not seem to do the same volume of work as a conventional repair shop. Yet they need tools and equipment, too.

"None of the tool guys call on me anymore," says Phil Vincevneus, Sr., owner of Pleasant

Valley Auto Body and Holeshoot Customs which share a building in Saukville, Wis.

Vincevneus chalks up the lack of tool dealer visits to his many years in business and full toolbox. But he is by no means done buying tools.

When a dealer does stop at Vincevneus' shop, the shop owner likes to go out to the truck and buy unique specialty tools and "oddball stuff."

"I really don't need hammers anymore, or the basic tools," he says. "But I'm always like 'Oh this is neat! I could use a 3' long screwdriver for something' ... I don't know if I need it, but if I've got it I might find something I could use it for."

**Q. Why would I add a stop every week to maybe sell a screwdriver? I barely have time for all the stops I make now.**

**A.** Because you don't need to stop every week.

"When guys did stop, I told them 'You don't have to come every week,'" Vincevneus says. "If you want to come every second week or every third week – or even once a month is fine. I've got your card."

"It's still nice [for a tool dealer] to stop even once a month at the little shops," he says. "They may think they're wasting their time ... But you never know. If you've got one [tool] guy that keeps stopping, eventually you're going to need something and he's going to be the guy that you're going to buy from."

There are tens of thousands of custom shops nationwide doing everything from restoration and restyling to tuning and performance work. These shops use all the hardlines you already stock like ratchets, wrenches, screwdrivers and such. They love specialty tools and they also do a good deal of special orders.

**Q. Won't a small custom shop just waste my time on small special orders?**

**A.** First, no order that pays your bills is a waste of time. A series of small special orders can lead to a big special order. Second, most custom shops aren't one-man shows.

"We do restoration, mechanical, paint, body, fabrication, and we have an upholstery shop and a parts department. The car never leaves here. That's what a lot of people like," says Paul Quinn, president of Midwest Hot Rods in Plainfield, Ill.

Quinn is a hands-on owner and, like Vincevneus, he has a full range of tools from his years in the business. But he does still buy "odds and ends." And the younger technicians at his shop buy a lot of tools from the tool dealers that call on his shop.

Quinn still buys shop equipment from the flags calling on him – like a recent purchase of jacks. Pricing is often the deciding factor. "They're comparable ... or he'll make you a deal," Quinn says. "You can bargain with them."

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Contributing writer Phil Sasso answers the following questions:

- What tools are unique to the mechanical side of restoration shops?

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**Should I carry any special tools for custom shops?**



I doubt you call on enough custom shops to make it worth stocking tools just for them. And some of the unique tools they use are well outside of what you'll find at your flag or WD.

Kevin Tully, co-owner of Custom Chassis and Cycle in Addison, Ill., says two tool trucks regularly stop at his shop.

A lot of the tools his shop uses for doing custom work are not typical automotive tools you'd find on a tool truck, Tully says.

"I used things like carpenter's squares, combination squares and plumb bobs, and all kinds of stuff that they normally wouldn't carry," Tully says.



*Custom shops nationwide do everything from restoration and restyling to tuning and performance work. In particular, these shops love specialty tools and they also do a good deal of special orders.*

When asked by a young technician who just started working at his shop what tools he recommended, Tully was at a loss for what to tell him.

"I have tools in my toolbox that I got from Home Depot, and I have stuff in there that I got from Jo-Ann Fabrics, and I have stuff in there that I got from Office Max, and Micro-Mark hobby

distributors ... I mean I've got all kinds of crazy stuff from all over the place," Tully says.

"It's a tough list of things," Tully says. "It's not like a guy in my position would want to go out and walk into the tool truck and get [these tools] rather than just go to the local hobby shop or the local Lowe's and buy it myself off the shelf -- rather than paying the premium of a tool truck. Especially if it's something they're not going to warranty."

Tully has bought specialty tools, however, from his tool dealer, like a tiny driver ratchet set about 3/8" long.

"I haven't used it, and I probably won't use it for a year," Tully says. "It's one of those tools that you only use once a year but you're damn glad you have it. You can't get another tool in there to do the job." PD

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