

Pride and Passion

Being Australian and staying Australian is an important part of the O'Phee trailer business. Patrick O'Brien reports

Everyone in the transport game knows the name O'Phee. Whether it be their eye-catching – and award winning – stands at the Brisbane Truck Show or a gleaming trailer running up and down the highway without fail, O'Phee Trailers is an integral part of Australian transport.

But what makes a business like O'Phee tick? What keeps Mick and Sharon O'Phee and their hard working staff of 40-odd, not just surviving, but producing innovative trailers that stand the test of time?

Take a quick look around the 7,000-sqm O'Phee premises in Brisbane's south-west and you can't miss a message emblazoned on the giant overhead cranes that dominate the buildings: 'The people make the difference'. But it's not a mere slogan.

"To us, a company is nothing without its people," Sharon O'Phee explains.

"And because we're smaller – we're only a mid-sized manufacturer, we're not a mass producer – we can concentrate on that part of our business really well, whereas once you get past a certain size you can't have that personal approach with your staff. You don't know their names, their wives, their kids ..."

The skills shortage has been dominating headlines for a good number of years now, so all companies could do

worse than taking a leaf out of the O'Phee book when it comes to their teams on the floor. At O'Phee it's not uncommon to find staff whose tenure is well into double figures.

"We had to make a decision a couple of years ago: Do we go down the path of getting foreign labour in? Or do we get young local people in and train them up? And we chose the latter because we see that as Australia's future," Sharon says.

"One hundred per cent of the trailers we manufacture here are Australian made –we use Australian steel for its higher quality and we don't bring in any fabricated manufactured items like chassis rails from overseas. We're a mid-sized niche manufacturer who builds a quality trailer the way the customer wants. And we want to encourage manufacturing to continue strongly in Australia."

Far from being a mass producer of trailers, the O'Phee expertise comes into prominence when a purchaser has a specific transport requirement.

"Before we start building a trailer we spend time talking with the customer to find out exactly what they want and how we can improve the solution for them," said Sharon.

"We have been very involved with the PBS requirements and our production system of having one team working on one trailer means we are



very flexible in what we can do. Each trailer can be totally individual and a change in the industry requirements just gives us another challenge,” she added.

The company has an extensive range of products ranging from skeletal and retractable skeletal designs through drop-deck flat-tops and curtainsiders, convertible trailers that offer flat top options with tipping versatility and specialist road train applications including dollys.

“There’s a marked increase in orders for drop deck trailers and extendables and the industry is much more aware of the increased safety and efficiency of systems such as electronic braking, disc brakes and roll stability programmes.

“The reticence by some operators to adopt some of these technologies has been caused by compatibility problems between older prime movers and new trailers but as more new equipment incorporates these systems those compatibility concerns are reducing. There is nothing to prevent these systems being retro-fitted into existing trailers in a fleet,” Sharon added.

Comfortable and confident

The key to the O’Phee passion lies in the way that no-one is pigeon-holed into the one role; every tradesman is exactly that, a multi-skilled professional comfortable with making every facet of the trailer, not just someone working on the same thing every day.

A nice mix of apprentices are scattered throughout the business, arranged so a school-based apprentice will be trained to become a first-year apprentice, then rolled on to second-year, third-year and so on, with a constant cycle coming through, refreshing and enervating the whole trailer-making procedure.

“When we employ apprentices we look for that little bit of passion in them,” Sharon reveals.

“They have no skills (when they first join as an apprentice), so we just want a little bit of spark. And you can see that when they come in and have a look around. If they have the passion, we can teach them the skills.

“We like long-term people here, even if they haven’t necessarily worked with trailers before. If they have the skills of a boiler maker, say, but really want to learn how to make trailers, we can teach them.”

Of course the advantage of having such a dextrous staff means the ability to produce special one-off trailers becomes just that bit more feasible. Take the example of a 48ft drop-deck flat-top with a hydraulic rear ramp built to transport helicopters with – best of all – sides that opened up to form a portable helicopter pad.

The way it usually works is the customer will talk to Mick first, working through the freight task and issues such as height or width restriction or, as in the case of the helicopter mover, loading and restraint issues. When the process reaches the point where the customer is happy with the concept and Mick is comfortable with what’s going to be produced, the basic sketches and outline drawings begin.



Top: Sharon and Mick O’Phee introduce innovative design with an enviable reputation for quality and durability.

Lower: The Brisbane headquarters is the centre for O’Phee’s manufacturing and service.

It's also extremely common for tradesmen to become involved in the original design as the build team can suggest detail changes to improve the overall result.

"Of course, once you start making the trailer, you frequently reach a point in the manufacturing stage where the experience of our manufacturing manager comes into play and we realise we'll need some small modifications," Sharon continues, turning the conversation back to the value of a steady – and therefore experienced – workforce.

Talking the talk

Showing diplomatic ability the equal of his engineering skills, Mick has long worked closely with regulatory bodies across Australia, helping O'Phee's customers get approval for their unusual designs across what can be a tough run to find the finishing line. Not that Mick is alone in dedicating his spare time to the 'political' side of the industry. Sharon, too, is well known for her hard work with the associations that are so vital to the industry, including her role as a past Chair of the CVIAQ and Chair of Skills Tech Australia, where she helped nut out the important structural changes needed to update TAFE courses in Queensland.

"I think it's really important that manufacturers come on board in some way. The CVIAQ, for example, represents the voice of manufacturers and repairers; the service side of the transport industry. It has very good representation at State and Federal level and is asked to respond to issues around ADR regulation all the time," she says.

"If the CVIAQ has access to all the key manufacturers it can communicate their responses down to Canberra. You have to have people who are prepared to come on board and put in for the industry, otherwise decisions will be made that are detrimental to the industry."

You get the clear impression that for O'Phee there's no distinction made between these different components, that the effort they put into their trailers is matched by the effort they put into associations. This in turn is no different to the effort they put into their displays at the Brisbane Truck Show, where it's almost as if they're due a Lifetime Achievement Award for the number of times they've been awarded first prize for Outstanding Trailer Display.


And sure enough, the show that started some 45 years ago just a few metres from O'Phee's premises does find Sharon in an ebullient mood.

"There's something about Brisbane, a great vibe and feel. People come not just for the show, but the get-together and the weather and everything else. They're talking about it months and months before it happens and then come every day, not just to look at the equipment but because they'll meet their old mates".

"The other thing I like, bearing in mind I've been on the CVIAQ Board and seen what planning is involved, is that every cent made at the Brisbane show goes straight back into the industry so that we can continue to deal with the Federal and State authorities across Australia."

As for those awards, Sharon is quick to bring the topic back to where we started: the people that make O'Phee what it is.

"When Mick and I get accolades from the industry, that's great, but we ensure it filters back to everyone in the factory and admin office. They are the people who are actually responsible for the manufacture of the trailers".

"We're very lucky to have people like that. They're loyal to us and we're loyal to them – they're as much a part of O'Phee Trailers as Mick and I." 

The Hamelex connection

Apart from O'Phee's own range of trailers, the O'Phee Trailers site also houses the Hamelex White dealership in Queensland. Sharon explains how it all came about:

"About ten years ago, Mick and I sat down and looked at our core business, and with the idea of not having all our eggs in one basket we thought about how we could diversify our business."

"One thing we don't make is aluminium trailers, so we had a think about that and approached Hamelex White and asked if they would be interested in a dealership up in Queensland – they'd had one before – and they said yes."

"Then Hughie Carr, who's a really good friend of ours, became available. He was living down in Wagga, where his family is from, and we spoke to him over the phone and said, 'Why don't you come and live in Queensland and sell aluminium trailers?' So he thought about it and moved his family up.

"He's done a tremendous job, has Hughie. In fact, he's done such a great job that we won the inaugural Dealer of the Year Award at the Hamelex White conference in 2008!"

