



# PASSING THE TEST OF TIME

For Steve Lawler, 10 years have gone by quickly, and in that time he has been able to build a reputable customisation business offering his customers quality, service and reliability. Australian Custom Trucks has a special Q&A with SLS Group to celebrate 10 years in business.

**I**t's been 10 years since Damien from Costello Transport was getting ready to take delivery of his new T904. He wanted bling but was unhappy with his supplier and turned to a good mate and fellow driver Steve Lawler for help.

Steve, with the help of Steve (Gibbsy) from Gibbs Fabrication had been working on the truck he was driving for his dad. He added twin stacks, tank steps, tank trims and custom cabinets to house the surround sound entertainment system.

Gibbsy offered the opportunity to rent his machine tools

and workshop to fabricate Steve's products and to make the leap from driving to customising a reality.

With this offer and encouragement from Damien he took a big breath and started his business.

"I stepped out of the truck on the evening of September 29 and started making custom stainless steel truck accessories the next day," he recounts to Australian Custom Trucks.

"Here we are, 10 years later!"

"What started out as one truck has led to hundreds more as well as the addition of profile cutting, engraving and fabrication departments in the business."



Words: Q & A

Photos: Steve Lawler

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**1. The first customer truck by SLS Group**

**2. A well kept workshop that saw over 200 trucks move through it in 2007**

**3. A T404 SAR done for Barakel Transport**

**4. Tom McQueen's T904**

**Q. What was the most challenging part of starting the business for you?**

Making the decision to do it and the uncertainties behind it all; weighing up the chance of failure versus the possibility of success. Also the fact that I was leaving the family business and felt that I was letting my father down. There was also the uncertainty of going from a guaranteed weekly wage to starting a business and having minimal to no wage for a long while, as well as the debt and pressures associated with starting a business from scratch and establishing a client base.

**Q. Did it take long for you to build up a client base?**

I didn't have a specific plan to begin with and was uncertain of where I was going to take it. I was just going to do Damien's truck and see what happened. Once the word got around that I was in the business I started gaining more customers and that forced me to take on employees and expand my operation.

I guess one of the issues with my client base is that generally speaking, a truck owner is only buying a new truck every four to five years so even though your customers are returning, it's not for a few years.

In the early days it seemed to be more about the owner operators doing up their truck but times have changed and

many small to medium fleets have started blinging up their trucks to improve the image of their fleet and to attract the better drivers as potential employees.

**Q. What has been the highlight for you in this business 10 years on?**

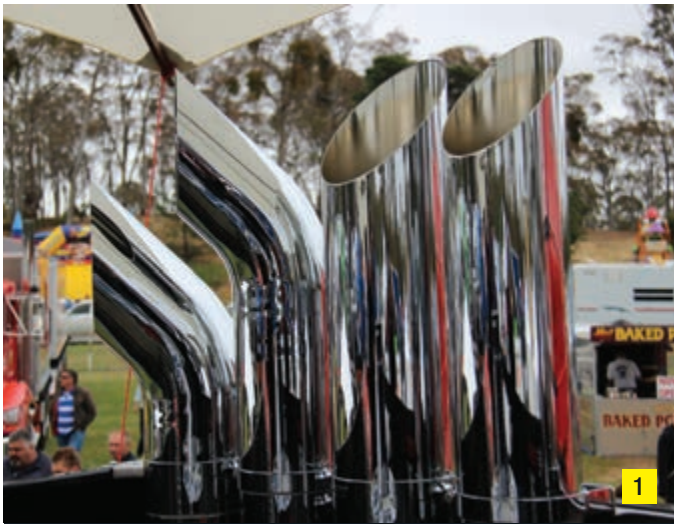
Making it to ten years is definitely a highlight considering the statistics that around 90% of businesses fail in the first ten years.

Every year has its highlights, but 2007 as a year stands out. It was a cracker of a year across the transport industry in general as lots of people were buying new trucks before the emissions rules were changed.

We were constantly working on five trucks at a time and on several occasions up to seven at a time. We did 12 trucks for K.S Easter, seven for Earthworx, four for Betts Transport and two for M & M Betts. We did a massive project on a T404 SAR for Barakel Transport as well as Tom McQueen's T904. We worked on over 200 trucks that year. It was an awesome year.

**Q. Who are your biggest customers?**

In terms of dealerships it is Brown and Hurley, Gilbert and Roach and North Star Motors. We sell a lot of DIY kits to VCV and CMV. In terms of the fleets that we are working



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**1. As the Australian distributor for Dynaflex Products SLS offers an Air Kooled stack that can handle high temperatures of newer exhaust systems.**

**2. The 45ft display trailer specially built to promote SLS Group products and services just finished a major road trip**

**3. Pulling the 45ft flat top is the fully restored 1983 model Kenworth - this is the truck Steve drove for his dad**

**4. The truck was fully stripped back and shows what SLS can do.**

**5. The road trip was a great success. This was taken at the Kenworth factory in Bayswater.**

on for those dealerships it includes: Betts Bower Haulage Group, Betts Transport, Hogan's Heavy Haulage, Compass Transport, K.S. Easter and Causley Transport.

**Q. What services do you now offer?**

At our Maitland, NSW workshop we offer a one stop truck shop experience where we take delivery of the vehicle and see the entire process through from start to finish. We will manufacture and fit our premium accessories as well as work with our partners to get the truck painted and sign written. In house we have a water jet cutter, laser cutter, guillotine, press and an engraver, so we have the ability to create almost anything the customer could desire for his truck. Our intention is to get all the work done on the truck before delivery so that once the customer gets the truck it's complete and ready to go to work.

We also manufacture DIY kits for Kenworth, Mack, Volvo and Western Star. We offer stainless steel drop visors, bug deflectors, pre-cleaner covers, mirror trims, headlight defenders, tank wraps, strap wraps, tank trims, number plate covers and stainless wrapped swing plates. We fabricate tool boxes, mudguard brackets, deck plates, rear bumpers, mudflap weights and we do a lot of custom signage and lettering.

As the Australian distributor for Dynaflex Products we offer an Air Kooled (AK) stack that can handle the high temperatures of the newer exhaust systems. The AK stacks have a double pipe design that allows cool air to pass between the inner pipe and the outer chrome, giving you chrome that does not discolour and chrome that is easy to clean because the bugs are not getting baked on. It also means no additional heat shields. We are also a distributor for Vortex Technology who specialise in stainless steel air cleaners, they have the best air cleaners on the market.

**Q. Do you ever miss driving, or do you still do it occasionally? And tell Australian Custom Trucks about your recent trip around the country and how you were received by the different dealerships and suppliers?**

Yes I miss driving. I miss the open road and just cruising along. There is just something about driving in the great open spaces, I don't miss driving in Sydney, although I like Sydney, it's the country roads and the wide open spaces that I really enjoy.

Needless to say, I really enjoyed the 4600km trip we just completed. I drove the '83 model Kenworth and towed our 45ft flat top display trailer, and made over 55 stops in four states, plus there was two days at the Castlemaine Truck Show.

We had a road salesman that was planning a trip around Victoria and we were also working to turn a 45ft flat top into a display trailer that we could use for the truck shows. So when the Castlemaine Truck Show coincided with our salesman getting sick, I decided to take the new trailer and do the trip myself.

I had originally wanted to do a furniture van display trailer, but we decided to tackle the flat top to give it a different sort of atmosphere and show off the creativity of what we can do at SLS and it has definitely turned some heads.

As our customers have brought their trucks into our Hunter Valley workshop we have designed and perfected truck accessories for many makes and models and now we want to offer those accessories as full DIY kits to customers beyond the Hunter Valley region. So this trip was a great way to get out and introduce ourselves and get people familiar with our products.

With the dealerships, if you could get the truck and trailer in front of their windows where they could see it, they would be out the door and on the trailer. At some dealerships we



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"I DROVE THE '83 MODEL KENWORTH AND TOWED OUR 45FT FLAT TOP DISPLAY TRAILER, AND MADE OVER 55 STOPS IN FOUR STATES"





"THROUGHOUT THE TRIP WE HAD MANY PEOPLE TELL US OUR STUFF WAS 'FIRST CLASS', 'FIRST RATE', 'EXCELLENT STUFF'"



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had upwards of 15 people come out. And at the Kenworth factory in Bayswater there was somewhere in the range of 50 people that came out for a look. We had let them know we were coming and someone sent around an email, plus we were driving a very neat '83 model Kenworth... so that caused some excitement.

Throughout the trip we had many people tell us our stuff was 'first class', 'first rate', 'excellent stuff', several people knew us as 'the guys that do those awesome tank wraps'. A lot of people commented that we were really thinking of everything, covering all the bases and that we are on the right track.

We also met a number of our Facebook fans along the way, some in interesting chance meetings, and we had several people that followed the road trip on Facebook and arranged to meet up with us when we stopped in their town.

Our Dynaflex AK Stacks were on display and we had tonnes of enquires about those as there are so many people having huge problems with their chrome being destroyed by these newer exhaust systems that are running at really high temperatures.

**Q. Why the '83 model Kenworth?**

It's the truck that I drove when I was working for my father, Tom Lawler. It's a truck that I have had a soft spot for since I was a kid because it was the first truck Dad bought brand new. It has been a great truck since day dot, so it was the one I set my eye on driving. I drove it for four years, washed and shined it every weekend and it's the first truck I began to customise. I added bits and pieces to it in my spare time - twin stacks, tank steps, tank trims - and in a sense it became my truck.

When I started SLS the truck was driven for several years by other people but then we took it off the road to strip it apart and sandblast and paint all the chassis rails. While we were doing that I decided to tidy it up and turn it into a bit of a display/masterpiece to show off what we can do at SLS.

**Q. Why do you think it is important for transport operators to customise vehicles?**

It's a way to create their identity, their brand so that they stand out from the crowd. Fleet owners tend to do it to lure the better operators into their employment and encourage some friendly competition between co-workers to keep their trucks clean and tidy.

But having a neat, well looked after truck is also important for getting work. If it is obvious that you look after your gear it shows your customers that you are going to look after their freight.

**Q. What have been some of the hardest deadlines to meet?**

Generally anything to do with Chris Betts! (laughter) He always has a tough lead time!

Customising Causley Transport's first set of B-Double trailers in less than two days to get it to Lismore Truck Show on time was a tough ask. It was the lead truck in the procession so it had to be there!

The trailers got to our workshop at smoko on Thursday and we had to complete the trailers, get them loaded and then drive the seven hours to Lismore and get there with enough time to wash the truck before the procession started Saturday morning.

We got to Causley's shed and four people took five hours to get the truck and trailers looking their best. We headed to the show, drove less than 100 metres and it poured down rain! We made it to the show with less than 10 minutes to spare.

**Q. What are some of the challenging requests or big projects that stand out?**

In 2006 Daniel Bower brought in his K104 that had square tanks and asked for them to be wrapped in stainless steel. One of my employees said that it wasn't possible. I said 'we'll make it happen'. The finished product came up an absolute treat and we haven't stopped wrapping square tanks since. Daniel also wanted curved tool boxes that looked like a seat, acted like a step and matched the shape of the square tanks and it had to have the trims and lights to match. That took a bit of skill.

There's also the Volvo D-shape stainless steel tank wraps.

**1. Steve's own truck is an example of the great work he does.**

**2. OnTrack's K104**

**3 & 4. Phillips Racing's Peterbilt before it was restored.**

**5. One of Steve's most challenging jobs was back in 2006 wrapping square tanks in stainless steel for Daniel Bower.**

**6, 7 & 8. Phillips Racing's Peterbilt truck looks impressive after SLS.**





**1. Betts Bower's C509**

**2. Betts Bower's Mack Titan**

**3. Marchant Brothers 2003 model T904**

**4. Causley Transport's T909**

**5. Mark Smith's pride and joy.**

**6. Compas Transport**

With more people now blinging up Volvos we have recently put a lot of effort in to get the Volvo tank wraps right. There are lots of shapes and roll zones that have to be coordinated to get it perfect, but I am happy to say that we have nailed it!

A big job was the Philips Racing Peterbilt now owned by DBT. This truck came to us in 2008, it was nearly 20 years old and was a case of making a silk purse out of a sow's ear. You can just see from the before and after photos that it was a massive job! It took about four months to complete but the final result was impressive. It was the first stainless steel bumper bar wrap that we did as well as the smooth stainless steel deck plates. We also did smooth stainless exhaust shrouds and there was a lot of custom cut signage that was backlit. We had to source American bud wheels and get them chromed... it wasn't necessarily a difficult job but there was a huge number of hours that went into it.

Another big one was Marchant Brothers 2003 model T904. This was a log truck that had had a hard life working in the bush and Jason wanted to revamp it. Again, the before and after shots really tell the tale. We sandblasted and painted the chassis (the cab wasn't painted, just new signwriting), we did a few modifications and added a bunch of stainless.

**Q. What about recent projects?**

Between June and September we did Betts Bower's Mack Titan, Betts Bower's C509 and Causley Transport's T909. They were all big jobs. The Mack Titan was definitely the biggest Mack customisation we have done in our ten year history, the C509 was a huge project and so was the T909. I was very happy with the results and did day and night photo shoots for each of them.

**Q. We hear you are a keen photographer?**

Yeah, I guess I've probably got close to 100,000 truck photos now.

My father and uncle were always taking photos of their shiny trucks, the loads they were carting and the way they tied them down... so I guess it's in my genes.

When I started driving trucks I started taking photos and when I started my business it was just natural for me to take pictures of every step along the way. Not just of the trucks but also of the improvements we have made to the workshop over the years.

I would love to do photo books for the big jobs we have done so that the customer can have a record of the before, during and after shots. My staff often joke that I take way too many photos but it has been photos that have been crucial for developing our procedure manuals and marketing material.

But largely it all just boils down to pride. Being proud of the work we do at SLS, keeping a record of it and showing it off.

**Q. What's next for you Steve? Where do you see yourself taking SLS Group in the future? Are there plans for further expansion? Further product lines?**

My head runs wild with ideas every day! I am always looking for ways to improve and streamline our processes so that we can expand and better service the marketplace. We are always looking to do as much as possible in house so that we are in control of the quality and the lead times.

At the moment we are concentrating on the DIY kits to get them perfect for distribution across the country. We want to be 100% confident that there will be no installation issues and that we will have happy customers.

I do have another much bigger dream, but at the moment I'd like to keep that under wraps, because it's pretty big.

**Q. Tell us about the SLS slogan, "Passion, Precision, Perfection - Exceeding expectations since 2003"**

They all work hand in hand. You can't get perfection without passion and you can't get perfection without precision. You have to be passionate, precise and perfect and that's what we do here at SLS! That equates to exceeding our customers' expectations!

I have often been accused of OCD but it is that attention to every detail, and commitment to perfection that my customers are looking for. •





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