



# Mobile Trailblazer

From locksmithing to politics, Bill Neff creates his own opportunities.

**B**ill Neff is a man with a plan — lots of plans, in fact. The locksmith industry veteran owns three different companies, including Neff's Safe, Lock & Security, Inc., a 14-employee retail locksmith store with nine mobile lock trucks in Lancaster, PA.

Neff, CPP, PSP, CML, recently went back to college to pursue a degree in political science and is preparing for a follow-up 2012 state Senate run after getting his first taste of politics during an unsuccessful campaign last year. "That was a real learning experience," he says. "I love locksmithing but I want to do more

with my life. I hope that I can eventually pursue a career in politics.”

‘Learning’ is what life is all about, as far as Neff is concerned. “The day you stop learning is the day you stop growing. Going back to college and the critical thinking it has required has given me a totally different perspective.”

#### FROM PARTS MANAGER TO LOCKSMITH

Bill Neff first entered the locksmith industry in 1975 when, as a parts manager at a General Motors dealership, he was offered the chance to purchase a key duplicator, key clipper, key blanks, pin kits and a correspondence course from an acquaintance for just \$200. He jumped at the opportunity and started educating himself on locksmithing, reading everything he could get his hands on.

Since he already knew the auto parts industry, he started out with automotive locks, and his boss allowed him to duplicate keys for the dealership’s customers in exchange for a percentage of the income. Within two years, he

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was making more as a locksmith than as a parts manager, so he decided to make locksmithing his full-time occupation.

“At that time, there were no mobile locksmiths here in this county — we removed locks, brought them back to the shop to repair them, and went back to reinstall them,” he explains. “So I bought an old ice cream truck and had it repainted and lettered and I was in the mobile locksmith business.”

Neff still focuses on the automotive niche, as well as access control, CCTV and high-security locks. “Electronic automotive locks are our specialty and have proven to be very profitable,” he says, explaining that he’s built an electronic “clean room” where he can remove microprocessors and chips from circuit boards and reprogram them instead of replacing the

boards. “It’s a 10-cent part on a circuit board, instead of a repair that would cost customers hundreds or thousands of dollars. This is a very lucrative niche for us.”

#### DOWN ECONOMY HELPS BUSINESS GROW

The current economic environment has actually helped boost business for Neff. “Other peoples’ misfortune can be an opportunity for us. There are lots of repossessed vehicles entering the market now that need new keys. I had to hire five new employees in January just to keep up with this business — it’s exploding,” he says. In addition, more people are buying transponder keys and automotive remotes in the retail store, he adds.

Neff points out that the only reason he’s been in a position to benefit from this business is because he has made the necessary investments in tools, training and equipment over the years. “In a service business like ours, you only have so many hours each day, so you have to invest in tools that will help you be more efficient. I think it’s important to set aside a certain amount of revenue each year to reinvest back in your business; otherwise, you will get stagnant.”

Just as important as keeping your tools and equipment up to date, Neff believes, is keeping your employees (or associates, as he calls them) motivated and content. He offers his associates the chance to earn extra money and commissions above and beyond their regular wages. “Give your employees opportunities to share in the wealth and let them know that the sky’s the limit,” Neff says. “Those who work for me know I’m firm but fair. Many businesses fail because they treat their employees like objects and non-essentials, and this is a big mistake.



Neff’s mobile locksmith truck doubled as a campaign vehicle in last year’s election.

“Human resources is my biggest challenge today,” he adds. “There were 60 applications for the five jobs I filled earlier this year. I gave a career aptitude skills test to applicants because I need people with multiple skill sets who can multi-task.”

**TIME OF TRANSITION**

Neff believes the locksmith industry is entering a time of transition, with more information available to both locksmiths and consumers via the Internet. “This is a double-edged sword,” he says. “Some locksmiths are now collaborating together in pricing and charging less, which they think will bring them more business. But price is not always the main factor when customers buy.”

Instead of lowering prices, Neff prefers making sure he and all his employees show customers that they really care. “For example, are your trucks and your shop clean and well-organized? Are your customers properly dressed? Are they competent and knowledgeable and do they use proper phone manners? In essence, does your business add value for the customer?”

“For years, it was easy pickings for locksmiths, but today it’s critical to stay up to speed on the latest trends and technology, especially electronic locks,” he continues. “I’m



In April, Neff spoke about the future of security at the Lancaster County Tea Party.

an optimist and I see the glass half-full — I think the rewards will be great for those who are serious about our industry, but you can’t just give away your services.”

On April 15, Neff spoke at the Lancaster County Tea Party about the future of security and personal privacy. In his speech, he stressed that “security is a journey, not a destination” and that there’s no such thing as “pick proof,” “burglar proof” or “fire proof” when it comes to security.

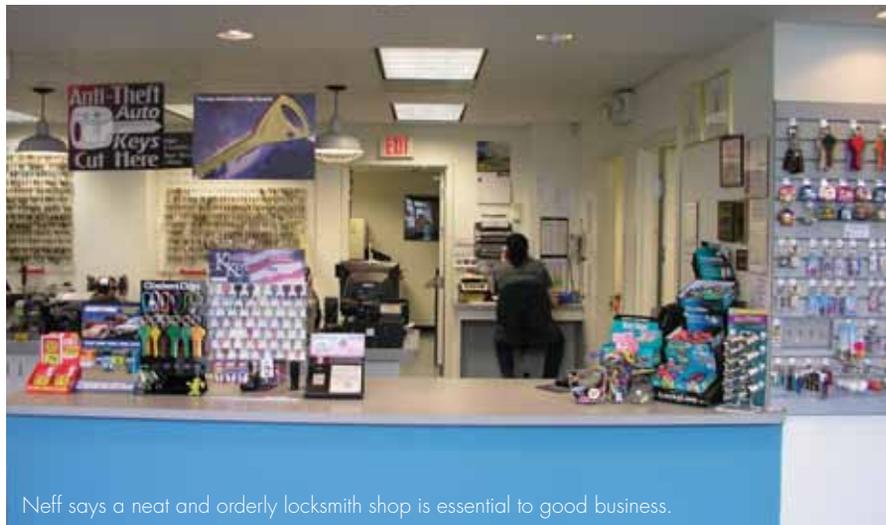
“Security is dynamic and forever changing, mainly due to the new conflicts and crises we face in this constantly changing world,” he said. “I remember growing up in the ‘60s living in the 7th Ward of Lancaster, and my family didn’t lock our doors until after April 4, 1968 — the day Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot.

“Despite advance warnings and calls to proactively take precautions, our country ignored the threat of impending attacks by terrorists and the result was Sept. 11, 2001. Just think: If the cockpit doors of those planes had been secured, our country wouldn’t be in the financial crisis it is today.”

**A CERTIFICATION PIONEER**

There’s no question that Neff practices what he preaches when it comes to learning and continuing education. He was one of the first participants in ALOA’s Proficiency Rating Program (PRP) when it was introduced in 1986 and was the first locksmith in Pennsylvania to earn the Certified Master Locksmith (CML) designation. In addition, he has also received the Certified Protection Professional (CPP) and Physical Security Professional (PSP) designations.

“Before I participated in the PRP, my income and outlook on the locksmith industry were both at lower levels and I had ebbs and flows in my business,” he says. “But after I became certified, my perspective changed and so did my income and my well-being. Getting a certification or degree is just the beginning — it has to be applied to have any worth or value.”



Neff says a neat and orderly locksmith shop is essential to good business.



Don Sadler is a freelance writer and editor based in Atlanta. He has written on all aspects of business and management since he began his journalism career in 1985, including access control and security.