

After moving to New Zealand, Ken and Sonja Hunter have set about establishing a strong and successful business and family connection to their adopted homeland.

Out of Africa

When they could see little future opportunity for their young children in their native South Africa, Ken and Sonja Hunter made the difficult decision to search for a new home. According to Ken, Google Earth helped the couple choose Taupo, on the shores of Lake Taupo, and in 2007 South Africa's loss became New Zealand's gain. Ken says he put his past industry experience (panel beating, spray painting and as a regional manager for a PPG distributor) into action, eventually securing the role of foreman at local repairer, Ross White Panel & Paint, which had been in operation since 1970.

"Ross was looking to retire and in 2012 we were able to come to an agreement for me to buy the business and pay him out over three years. At the dinner to celebrate the final payment he said he'd done two really good things – he'd sold the business and he'd sold it to me! Now, with all his

experience, we're really happy to have him back here working for us to help run the business."

Ken and Sonja applied all their energies to developing the business. In three years it grew from two buildings and eight staff to four adjoining buildings and 12 staff but it simply wasn't big enough.

"We couldn't expand any further, it was gravel outside so it was dusty, there was only one booth and it wasn't fenced so you couldn't park vehicles outside overnight. Unfortunately, we couldn't buy a premises but we found this one to lease. It's a big concrete building that gives us 1250m² under one roof and it suits us to a T. A central dividing wall separates the panel and paint shops and there are six roller doors for entry and exit. Just being able to lay out the interior the way I want is a big advantage. With the help of PPG

we installed two new spray booths – one is downdraft and the other is semi-downdraft but it's higher and longer than a standard booth and we've already used it for vans and a large boat. We've been in here for a couple of months and having everything set up nice and tidy and the flow of the new shop makes things a lot easier. We've now increased to 14 staff and they're great."

When the Hunters bought the business it was already a long time PPG user which Ken was keen to continue. Indeed, the new premises became the catalyst to step up to PPG's advanced waterborne technology, the ENVIROBASE® High Performance paint system.

"We should have done it a long time ago. PPG has helped me a hell of a lot, including all the onsite training to help my painters make the switch – my guys are happy, happy, happy! Along with *Envirobase*, we

have the *spectro* (RapidMatch X-5) and it's been great for colour matching – we've only had a couple of glitches through human error. I'm very happy with PPG."

Ken sees some key differences between the South African and New Zealand markets. For example, there are a lot of prestige vehicle brands in South Africa and repairers are often aligned to a brand which means having the very latest equipment and repair methods. Typically, shops are larger due to high repair volumes – 40 staff is nothing out of the ordinary. A customer service mentality is something Ken has transplanted to his business.

"Customer service is crucial in South Africa and the biggest thing I learned from working at the PPG distributor, Balco Auto Coatings, was to have a fanatical approach to customer service. Here, we deal with owners and insurance companies very professionally and, when working on a vehicle, the guys must treat it like their own.

Each vehicle gets a complete valet inside and out, including the alloys and tyres. Small things make a big difference, like a little spray of vanilla on the carpet so it smells good when the door opens. I learned years ago that if you return the client's vehicle really clean and tidy, if there does happen to be an issue, it generally doesn't blow up. We call clients three days after the vehicle goes out and, often, the first thing they say is how

clean it is. We believe customer service is the way to keep clients coming back."

While it wasn't an easy move, Ken says he and Sonja are very happy with their choice of new home.

"Taupo is like South Africa when I was young. Kids can walk to school or ride their bike down the street and feel safe – you can't do that in South Africa. There are thousands of plusses for New Zealand but South Africa will always be the country I was born in. We've never had the thought of going back – this business is our future and we enjoy it!" **R**

