

The Business Connection

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Specialized skills

Dartco Transmission finds market with Allison parts



FINDING ITS NICHE

Dartco Transmission builds reputation with Allison parts

BY BARNEY QUICK ■ PHOTOS BY GREG JONES

Columbus has long had a reputation as home to headquarters for companies with worldwide reach. Dartco Transmission is an example, serving customers in a variety of states and countries from its facility on the city's north side as well as from three other locations around the United States.

Dartco's business is Allison transmissions. Headquartered in Indianapolis, Allison Transmission has its roots in the Allison Experimental Co., founded by James Allison, one of the founders of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. For a period of time in the 20th century, it was a division of General Motors but has been an independent company since 2007.

Dartco, founded in 1978, sells new, used and rebuilt parts for Allison transmissions, as well as overhauled transmissions, cores and exchange units. It was actually established in the Los Angeles area. J.R. Sellars, the founder, still oversees its growth.

Sellars was originally a Midwesterner, having been born in Michigan. Both his parents were from south-central Indiana. His father worked at Allison for 17 years.

The family moved to Orange County, California, when Sellars was still growing up. He worked for a General Motors dealer that sold Allison products.

"I started selling used Allison transmissions and parts and opened up a shop with my dad," he says. "We chose that line because it was a niche market."



Brianna Coburn, left, and Rhiannon Napier assemble transmission overhaul kits in the packaging area of the Columbus Dartco operation.

That was in 1978. Two years later, they were overhauling and servicing transmissions. Allison conferred authorized-dealer status on their operation in 1985.

Along with Allison transmissions, family is important to Sellars. The reason for opening the second location in Columbus in 1996 was to be near his grandmother, who was still living at the time.

"I also thought it would be good to be near the manufacturer," he says.

Dartco opened a third location in the Dallas suburb of Royse City, Texas, in 2005 and a fourth in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2011.

Company-wide staff numbers around 50. The Columbus facility, on North Long Road, employs 13. All corporate accounting is handled in Columbus. Annual sales are around \$20 million.

"The Columbus and Texas locations are more parts-oriented," says Sellars. "They focus on used

and after-market products. Remanufacturing is handled in North Carolina and California."

Sales are generated through the company's website and word-of-mouth. Dartco does have a national sales manager, who researches upcoming bids being solicited by municipalities, the federal government and the military.

On-road applications for the transmissions include trash collection, school buses, transit buses and city trucks. While most of Dartco's business is

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done elsewhere, Columbus customers have included Rumpke and the city’s fire department.
Sellars is gratified by the extent to which Dartco’s market is immune to fluctuating conditions.

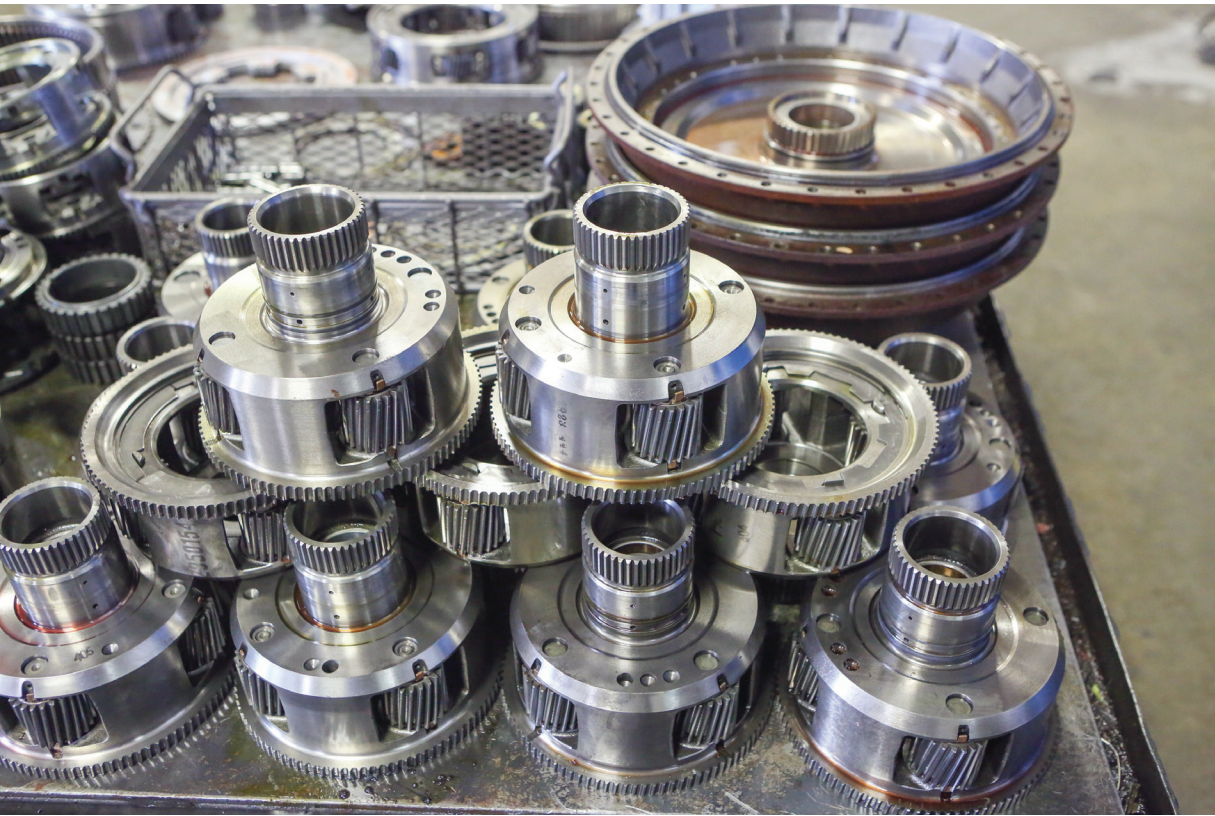
“Our business isn’t generally affected adversely by economic shifts,” he notes. “As long as infrastructure is being tended to, our on-road business stays good. It’s true that when the country is not pulling oil out of the ground, it impacts the off-highway sector, which is, to a large extent, oil field equipment.”
He explains that “this is a specialized-niche business. There are probably only three or four transmission rebuilders in Indiana that do any kind of volume.”

The biggest change Sellars has noticed in his industry is that “everything has gone electronic. It’s not 100 percent hydraulics anymore. That said, the basic principle of how a transmission works is still the same.”

Strategic planning figures into Sellars’ activities as Dartco’s CEO.
“We’re currently working on a project to bring a second generation up in the business,” he says. “My stepson, Jim Peek, manages the California location, and Jason Knotts, who’s been on board with the organization for 20 years, runs the North Carolina facility. They both literally grew up around Allison



J.R. Sellars is president and CEO of Dartco Transmission.




These parts are Allison planetary carriers.



Shawn Purvis, sales associate, spends the majority of his workday on the phone with customers across a wide geographic area.

transmissions. The company will eventually be passed on to them.”
Sellars tries to visit the other locations at least three times a year. “I have grandkids in California, so I make a point of getting out there.”
The Columbus location serves a definite worldwide need, according to Sellars.
“We sell a lot of obsolete products, and a lot of that goes overseas. Other countries don’t upgrade their equipment as often as the United States.”
He cites learning about other cultures as one of the most satisfying aspects of his work.
“We’ve recently had visitors here from the United Kingdom and Louisiana,” he says. “I’m going to India later this year.”
His recent trips abroad have included Puerto Rico and Canada.
Sellars stresses that it takes a certain type of individual to thrive as a Dartco employee. The company administers a profile test for applicants.
“We’re looking for attitude before ability,” he says.
“The greatest asset any company has is people,” he asserts. “If you can get them to share your vision, you’ll be successful. It takes the right frame of mind and heart to be committed to service. That’s what it takes to be a long-term member of our team.”
With regard to what else qualifies an applicant to come on board with Dartco, Sellars says, “Prior experience with Allison Transmission work is preferred, but a general mechanical knowledge and eagerness to learn is most important. We try to recruit top performers from automotive technology schools.”
If Sellars sees that an employee has exceptional potential, he makes Allison eLearn training and an on-the-job apprenticeship under a senior technician available.
Thus does another Columbus-headquartered manufacturing enterprise provide the world with quality products and services, as well as opportunities for solid careers.



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