



Rick Doetsch,  
company founder.

PAUL CAREY

# IT'S A GOOD LIFE

## Despite a Few Bumps, Doetsch Suspension is Cruising

STORY BY **WILLIAM GROAK** | PHOTOS COURTESY OF **DOETSCH**

“Life is good,” beams Rick Doetsch, the 46-year-old founder/owner of Doetsch Suspension, and it’s easy to see why. He’s been happily married to “his best friend” Kandee for 11 years, and the little off-road business he started in his garage in 1982 is kicking butt big-time, selling loads of shocks and lift kits. Yep, life is grand for the good-natured Doetsch, but in true off-road fashion, he and his company have had their share of bumps, breakdowns and busts. Still, optimism, hard work and talent always seem to smooth things out in the end.

“It has been a long road,” admits Doetsch, who got his start in the off-road industry at age 17 working for Rough Country, cleaning the side yard. “I graduated to their shock rebuilding/contingency program.

They gave me a van and off I went to all the desert races for shock support. I worked on everybody’s shocks, from Ivan Stewart to Walker Evans. I started racing very young up in Barona and Carlsbad, Calif., in Motocross, then once I entered the off-road scene, I raced the Baja with Scott Douglas. That fire for racing never goes away.”

It’s this same fire that fuels his eternal off-road entrepreneurial spirit. “In the beginning I had no idea that this company would grow into what it is today,” Doetsch says. “As difficult as it has been, I am happy to say that most days I do like coming to work. It’s a constantly changing industry—fun and exciting.”

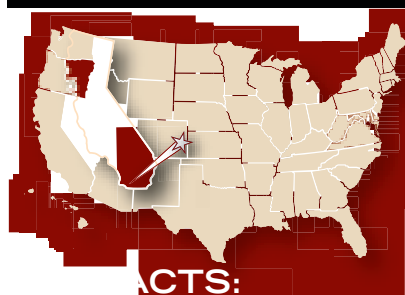
### COMPANY EVOLUTION

Rough Country was sold to Mr. Gasket in 1982, so Doetsch opened Doetsch

### TRADE SECRETS

- 1. Ask customers** a lot of questions about their vehicles before selling a part. Inquire about year, make, model, VIN number, motor size, cab size, bed (short/long), etc. This saves many extra phone calls and/or the cost of freight on shipping the wrong parts.
- 2. Talk to the customer** about his or her budget. You may be surprised at what customers want to spend on modifications. A lot of customers want to go “beyond” just getting the job done. Remember: their vehicles are their lifestyle, not simply a project.
- 3. Address and rectify** customer problems quickly. “We have always done the right thing for customers,” says Rick Doetsch. If there is a problem, we take care of it. This has helped us maintain the same customers for many years because we stand behind our printed warranty. It’s important that the distributor knows if there is a problem, we will help solve it!

### OFF-ROAD NATION



FACTS:

**FOUNDED:**  
**LOCATION:**  
**NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:**  
**KEY PERSONNEL:**

**TOP-SELLING PRODUCT LINES:**

**MILESTONES:**



**QUALITY CONTROL:** Doetsch 2.5 and 3.0 bypass shocks are carefully inspected prior to shipping.

warehouse. In 1992, Doetsch Tech morphed into Doetsch Enterprises. “Before he was a famous NASCAR driver, Jimmie Johnson would come over and work at our first building doing odd jobs after school in the summers,” Doetsch says.

Doetsch admits none of his success was planned—“it just happened.” Nonetheless, Doetsch did something right: he now has a 22,000-square-

It took Doetsch five years to turn a profit and a decade to hit the \$1 million mark. Today, they maintain 30% annual growth.

Tech, a one-man off-road shock service shop. Word spread, and he added a couple of employees to help rebuild shocks. Then he began producing his own brand of shocks—Doetsch Tech—and moved to a 2,000-square-foot

foot facility and employs 14 people. “We expanded beyond shocks in 2001, adding lift kits and 2WD lift spindles,” he says. “We currently produce complete kits for all the popular 2WD and 4WD trucks and SUVs.”

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**FAR LEFT:** Shock bodies ready for assembly.

**LEFT:** New lift and lowering spindles. Doetsch strives to create quality products in the medium price range.

Doetsch Enterprises is split into several divisions: Doetsch Suspension Systems, Doetsch Tech (shocks), Doetsch Trucks (dealer program) and Doetsch Racing. "I have no partners," says Doetsch. "Our growth has been through equity, slow steady growth each year. I am happy with our current rate of growth."

It took Doetsch more than a decade to get to the \$1 million mark in sales, a time Doetsch describes as extremely difficult. "It took us about five years just to become profitable; I just got by

up a lot of what would normally be free time. I still ride Motocross, just not as much as I'd like to."

The dirt bikes will just have to wait. Doetsch, like many in the off-road industry, is riding a mammoth wave of success. "Business is better for us than it was five years ago due to our addition of so many products," he reports. "I think there is a market for every type of person, and we try to make a product that is both affordable and good quality. Most of our products are priced very middle of the

ucts like dual-shock hoops, coilover kits, chrome serviceable shocks, bypass-tube shocks and bumpstops. These are items that can be added later after the initial wheels, tires and lifts are installed."

#### RIDING TRENDS

Speaking of installation, Doetsch added some bays and lift racks at his facility, which has helped in several areas, including product development. "R&D has become one of the most important aspects of our business," he says. "Most of the manufacturers—Chevy, Dodge and Ford—make minor changes to their trucks every two or three years. Installing our products help us to catch these changes before we need to change or add to a kit for proper fitment. We



Doetsch stands by his team's Class 8 Ford. Desert racing has become an important component of his company's R&D and marketing.

**"As difficult as it has been, I am happy to say that most days I do like coming to work."**

road, and we are working hard to maintain a high level of quality control [QC]. We grew very fast in 2002 and learned about QC. We were so busy, we couldn't find people who consistently

cared, lesson being: some of the parts we make require the check fitment of every component, and we learned to put the time into them," he adds.

"I am very surprised at the amount of high-end truck suspension accessories being produced and sold. I do think it will continue because people are very into detail when it comes to truck suspension. That's why we are adding and upgrading high-end prod-

were getting calls and trying to understand the problem on the phone, and it didn't work. It has helped our sales and our relationships with installers."

As every off-road manufacturer knows, determining new products to produce can be tricky. Doetsch's top-selling product is still the DT3000 shock absorber. "They are easy to handle due to the limited SKUs and affordable to the end-user. We are currently working on the various lift combinations for the 2007 Chevrolet trucks and SUVs. Unfortunately, the new Chevys have a new feature called Stabilitrak, which has slowed down progress. "They are very temperamental when it comes to the

Since 1982, Doetsch's growth has been "slow but steady." The company now boasts 14 employees and a 22,000-square-foot facility.



alignment. I see this as being a deterrent to lifting them. We are learning these new trucks slowly, so we don't have install issues out in the field."

"We have also been developing our high-end monotube shocks for the last four years. The 2.0 is available in chrome and can be ordered with remote reservoirs. We make these for all truck applications with custom valving. Our 2.5 and 3.0 monotubes have been in limited production; we wanted to get many off-road miles on them prior to a big push on sales. Our final test was the 2006 Baja 1000. We

were very pleased with the shocks' performance."

One avenue Doetsch utilizes to help get the word out is off-road racing. "The Doetsch Racing Team consists of a Class 8, Class 7SX for the Desert Racing series," says Kande Doetsch. "We will also debut our new Pro-2 and Pro-Light Ford trucks at the September Chula Vista CORR Race, which will be televised on NBC."

That should please Doetsch's distribution network. "We sell to WDs as well as jobbers under the traditional jobber sheet buy-in breakdown,"

says Kande. "We try to help the little guy with competitive programs, so they can compete against the super stores. Our motto is: 'Why buy from your competitor? Compete against them!' We also sell direct to the end-user, but we work hard to keep our prices competitive so we don't compete with our distributors. We also have distributors in Canada, Indonesia and Mexico."

Rick and Kande plan on chatting with new distributors and installers at trade shows such as Off-Road Impact, says Rick. "That's where I reconnect with industry friends I've lost touch with," he adds, "and tell them life is good!" **ORB**

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