TIRE RETREADING: 
TIME FOR A REBIRTH?

Harvey Brodsky
Tire Retread & Repair Information Bureau (TRIB)

ITEC 2008
PAPER 16C

All papers owned and copyrighted by Rubber & Plastics News, a Crain Communications publication. Reprint only with permission of Rubber & Plastics News.
When I first entered the retread industry back in the early seventies, passenger retreading was king of the hill. There were thousands of retreaders throughout North America and most of them retreaded passenger tires. In fact, at one time nearly 20% of all passenger replacement tires sold were retreads. But slowly the decline began, partly because of the less than great quality and performance of the passenger retreads being produced, but mostly, as time went by, by the low prices of new tires coming into the U.S. from other countries.

As a quick aside, I began using retreads on my personal car practically from the first day I got into the business, and I still drive on them today, as does my wife and son on their cars. The retreads on our cars all come from Green Diamond Tires in Elmira, New York and you would have to look VERY carefully to recognize them as retreads. They are bead-to-bead and are very hard to distinguish from new tires. They not only look like new tires but they also handle like comparable new tires, the only difference is that they cost less.

Today, there just a few passenger retreaders left in North America, but the few that are still producing passenger retreads are doing a very decent job,
The two passenger retreaders in Canada, Techno Pneu in Rimouski, Quebec, and Eastern Tire Service in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, are each producing approximately 600 passenger retreads daily! Their retreaded passenger tires are sold throughout Canada and a few other countries in Central America and Europe, as well as to most of the taxi companies in New York City. Both companies claim the passenger retreading side of their business is strong and are very optimistic about the future of passenger retreading in Canada.

In the U.S. the few passenger retreaders left are all also very optimistic, in view of the ever-increasing prices of new passenger replacement tires – especially those new replacement tires in some of the unbelievable sizes that are now being seen.

The passenger retreaders who are our members in the U.S. have a much smaller production than our Canadian members, but they also see growth and according to what they tell me, their passenger retread business is good.

As a matter of policy we try to phone at least two of our members daily, just to check in and stay in touch. Many of our members (mostly truck tire retreaders) have retail showrooms and sell passenger and light truck tires. When I ask them about the high prices of their new replacement tires for the larger size SUVs and “high performance” vehicles, the joke is that they need a cardiologist on staff in their showrooms when they tell a customer (who has no clue what his tires are about to cost) that the bill for four tires will be more than one thousand dollars – and sometimes much more!
While preparing for my presentation I visited a local tire dealer and asked about the prices for a few of the passenger and light truck tires I saw in his showroom. The owner is a friend of mine and although a few years ago he would have scoffed at the thought of ever carrying retreads in his very modern and high end showroom, when I told him why I was there he was very receptive to the idea of carrying a line of retreaded tires and thought there might be a market, especially for the sizes shown below. He told me his customers have become very resistant to the present day high prices of new tires and have been asking about alternatives. They are putting off purchases until the last minute, something he had never seen before in his market.

Here are a few of the prices:

- P275/55R20 CONTI CONTACT UHP 206.95
- LT265/75R16 BRIDGESTONE DUELR AT LRC 109 201.95
- P235/60R18 MICHELIN PIL HX MXM4 102V 282.95
- P225/70R16 GOODYEAR INTEGRITY 101S 139.95
- P275/60R18 MICHELIN LATITUDE TOUR HP 111 285.95
- S/O MICHELIN 275/30ZR19 PILOT SPORT 306.50

And the above prices DO NOT include tax!

For those of you who are interested his company is part of the American Car Care Centers organization.
SOME OF THE PROS

THE ENVIRONMENT

• The green movement has finally become mainstream and retreaded tires are far more environmentally friendly than comparable new tires. My apologies to my new tire friends in the room, but a fact is a fact. Retreading was a green industry before anyone ever used the word. As a matter of interest, a retreaded tire –whether for a car or truck – has one of the HIGHEST post-consumer contents of any recycled product. The very tire casing is post-consumer.

• Staying with the green movement for a moment, when you buy a retreaded (read recycled) tire, you have to not mind spending a little LESS. How refreshing for those who buy recycled products. Have you bought a case of recycled copy paper lately? If you have, you will know what I mean.

• Our friends in the scrap tire industries will acknowledge that the highest and best use for a worn tire is to have it retreaded for another useful life. They know their turn will come later.

PERCEPTION

• Talk to people over about 40 and they will be happy to tell you some of the “horror” stories about those caps that came apart back in the old days, or how quickly they wore out.
• In my role as the Managing Director of TRIB I speak to lots of people about tires. When I ask some of the new generation – those under 30 – about their thoughts regarding passenger retreads, I often get a blank look. Many of them have no idea what a retreaded tire even is. The prejudices of their parents have not been passed down to them. This is a VERY IMPORTANT fact. Since they have no pre-conceived notions about the safety and performance of passenger retreads they are more open to considering the use of retreads on their own vehicles, especially when they realize they can save a considerable amount of money when purchasing a set of four tires, and be kind to the environment at the same time.

**PERFORMANCE AND HANDLING AND LOOKS**

Based on my own experience over many years as a retread user on my family cars, there is no question that a top quality retread will perform and handle the same a comparable new (and more expensive) tire. Regarding looks, I have several retreaded tires with me today so you can see for yourselves. You will note that these are bead-to-bead retreads, which is in my opinion the ONLY way passenger retreading can be reborn and have a chance to succeed.

Many years ago when I was with Big O Tires we used to feature our line of retreads in our showrooms and they would always be prominently displayed right next to the highest priced comparable size new tire in our line.
We offered a stronger warranty than the best new tire in our showrooms and at our height we were producing and selling over 10,000 passenger retreads a month, with a much greater profit per tire than we ever made selling a new tire. And although we produced a fine looking retread tire in our plant, they still looked like a retread and NOT like a new tire. Imagine how it would be if a tire buyer could not tell the difference between a bead-to-bead retread and a new tire by looking! This is not to ever suggest that a retread should be misrepresented. A retread is what it is and if our industry can produce a top quality product we should sell it with pride and NEVER misrepresent it.

**PROFIT**

Retreaders and tire dealers are in business to make a profit. Retreaded tires can have a higher profit margin than comparable new tires, pure and simple. When we look at some of the high prices of new tires for large SUVs and other high performance vehicles, well made and good looking retreads can be an easy sell.

The retreader makes more and the consumer pays less. This can be a win-win, enabling both parties to do well and good at the same time.

Sounds good so far, but there must be a catch, right?

Not necessarily, but now let’s examine the cons, because there are some and the important ones can be deal breakers before we even begin.
SOME OF THE CONS

THE HIGH COST OF GETTING INTO THE GAME

• A bead-to-bead retread looks better than a regular retread. I don’t believe anyone can argue with this fact. This means the tire must be mold cured in size specific molds. Unfortunately, this can stop the discussion in its tracks.

• Molds are very expensive and unless enough tires can be retreaded in the mold to amortize the mold cost, it would not make economic sense. End of story.

• The mold would have to be designed to accommodate the sidewall design for the bead-to-bead final product. This would further add to the cost.

• Related equipment such as presses further adds to the cost of starting a mold cure plant for passenger retreads.

AVAILABILITY OF GOOD CASINGS

• This may or may not be a problem, depending on the size and brand of the original casing. I believe casing dealers would quickly gear up to find and supply casings if the demand was there. Millions of passenger casings are generated every year, some good and some not worthy of being retreaded.
• BUT…AND THIS IS A HUGE BUT! Are the casings being sold as OE tires suitable for a second life? Only the new tire companies can answer that question. When it comes to truck tires, every major truck tire manufacturer boasts about the retreadability of their casings. Are they prepared to do the same for their passenger tire casings? The first new tire manufacturer that would be brave enough to do so would score MAJOR points with the environmental community and probably with the federal government, as well.

Another aside: When I mentioned to a few of our members that I had been invited to make this presentation I was warned to wear my flack jacket and to be prepared to be run out of town by some of the attendees. A few others told me I was wasting my time and the association’s money. However, I have always been a member of the Giraffe Society, meaning I’m not afraid to stick my neck out. I just hope it’s not cut off before I leave the room.

**AN ASSUMPTION**

• Let’s assume that there is an ample supply of good, retreadable passenger and light truck casings available, how do we know that they are in fact really suitable for a second life? This brings us to one of the most important improvements in our industry: NON-DESTRUCTIVE TESTING, one of the most important advances ever in the retread industry!
• Thanks to new technology the non-destructive testing machinery (Shearography, X-Ray, NDT, Differometry, etc.) now available will enable a retreader to have great assurance that the tires to be retreaded are really suitable for a full second life. The problem is that this equipment is not cheap!

SUMMARY

CAN THIS REBIRTH REALLY HAPPEN?

Maybe, but maybe not. It will depend on the willingness of a retreader to make the serious commitment required to gear up to produce enough tires to make the investment profitable.

I believe the market is absolutely there and that well made, top quality great looking passenger, right priced retreads would fly off the shelves.

In my dreams I envision a cooperative investment by a number of forward thinking retreaders willing to invest in a start up plant that would be able to take advantage of the economies of size. The plant would be centrally located and would be jointly owned by those companies looking for a steady supply of top quality, great looking bead-to-bead passenger and light truck retreaded tires.

In closing I ask that you have a look at the retreads I’ve brought along.
Finally, do I ever see the large number of passenger retreads being produced as they were years ago? Absolutely not, but I do see a potential lucrative niche market to fill the needs of those consumers who shudder at the thought of spending their kid’s inheritance for a set of tires.

My presentation might win the award for the most far-fetched and outlandish, but maybe not.

Any takers?

-end-