

Certified Inspections: Part Two

Last month's *Front Counter Mechanics* described the Car Care Council's Certified Inspection Center (CIC) program. For those unfamiliar with the Car Care Council (CCC), it is a nonprofit organization dedicated to "educating motorists about the importance of maintenance, repair and enhancements for safer, cleaner, better-performing vehicles." Only the top shops can be Certified Inspection Centers. Among other requirements, each CIC shop must have at least one ASE-certified master technician on staff, access to technical service bulletins and up-to-date diagnostic equipment.

The CIC program has grown gradually since its inception in Ohio four years ago. Today most of the approximately 100 CIC's are in the Midwest, but the program is now ready for a nationwide rollout. Plans call for up to 2500 Centers throughout the U.S. By the time you read this, the Car Care Council will be actively recruiting shops on the West Coast.

This month's *Front Counter Mechanics* examines the benefits of the Certified Inspection Center program from the viewpoint of those participating in it. The marketing and implementation strategies used by the managers of these top-flight shops can be used by all auto repair businesses, even those not planning to become a CIC.

Testimonials

Moses Automotive of Toledo, Ohio, has been a CIC since the program started. Owner Mark Moses has no doubts about the program's benefits:

"We do two to three Certified Inspections (CIs) a week, and 20-25 percent of those are for new customers. We do a lot of direct mail, plus our website (mosesautomotive.com) has a description of the Certified Inspection Center program and a link to the Car Care Council website. We now get four to five appointments a week through our website, and some of these are for CIs."



Also, our first-time-customer package now includes a cover letter with an explanation of the CIC program. Once you do a CI for a customer, word of mouth sells it to his or her friends and family. We have one family that's had us inspect three cars for them.

"Selective customer retention is our total focus. The people who buy CIs are great customers who continue to stay with us. There are two types of customers: those who believe in preventive maintenance and those who drive their cars until they break. Which type of customer do you want to work for?"

"The CI greatly increases our customer's comfort zone. When I complete a 190-point inspection and explain it all, I become an advisor and consultant, instead of just someone standing there with his hand out, looking for a payment. The CI is solid; it's something the customer really can 'take to the bank' when shopping for an auto loan. It promotes a budget for auto repair based on a solid understanding of the facts instead of hopes, fears or other emotions."

"Sales after the inspection are phenomenal. Our average follow-up sale is \$700, including work for customers who decide not to buy a car based upon the results of the inspection. People remember the CI. We inspected one customer's Honda and came up with an initial estimate of \$2800. We prioritized the repairs for her and performed them all in three visits over the next 18 months. Best of all, we were able to accurately predict everything the car needed. In all that time, her only other automotive needs were regular oil changes."

Steve Griff, owner of four Golden Wrench Auto Service stores in Minnesota's Twin Cities area, is similarly enthusiastic:

"It's a great program. At first I thought \$99 was a lot to ask for an inspection, but at this point we have no problem selling it. The customers who have it done are really happy with it. They're having us do all the work and saying 'now we don't have to worry about this thing anymore.' They do a CI before they buy, take the results back to the seller, renegotiate the price, then bring it back to us and say 'OK, fix it.' Another customer was driving to Mexico, so for his peace of mind he had us do one before he left. Our average ticket after a CI runs just about \$2100.

"We market the inspections every way we can: on our website, with a display holding pamphlets that people see as they walk in the front door and with direct mail. We've also had good luck with a coupon that features a discount for CI's performed before the owner takes the vehicle on a trip."

Eddie Butler, owner of Butler Automotive in Augusta, Georgia, has successfully marketed to new customers by running small ads promoting CI's in the classified section of his local newspaper. The ads include his company logo and state: "Know the exact condition of any vehicle."

Butler says the benefits of being a CIC go beyond getting new customers:

"Implementing the CI's pointed out some of our flaws. It taught us something about procedures and the way we market. The brochures [explaining the CI] are superior to any literature we had for any of our other programs. So we've reconsidered how to market all our other services."

He's also happy with the type of customer purchasing a CI:

"There's always something to learn. There are customers who are willing to spend \$150 before they even buy the car — especially for cars selling for \$10,000 to \$15,000 or more. The people who buy a pre-inspection are the ones who want their hands held, but they're also the people who will spend \$1000 on a car that's already running fine. They're more maintenance-conscious, Type-A customers, as opposed to the other kind of customers who will drive with the MIL on, as long as they're convinced their car isn't about to explode."

Butler's average completed repair order based upon a CI is \$700 to \$900, approximately three times his normal repair order average, but he cautions that success takes work:

"CI's don't sell themselves; they have to be marketed like 30-, 60-, or 90,000 mile service."

The best list of ways to market CI's comes from George Witt, accredited Automotive Management Institute (AMI) instructor and owner of George Witt Service, Inc., in Lincoln, Nebraska. To graduates of George's AMI classes and to readers of his postings on www.iatn.net, this should come as no surprise. Here, republished with his permission, is one such posting:

"Here are just a few situations where you can sell a Certified Inspection:

- 1. If a vehicle requires major engine work, it only makes sense to inspect the rest of the vehicle thoroughly to see whether it's even worth fixing the engine. Don't recommend or begin major repairs of any kind without first inspecting the rest of the vehicle. Do a CI here.*
- 2. Before buying any used car, do a CI. I charge 150 corncocks for a CI and explain to the customer it takes a half a day for a tech to do the work. It's a great value for the money. After all, 150 corncocks won't buy much in the way of repairs. The risk is great when purchasing a used car — this really minimizes it.*
- 3. Before any student heads off to college in another town, do a CI.*
- 4. Before any long vacation trip, do a CI.*
- 5. If a customer has been leasing a car and is thinking about buying it, do a CI.*
- 6. If a customer is trying to decide whether to 'keep it or trade it,' do a CI. In many cases it will cost the customer a lot less to continue to maintain the car he has than to lease or trade for a new one. If he sees the numbers, he can decide with his eyes open.*
- 7. Before your customer sells a car he owns to a friend, neighbor, relative or co-worker, do a CI to protect your customer as well as the buyer.*
- 8. Any new customer coming to your shop for the first time is a good prospect for a CI, especially if the previous shop didn't counsel him or her on the importance and economy of regular maintenance.*
- 9. If the new car warranty is almost up, do a CI.*
- 10. When the extended warranty is almost expired, do a CI. It's your customer's last chance to collect a claim."*

Although only five percent of shops nationwide are expected to qualify for the CIC program, attempting to qualify is worthwhile in itself. There's nothing to lose and much to gain from setting the Certified Inspection Center standards as your own goals. Learning about them is easy. Call (800) 466-5343 or visit the Certified Inspection website at www.certifiedinspection.org/. ■

—By Chip Keen