

Marketing Your Repair Shop

A lot more goes into running a successful automotive repair shop than simply renting some space and hanging out a sign. At least some time must be devoted to attracting and keeping customers. This activity can be loosely described as “marketing your business.”

Perhaps you have experimented by buying a *Yellow Pages* ad, subscribing to a coupon service or running a newspaper ad. Some of these efforts may work well, some not so well, and some may even attract the wrong type of customer. The only predictable outcome is that the advertising people will consistently come out ahead. They certainly know how to market *their* services!

Marketing is defined as “the act of selling goods or services.” Marketing occurs when we actually ‘get the money’ in the shop. Advertising involves selling people on the idea of coming to our shop. We must do a good job of developing a marketing plan before thinking about doing any advertising.

The purpose of this article and those to follow is to give you a better understanding of the principles of marketing, and to show how solid marketing principles can be applied to your auto repair business. One thing is certain: there is no ‘one size fits all’ marketing plan that will work for all shops. We’ll begin with some fundamentals before showing you how to develop a plan that fits your shop’s needs.

Customer Buying Motives

There are just three basic buying motives for most customers:

- Price,
- Quality,
- Convenience.

Most of the things we buy can be traced to these three basic motives. As the owner or manager of an independent automotive repair facility, you’ll find price is rarely an issue if everything else is in order.



If you seem to be getting a lot of price complaints, take a good look at the entire service transaction, because something isn’t right. In fact most shops actually *undercharge* their customers. Your shop might fall into this category – what do you charge to replace a taillight bulb? If it’s below \$42, you’re undercharging.

What Do Customers Want to Buy?

Customer surveys show that most customers expect:

- to be written up promptly (Convenience),
- to have the work completed on time (Convenience),
- the final price to be within the estimate (Price),
- the vehicle fixed right the first time (Quality).

These four components are the baseline of performance. If your shop is deficient in any of these areas, you can expect to lose customers and to receive a lot of price complaints.

I surveyed some of my best customers to learn what was important to them and found that a clean shop, friendliness, prompt write-up and a clear explanation of repairs were common replies. The customer’s perception of our honesty was greatly enhanced when we took the time to prioritize the order and importance of needed repairs and maintenance on the car.

Even a very high-priced shop can appeal to the Price motive if customers feel they are receiving a decent overall value from the transaction.

Selling What Your Customers

Want to Buy

If you're going to sell something, is it better to find something people already want to buy or to make them want what you have or do? Almost anyone can sell to a good prospect — someone that already wants what you have to sell. It's easy to sell Cokes at halftime when it's 100 degrees in the shade. It's much harder to sell to a bad prospect — someone that doesn't want what you have to sell. All of us receive telemarketing calls every day from people who are trying to sell us stuff we don't want at all. Are you selling something your customers want to buy?

Always think in terms of what your customers want to buy. They don't want to buy a new battery; they want a car that starts at midnight. Most don't mind spending money on auto repairs as long as they believe it's necessary. But don't assume you also have the right to spend their time. Remember the surveys — most good customers want to be written up promptly (Convenience), have the work completed on time (Convenience), within the estimate (Price) and fixed right the first time (Quality).

Selling Attitude

It's ironic that the one thing people seem to want the most, and get the least, costs absolutely nothing to give — *the smile*. I don't know why more business owners don't offer this rare and unique product. It's something people really want. People don't buy from people they don't like. A smile is disarming and puts people at ease. You should be happy to see each of your customers. Without them you wouldn't have a business.

It's easy to recall examples of unpleasant personal experiences with store clerks or others who deal with the public. Whenever possible, most of us will avoid going back to businesses where we've had bad or unpleasant experiences. On the other side of the coin, we can just as easily bring to mind people we really like to do business with. Your customers can probably overlook almost any other problem with the service transaction if you are friendly and honest. A smile campaign is something you should immediately put into practice at your business.

So, how does your shop stack up so far? Put yourself in your customers' shoes and see whether you'd buy your own service.

Selling Convenience

My wife and I frequently buy take-out food. There's a little Italian restaurant in our neighborhood that makes great spaghetti. Their take-out spaghetti orders are packaged in a nice little styrofoam dish, wrapped tight with soft plastic shrink-wrap. This is placed on a larger plate and the whole thing is shrink-wrapped again. The dish travels well because it's easy to carry and impossible to spill.

It sounds like a great idea, but there's one problem: the package is impossible to open. The plastic wrap won't tear and resists penetration by a 9mm bullet. By the time you get the thing open, there's sauce all over everything and it's the biggest mess you've ever seen.

It seems obvious: the restaurant owner has never ordered any of his take-out food and tried to open it. He never tried to see things through the eyes of his customers. If he had, he never would have packaged his food that way. He never considered the buying motive of Convenience.

Stand off in the corner of your shop and imagine yourself as one of your customers. Think of all the reasons why you might decide to never come back to your own shop, then solve those problems. Make it as easy as you can for your customers to give you their money and feel good while they're doing it.

If your customers have to wait a long time to be written up, try scheduling customer arrivals at regular intervals. If a customer requests an arrival time that has already been taken, take a moment to explain why your system will actually save their time while making the process more convenient for them.

Solve all the convenience problems you can, such as promised completion times, waiting to pick the car up at the end of the day or transportation to and from work. Imagine yourself as one of your own customers. Would you buy your own service?

Selling Quality

Quality work, pride in workmanship, done right the first time — these are important attributes that every repair business should strive to achieve. But how can you convey your dedication to these concepts to your customers? We can tell them we are dedicated to quality work until we are blue in the face, but will they actually believe us?

Three key elements silently convey the message of your shop's dedication to quality work: soap, paint and light. Use soap to thoroughly clean everything in the shop. Paint the walls and ceiling white. Paint all the equipment so it looks new again. Put up the brightest shop lighting you can find. Your goal should be to have shop lighting that's bright enough to virtually eliminate the need for a trouble-light.

Use a camera to photograph everything in your shop. Start with the exterior, including the front, sides and back. Take pictures of everything inside — the office, the bathroom, the shop, under the benches (yikes!). We all get used to seeing things the way they are. Before too long, we become incapable of seeing things the way our customers see them, especially for the first time. The pictures allow you to see things from their point of view. You won't believe the mess you will see when the pictures come back.

Clean everything so it looks like you just moved in yesterday with all new stuff. Fresh paint can make old things look new. A clean shop silently delivers the quality message to every customer (new or old) who walks through the door.

Conclusions

Focus on selling what people want to buy. Anyone can sell to a good prospect — someone that wants what we have to sell. It's much harder to sell to a bad prospect — someone that doesn't want what we have to sell.

Remember the three buying motives: Price, Quality and Convenience.

If you deliver outstanding quality and convenience, price won't be a huge issue. Look carefully at the convenience features of your operation and eliminate all the inconveniences you possibly can. These are huge marketing points that separate your shop from others offering similar repair services.

Use soap, paint and light to convey a quality image. A bright, clean shop shows a pride in the workplace that customers don't see every day. This easily translates into pride in the work itself.

Last, remember the thing customers want the most, get the least and costs you nothing to give — a smile. Smile at all your customers and be happy to see them — they bring money! ■

— By George Witt



During thirty years in the business, George Witt has worked in parts stores, independent repair shops and new car dealership service and parts departments. He's been a mechanic (there were no technicians then), service advisor, parts counterman, dispatcher, Service Manager, Parts Manager and Service and Parts Director. He has won National Excellence Awards for Service Management as a Service Manager with a Honda dealership (a three-time Top Ten finalist among 1000 dealerships), and has also received awards for Parts Management.

Five years ago, tired of the new car dealership scene, George opened his own repair shop in Lincoln, Nebraska (George Witt Service). He started in a one-man, one-bay shop in a 15 by 30 foot storage building, on a dead-end dirt road. The business has grown and moved three times since then to its current 10 bay location with three technicians handling an average of 300 cars a month. George claims they have also averaged two new customers per day for the last several years.

George is an Automotive Service Association AMI Accredited Instructor who teaches a class in "Service Marketing for the Independent Service Facility." The class consistently receives high reviews from its students. George has also made significant contributions to the iATN Shop Management Forum.