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**CORRECTION:** In "Nissan's RE5R05A Transmission" in October's issue of *Motor Age*, the photo credit for Figure 9 and information regarding Nissan's warranty program should be attributed to John Parmenter from Centereach Transmissions and technical advisor for Precision International.

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# TAKING LESSONS TO HEART

ONE OF THE MOST BANDIED-ABOUT PHRASES IN THE INDUSTRY IS 'WORKING ON THE BUSINESS NOT IN IT.' BRAD AND LISA PELLMAN WERE ABLE TO MAKE THAT REALLY HAPPEN IN THEIR SHOP.

BY TSCHANEN BRANDYBERRY | MANAGING EDITOR

**F**ew shop owners are able to claim they have graduated to working "on the business rather than in it," but Brad and Lisa Pellman can easily stake claim to that achievement.

The husband and wife team also can call themselves owners of the 2013 *Motor Age* Top Shop. Pellman's Automotive Service in Boulder, Colo., has been in our top 10 for the last three years. The couple was ecstatic when told the news, a testament to their hard work over the last 18-plus years.

The Pellmans, like many others in the industry, have put their lives into the shop, starting from nothing and building a seven-bay location they improve regularly. It's just one way those who have known the couple over the last two decades can see how they've been able to move to working on the business.

"It's definitely worth the hard work to get to this point by hiring the right people, training the right way, creating a team that works together and then honoring them," Brad Pellman

says. "You trust them to perform the duties they're hired to do.... You then step back and try not to micromanage. Once you do that, and a lot of owners are afraid (to do so), but that's the reason you hired and trained these people, so you can do that. That's when you're really going to benefit and you gain freedom."

The Pellmans know what it's like to be on the other side of the business, as Brad spent 17 years working in all facets of the automotive repair industry before they set off on their own in



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1995. The road hasn't been easy, as evidenced by the devastating floods the Boulder community experienced earlier this year. Thankfully, the shop and Pellmans' employees all were safe.

"We came in and opened the Saturday after the flood," he says. "We knew we'd have car after car towed in. We were talking with all of our customers, trying to help them through the flood (repair) decision process. Everyone who works here knows someone who was flooded out, had car damage or who is homeless."

Because of the owners' ability to look at the business from a high level, the shop had several cars they had been collecting throughout the year that were in good condition, but had slight problems. They are working toward fixing up the vehicles to donate to those in need following the floods.

### Getting to This Point

The Pellmans both hold AAM certifications from the Automotive Management Institute (AMI), training that adds to their ability to run the business effectively. Brad Pellman explains how they came to believe in training and took advantage of all of the courses they could while encouraging, and requiring, employees to do so, too. Credits began to build, finally reaching a point where they just had to take a customer service test.

"I was very impressed I could get to that point, and it kind of happened automatically," he says. "I have this diploma now that I really feel great about. It was just believing in continuing training; it was the final credential that you achieved a goal."

Lisa Pellman still believes in the designation, as well as continuing training. She has a bachelor's degree from the University of Colorado, while her husband keeps active his ASE Master Technician status.

"I do believe that every technician should be ASE certified," he states. His five technicians are ASE and MACS certified, with the sixth tech coming on just this fall. Even on the service side, his service manager and parts manager both are ASE certified, while two other service specialists still are new to the company and working toward it. "We've grown three or four techs from lube position on up. You shouldn't be pigeon-hold that you're my brake guy. To me it's more of a building block. The more they know about cars, the better they're going to be at (even just one service area)."

His wife adds that the techs are proud of it, too. "We recently changed uniforms," she notes. "They're proud of their patches on their sleeves."

The dedication to bettering himself, his employees and the shop is something Brad Pellman brought to the busi-

ness from before day one. He recalls how early in his career, he saw many opportunities to improve customer service. He started in a dealership before working part-time at an independent shop while attending college.

"It was hard to believe it was the same industry, because they had none



## AT A GLANCE

### PELLMAN'S AUTOMOTIVE SERVICE

Shop name

**BRAD AND LISA PELLMAN**

Owner

**BOULDER, COLO.**

Location

**1 / 18**

No. of shops / Years in business

**12 / 6**

Total employees / Technicians

**9,420 SQUARE FEET**

Shop size

**8**

Number of bays

**80**

Average vehicles per week

**\$353**

Average weekly repair ticket

**\$1.4 MILLION**

Annual gross revenue

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Pellman's Automotive Service employees are (from left) Dan Levin, JR Warembourg, Brian Wilson, Eric Wright, Lisa Pellman, Nika Perkins, Brad Pellman, Carrie Custis, Zoltan Darko, Darryl Gipson and Ed Layton.

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of the same principles in place,” he explains. “It was cramped, dirty and you didn’t really want a customer to be in the office while their car was being worked on. There were a lot of things I didn’t like.”

When the Pellmans ventured out on their own, he took those memories with him, making sure everything is clean from equipment to floors. “I don’t look at other shops around me as competition. If I’m going to view someone as competition, I’ll compete with the dealership. I think we’re a professional environment and highly skilled.”

### Cultivating the Right Team

Dan Levin knows how professional and highly skilled the shop is and how far it has come over the last 18 years.



The shop features separate women’s, men’s and technician restrooms, all of which are clean and nicely decorated.



The customer lounge features a single-serve hot beverage dispenser, Wi-Fi and a toy area. Owner Brad Pellman’s office is right off the waiting area, as he is easily accessible to customers.



The employee lounge and conference room received new cabinets this year.

He’s been there officially for 15, with three more before that as a customer.

“We just kind of liked each other right off the bat. When I opened a shop of my own, he was one of my first customers,” Brad Pellman says, recalling how Levin came to work at the shop. The service manager suddenly lost his job at a car rental business and asked what he could do to keep his bill at the shop low. “I said you could help me do things and that will keep the price down. I got to know him and realized he had a pretty good mechanical ability on his own, because he was trying to save money. He’s a really likeable guy. He’s friendly, open, the kind of guy you want to hang out with.”

The business was growing, and Pellman knew they needed someone in the office, as he was a full-time tech. He offered Levin the opportunity to become a service specialist. “I said, ‘I’ve been watching you work, you have mechanical ability, you have the right personality. I can teach you how to do this and you’ll be great at it.’”

There is a similar story with lead technician Eric Wright, who has worked at Pellman’s for 15 years. “It’s been the same kind of idea I want to instill in my employees,” Brad Pellman explains. “We’re all here to do our job, do the best job we can and serve the customer in the best way we can. If everybody’s doing that, I don’t have to supervise them that much.”

Strong leaders like Wright and Levin help both Pellmans focus on their own roles. The couple has been able to give back to the industry beyond their shop, too, maintaining an active aftermarket presence. They are a TechNet member since 2004, and have an active local TechNet group for which Lisa coordinates the meetings. They have been on the CARQUEST National Advisory Council for multiple years. Brad serves on several national automotive association boards including the ASE Board of Governors and the Car Care Professionals Network (CCPN) Committee. He is the Mechanical Division president for ASA Colorado.

“I’ve always thought that our industry should be thought of better than it is, especially more so when I started back in the ’80s. Everybody hates an auto mechanic. It shouldn’t be that way,” Brad Pellman says. “We’re out



Technician Darryl Gipson performs an oil change on a Corolla GT.



Eric Wright, lead technician, performs service on a Toyota Tundra.

here helping people every day, either to protect their investment or get to work. There’s no way we should be thought of in a bad light. We should be thought of at the same level as doctors or police. We’re out here to help the public.”

That thinking is a main reason he became more and more involved in the aftermarket at a state and national level. He adds that while some owners claim they don’t have time to work outside their shop, there are large knowledge gains to be had by doing so. While you’re learning that the industry is bigger than just your little area, you’re helping to make it better and growing your own piece of the pie at the same time.

“I saw it as a great way to move forward and maybe help me take my philosophies out to a higher level and promote us more in the industry and help make decisions to reflect the industry





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in a better light," Brad Pellman says. "I think we've come leaps and bounds in 10 years. I'm excited about that. I just hope we can keep doing that. Being a part of AAIA and ASA. It's an honor for me to be asked to do these things."



The large flat screen monitor on the far wall is used to display the shop's energy consumption and solar production in real-time. When applicable, they also use it to show virtual vehicle diagrams to customers, as well as to give those customers a real time view of their alignment specs. The smaller monitor in the foreground is used for AutoNet TV programming.



Front service bays are among eight total.



The shop's parts room was fully re-organized this year with help from their vendors to balance their stock.



The shop offers loaner bicycles in addition to this customer shuttle.

## Encouraging Feedback

The national reach the shop now has helps make possible some great training opportunities. For example, the Pellmans requested from their TechNet group a service advisor class. TechNet created the program with a pilot class in July, and a nationwide program launch in September. The couple explains that the class has a lot of information on interacting with people and customer service in general.

"It really seems to be spot on with how I would like customer service to be run in my business," Brad Pellman says. "This is the type of training I received at the dealership. It's something that we in the industry haven't had and it's extremely important. It puts (service writers) on the same level as the technician in terms of ongoing training in our area."

The owners and all employees take advantage of in-house, online and off-site classes, and ask suppliers for what they need more of. The owners have taken their team on the road to national ASA events and the VISION Hi-Tech Training & Expo in Kansas City, Mo.

"We think it's important for (employees) to invest in training," Lisa Pellman states. "This is a career. When they interview, we tell them how important it is. Then we lead by example."

"There's just no way you can be a professional technician today without training," her husband adds. "The cars change every year; they change quickly. We're going to see them change a lot in the next 10 years. I want to invest my time in technicians that want to invest in themselves. If you don't want to do that, you're probably not a candidate for my place."

While that might seem harsh, the tradeoff is a boss who will listen and respect your ideas. Technicians are very involved in identifying the need for new equipment and tools, as part of the shop's monthly shop meeting is devoted to this topic and the shop's "Equipment Wish List."

"I'm a cautious buyer," Brad Pellman says. "When a technician comes to me saying we have to have something, I go out and see why. What's the need? How much are we going to use it? Is it for a special car and that's the only one we'll see? Can we make another tool or another way work to solve the issue."

If possible, the shop will do a trial period on new equipment, and typically pays cash for all equipment or negotiates interest-free deferred terms. The Pellmans anticipate the need for tools costing more than \$10,000 and budget for them. In addition to input on tools and equipment, the shop recently took ideas when it revised its inspection report, which Lisa Pellman explains started with a need for a more professional looking report.

She says the process began by looking at various options and sharing those with a select group of technicians, who gave feedback on what they thought would work best. After narrowing it down, the new forms were shared at the shop's monthly meeting and given to technicians and service employees to use for a week. Both sides had a lot of feedback, which allowed the owners to create a form that saves everyone time.

From the inspection forms to changing oil distribution on the floor to using Google Talk, these all are ways the Pellmans involve their employees in some decisions in the shop.

Google Talk is not the only form of communication in the shop, but rather an illustration of how technology is implemented. All employees are able to use it when they have a question that does not require an immediate answer, which cuts down on time in walking the long pathways through the older, 9,420-square-foot building.

"It's not taking people away from the phones," Brad Pellman notes. "We try not to have our technicians do anything but work on cars. That's where the money comes from."

Google Talk, along with a heavy presence in the front office, helps accomplish this. "Sometimes we'll pull TSB information, we'll do research for them while they're working on another car. We order all the parts. The technician doesn't have to worry about translating the technical lingo to the customer. We have people trained to do that. That's our philosophy and that's the way we've always done it."

## Working on the Shop

While the Pellmans have worked hard to get to the point in their careers where they can leave the shop for an extended break, they are not com-



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pletely separated. Brad Pellman still maintains his credentials, but works on staffing and operations. Lisa Pellman continues to do marketing, human resources and bookkeeping.

But she found some help for the marketing this year, by bringing on a marketing consultant to help them refine their marketing message and create some press releases. "We felt it was nice to get an outside perspective," she says. "We felt we had differ-

ent messages in different places. We wanted to get a cohesive message."

After interviewing employees, reading reviews and more, a new message was created centered around why customers like the shop and keep coming back. Lisa Pellman says they're now working to get the message onto the website, fine-tuning what already is out there. They all are more confident in the message they're now sending, and in the feedback they're getting.

In addition to the marketing consultant, the shop hired a company to help with Facebook postings and Tweets, which resulted in a steady uptick in fans and followers. In addition to professional and interesting topical posts, the Pellmans have paid to boost a post on Facebook and in October donated \$1 to Care Connect for each Facebook "Like." Google+ and Foursquare are part of their social media mix, and they recently created a YouTube channel.

The shop additionally has taken several opportunities to give back to the community. Both Brad and Lisa Pellman have been active in the school system, and they take their focus on training to area youth through popular Teen Car Basics Clinics.

The class starts in the shop's office, focusing on how to pick an automotive repair shop, then moves on to why the vehicle is important if not to you, to your parents. They talk about what warning lights mean, and walk through situations such as what to do when a car overheats. They have demos, go over an instrument cluster and quiz the youths in a fun way.

"I think we're providing something that is needed," he states, adding that the class also covers owners' manuals, jump starts and changing tires. "I don't think any parent that has a kid in high school wants their kid to break down, but inevitably it may happen. So twice a year we offer the class."

The shop also gives back through seminars at local businesses, training with Cub Scouts, repair and vehicle donations — even before this year's devastating floods — and free oil changes to local charities whose volunteers use their own vehicles to provide services for senior citizens.

At the end of the day, it's one more chance to improve both the shop and the industry. Brad Pellman says they aim to have a good time in the shop. "We're serious about what we do and we work hard, but we want to enjoy what we're doing."

They work hard to inject humor into the daily grind and create a positive environment. "I want people to work hard and respect me, but I want to be friends, too," he concludes. "It's a hard position to be in as an owner."

But it's easier to do once you master the shop and work on it, not in it. *ZZ*



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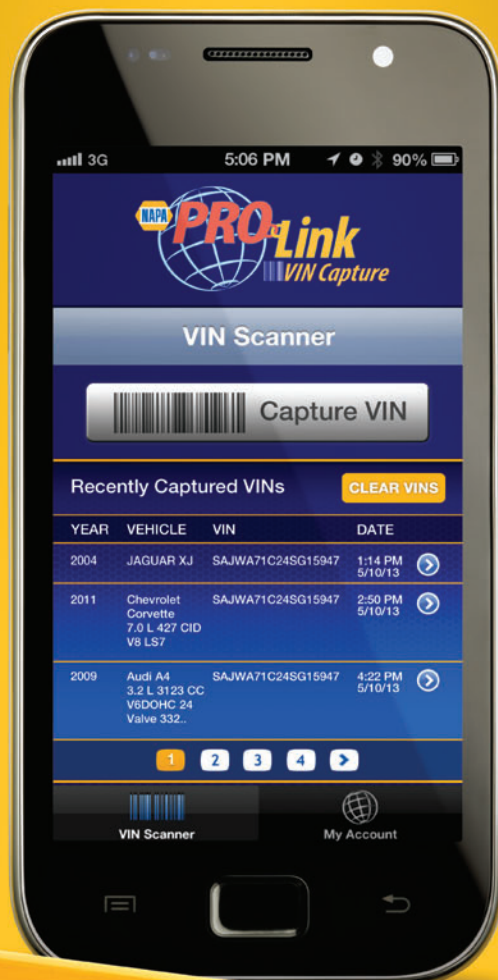
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## TOP SHOPS 2013

# HONESTY AND INTEGRITY

THIS PAIR OF CHARACTERISTICS STEERS BRAD'S SERVICE CENTER'S PATH TO BECOMING A TOP SHOP.

BY JAMES E. GUYETTE | NEWS CORRESPONDENT

Upon being notified that Brad's Service Center was among *Motor Age's* Top Shops, owner Brad Leveillee immediately gave credit to his employees for making it happen.

"We've worked hard for that, but it's my guys who have really made it possible," he says. "I'm the luckiest man

in the world. My hobby turned into my job, and now my job has turned into a hobby. I'm thrilled to be a part of this."

Located near Springfield in Chicopee, Mass., the operation has grown steadily in size and stature since Leveillee founded it 31 years ago with the goal of offering expert car care at affordable prices. "I've never had a year go by where I haven't made a profit," he reports, citing an increasingly wide-



Brad's Service employees are (front row from left) John Cannamela, Timothy Boshuyzen, Jeffrey Menard, Brian Merchant, Lizette Dorval, Brad Leveillee, Richard Cebula, Robert Meehan; (back row) Robert Moritko, Michael Chandler, Michael Jablonski, Richard Chapdelaine, Miguel Arroyo and Paul Houle. Mathew Curro, Jose Pagan and Peyton Leveillee are missing.



### AT A GLANCE

#### BRAD'S SERVICE CENTER

Shop name

**BRAD LEVEILLEE**

Owner

**CHICOPEE, MASS.**

Location

**1 / 31**

No. of shops/Years in business

**16 / 7**

Total employees / Technicians

**17,984 SQUARE FEET**

Shop size

**25**

Number of bays

**265**

Average vehicles per week

**\$250**

Average weekly repair ticket

**\$3.2 MILLION**

Annual gross revenue

**ASE, AAA, BOSCH, NAPA**

Affiliations



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Or visit [MotorAge.com/bradservice](http://MotorAge.com/bradservice)

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Photos: Brad's Service Center





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(Left) Shown here are the waiting area and front counter. (Right) Here is another view of the customer waiting area.

spread reputation throughout the region for honesty and integrity.

With 25 bays serving 265 vehicles per week with an average ticket of \$250, the shop annually grosses \$3.2 million. "We charge for the time we spend. We're not overcharging; people appreciate that, and it gives them a good result."

Leveillee's love for repairing vehicles began at age 15, "when I bought my first car and promptly tore it apart just to put it back together." He subsequently embarked upon a lifelong pursuit of continuous training while establishing his own business.

"My first shop was small: two bays and no employees," Leveillee recounts. "Within three years, I was able to hire a six-person team, creating the need for a larger location. In 1985, I purchased a city-disliked gas station and completely renovated it. I added a parts room, three bays and renewed the pumps to run a full-service gas station. Then finally after 11 years of hard work, I secured financing to buy a dream location, an abandoned car dealership, which I had running in three weeks. Currently, I oversee the entire operation, but my most important job is to respect and enable all the employees."

This sharp, workforce-oriented focus reflects the company's ability to continually raise the bottom line with the added benefit of gaining a personal reward. Most of the employees are brought on board at a young age via recruiting at area schools.

"It's just a joy teaching them. It's great to watch them develop and grow into men," says Leveillee. "I get them after school and hand them a broom. They all started off sweeping the floor, and now they have prominent posi-

tions. It will eventually be an employee-owned company."

The 16 staffers present an impressive pattern of longevity, with five of the technicians accruing terms of service amounting to more than 20 years each.

"We look at ourselves like a family. I have taken a personal and business interest in my employees and have instilled in them a sense of ownership and loyalty." With experience they steadily achieve heightened responsibility, trust and the ability to self-delegate.

Leveillee, though, is hard-pressed to explain the selection process employed when he comes calling at the schools. "That's a tough one. It's usually just a feel — instincts. It's usually the ones who are polite and who show that they want to learn."

And learn they do.

### Networking Within the Field

At Brad's Service Center, Leveillee notes that they constantly promote training, including an offering of all Bosch training programs. They also facilitate other programs from manufacturing partners and other options they can find.

"We like them to have at least 40 hours a year of outside training. We pay them for school time and we budget that time at the beginning of the year," he points out. "We have in-house training as well. We'll have a trainer come in and we'll invite all the other shops in the area, and that helps to keep our costs down."

"Recently we have been sending employees out to SEMA and AAPEX so they can take more advanced classes and network within the field. Our incentive program is heavily tied into training," Leveillee continues. "We will pay for any training our employ-

ees take and offer a payroll increase for every new ASE test passed."

On average, the company spends \$17,000 a year on new software and equipment. "I believe in giving my technicians the best tools and technology available," he asserts, "and when something needs to be bought, it is."

Leveillee goes on to report that "to make sure we are always looking towards the future, I sit down with my head technician and discuss new technology and what we will need in the upcoming years. For the more basic tools, there are Snap-on representatives along with several other small parts dealers that stop by the shop always checking if we need something."

The shop is never more than a year behind in purchasing updated factory software from OEMs such as Toyota, Honda, Nissan, Chrysler/Mopar, General Motors, Audi, Volkswagen, Kia, Hyundai and Mitsubishi.

Productivity is further enhanced with R.O. Writer for booking, email follow-ups and preparing invoices, and staffers throughout the 17,984-square-foot facility are equipped with two-way radios to quickly relay any information to the office or among the technicians.

Membership in a host of aftermarket organizations and a consistent pattern of industry recognition has been augmented by Leveillee's status as one of the first members of ACDelco's Master Technicians Council, in which he traveled the nation giving speeches on behalf of the company.

### Friendly conversations

Harkening back to the days when the shop encompassed fuel pumps, the ol' neighborhood filling station vibe retains its role as a treasured gather-



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(Left) A look at some of the 25 bays at Brad's Service Center. (Right) A car sales offers also is featured at Brad's Service Center.

ing spot. "It's like a local town kind of place," says Leveillee. "At 7 o'clock in the morning, people will come in five days a week and have coffee." A couple of the regulars have been drafted to provide customer pickup and drop-off duties in the shop's 2013 Toyota Prius.

"We don't have an advertising budget. I've never advertised – ever. We rely on our customers to do our advertising for us," he says.

"I believe the best marketing tool is word of mouth recommendations by our customers." Patrons are treated like family. "There is a spacious waiting room with complimentary coffee and water where customers often run into friends and have friendly discussions with the office staff," Leveillee continues.

"Along with that, we have countless magazine subscriptions and Android devices for reading or gam-

ing," he adds. "Customer education is also very important. Our technicians show customers issues with their cars first-hand. This creates transparency, which we have found keeps customers coming back — usually bringing more customers with them. We've had parents, grandparents and their kids, because we're an honest shop."

The business does have a strong presence on Facebook. "It's a wonderful marketing tool and it's free for us," he explains. "Social media today has proved to be a very prominent tool in reaching new customers." His son Peyton, 19, who is a neuroscience major in college, oversees the social media outreach. Another son, Connor, 17, pitches in to keep the company's website up to date.

An affiliation with the American Automobile Association that began two years ago has expanded the shop's marketing sphere. "Being a

part of AAA has brought in people from the outlying areas. We draw from 50 miles to 100 miles away."

Leveillee also is the go-to automotive expert for the local ABC television station. "They do spots down at the shop live, and in between the spots I take calls." The TV face-time frequently results in viewers bringing their vehicles by when professional repairs are needed. "It keeps our name out there; a lot of people watch the news."

Community involvement presents other opportunities for furthering the shop's reputation as an active participant in civic and charitable affairs. Numerous local sports teams are sponsored and the multi-acre former auto dealership lot is made available for benefit car washes and other worthy endeavors, including Chicopee's annual soup kitchen fundraiser on the Fourth of July.

"Personally, over the years I have given away several cars to customers going through hard times in their lives," he says. "Donations emerge from the heart," he emphasizes, "and that's what my company is based on — making what I do and what the company does very similar." **W**



The Massachusetts shop features this tire area.



A journalism graduate of Ohio University, James E. Guyette has covered the automotive industry since the 1980s after having served in assorted positions at magazines and newspapers. He's owned a few beloved cars in his day, including a customized 1979 Mercury Zephyr.

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## TOP SHOPS 2013

# MAKING IT WORK

BEING PART OF THE LOCAL MARKET MEANS CREATING A TWO-WAY STREET FOR CUSTOMERS AND EMPLOYEES.

BY LARRY SILVEY | PUBLISHER OF CUSTOM CONTENT

**"S**top the world, I want to get off," is a common thought for stressed-out, busy consumers. Carfix of Garner, N.C., might not be able to stop the world, but it surely can slow it down a bit.

"We know how busy customers are, so we created our 'valet' service. Customers just need to call us and set

up a time for us to pick up their vehicle and then we'll deliver it when we're done," says Mike Allen, who, along with his father, James, owns Carfix, a 10-bay, \$1.65 million business. "And if they need a loaner, we'll deliver it, too. For those who need less service, we offer a shuttle service."

According to James Allen, it not only takes great repair and maintenance service to please customers, "these days customers are looking for added



Team members at Carfix are (front row, from left) Eric Greene, Ismael Leyva, Jacob Olive, Mike Allen; (back row) Robert Spivey, Tyson Duerrich, Alek Trajanovski and Jim Kramer.

### AT A GLANCE

#### CARFIX

Shop name

**JAMES ALLEN & MIKE ALLEN**

Owner

**GARNER, N.C.**

Location

**1 / 8**

No. of shops / Years in business

**8 / 6**

Total employees / Technicians

**10,600 SQUARE FEET**

Shop size

**10**

Number of bays

**110**

Average vehicles per week

**\$315**

Average weekly repair ticket

**\$1.65 MILLION**

Annual gross revenue

**ASE BLUE SEAL, ASA, IGONC**

Affiliations



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Photos: Carfix





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value, and not disturbing their daily routine with car worries is high on the list. Plus, a good number of the dealers have incorporated loaners into their service, so offering an even higher level of service puts us in the driver's seat."

For customers who desire or need to wait while their vehicles are serviced, they will find the wait quite pleasing. The waiting area is more of a "welcoming area" where customers can relax in a clean and comfortable environment that features a library. For those who want to get something done, there are work stations with the free Wi-Fi. Of course, there is a snack/beverage bar no matter what you choose to do. Got kids? No problem. They will find plenty to do in the play room.

## Taking Care on the Road

Although convenience is a major factor for people with busy lives, an even greater offering might be Carfax's three-year/36,000-mile nationwide warranty on all parts and labor. Yes, you read that right — 3/36, which is way beyond what other independent shop and dealerships offer, the Allens tout. As an added bonus, customers get free roadside service during that time period or mileage.

"Customers are looking for peace of mind," James explains. "Our warranty provides that and builds trust with customers, as well as distinguishes us from our competitors."

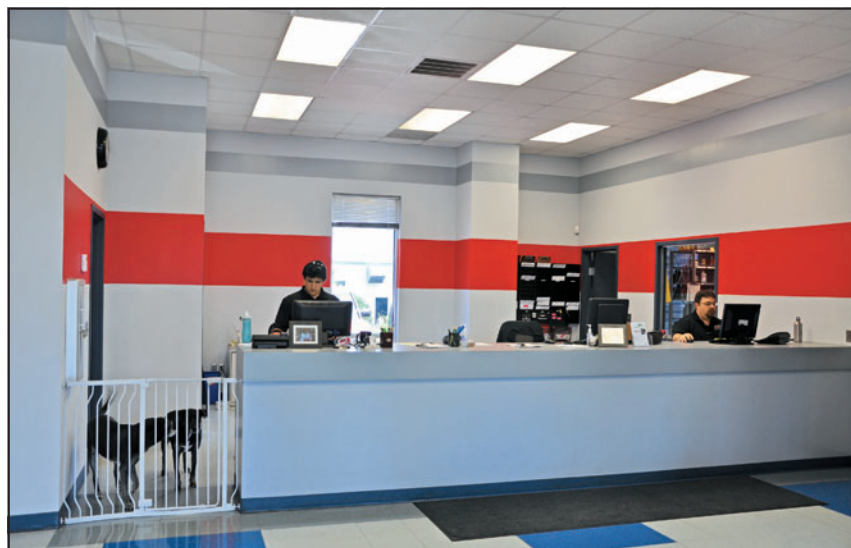
Why don't other shops offer these things? Well, part of the answer surely

has to be experience. Three generations of the Allen family have owned and operated automotive repair shops. James Allen worked for his father in his father's country store/garage, which was open for 50 years. Mike emulated his father by working in his father's garage in Chapel Hill. And now the tradition continues as Mike's sons are growing up in the current business.

With the Allens' extensive automotive experience, they understand the value of a smooth-running shop. "We use Technician Time Management to track productivity, efficiency and proficiency," says the younger Allen. "We track the back of the shop, service advisor performance and the total value of all items estimated. By comparing that number to the average repair order, we can track advisor performance and determine if further sales training is needed."

The intent, Mike Allen emphasizes, is for service advisors to direct work flow and job distribution to the technicians, allowing them to do what they do best — fix cars. In order to do that to the best of their ability, they must make sure they — advisors and technicians — get the proper training.

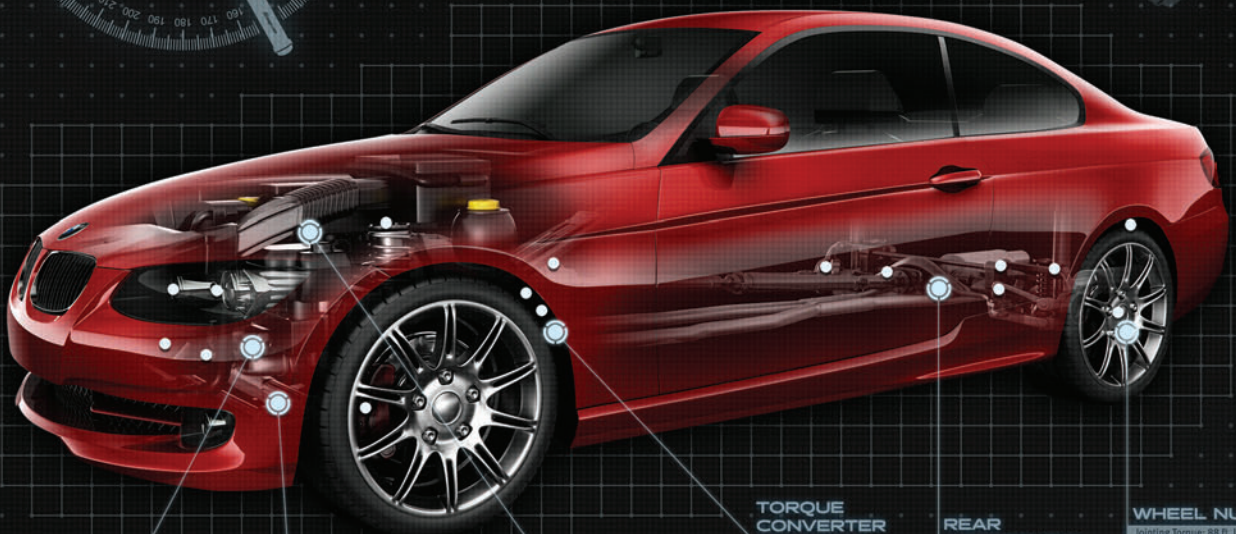
Service advisors receive online training, as well as offsite training through Elite Worldwide, including the Elite Masters Program, which includes a six-month, intensive course consisting of onsite training at Elite's headquarters and weekly teleconferences. And nothing is left to chance for technicians,



Service advisors John Harris (right) and Brian Kelly help customers.



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Angle of Rotation: 60°

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Angle of Rotation: 90°

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1st Angle of Rotation: 90°  
2nd Angle of Rotation: 180°

**TORQUE CONVERTER**  
Joining Torque: 45 Nm

**REAR DIFFERENTIAL COVER**  
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- Brad's Service Center, Chicopee, Mass.
- Carfix, Garner, N.C.
- CARS of America, Inc., Glenview, Ill.
- Certified Automotive Specialists, Glendora, Calif.
- Curt's Service, Oak Park, Mich.
- George's Sierra Shell, Fontana, Calif.
- Larson's Service, Inc., Peabody, Mass.
- Rad Air Complete Car Care, Westlake, Ohio
- Sun Valley Imports, Tempe, Ariz.

either. They are asked to complete 40 hours of course work annually, which is acquired through vendor training programs, online training and local trade shows.

Technicians are paid for time spent in training and reimbursed for all travel expenses. Additionally, Carfix covers the costs of ASE testing and training materials. The training support is topped off by giving technicians pay increases for self-improvement.

**Keeping Everyone Equipped**

Of course, technicians can't get the job done as well without the proper equipment, which the Allens address by earmarking part of Carfix's profits every year for new equipment. "We invest in our people and our equipment to get the job done right," Mike Allen says. "A properly equipped technician is far more efficient, which makes their job more enjoyable and benefits the business and our customers."

One of James Allen's greatest passions is marketing, both traditional and new media. On the traditional side, Carfix does a great deal of direct mail marketing to both its database for retention and specific targeted customers for new customer acquisition.

In addition, Carfix conducts fundraisers for charities at least twice a year. Though the primary intent is not marketing, these events increase community awareness of Carfix and help maintain a steady flow of customers.

"You can't really be part of a market without making it a two-way street," explains James Allen. "If we want people to support us, then we need to support them, too, in areas that are important to all of us."

One wouldn't expect anything less from a person who lists the company's core values as walk the walk, do the right thing, give back and laugh.

With those kinds of values, it's easy to see why Carfix developed its Driving Our Schools program to address a community need. It is a unique program that allows customers to identify themselves as supporters of a local school and, in turn, Carfix donates 5 percent of whatever is spent at Carfix to the school's PTA. Additionally, Carfix recognizes a Teacher of the Month at that school and rewards the teacher with free car service and a car wash for their service.

Another charitable activity that helps the marketing effort is participation as a Partner Garage with Wheels 4 Hope, which is a group that refurbishes donated cars to provide reliable transportation for needy individuals in central North Carolina. And, of course, Carfix contributes to The Food Bank CENC, TheFoodEffect.org and does fundraising for the Special Operations Warrior Foundation and the high school marching band booster club, among others.

As for new marketing media, James Allen has learned the secret: unique content. Both Allens have had this verified time and again by using Facebook's Admin Panel to track the reach of each post.

"It's no contest between the generic content from our Web services provider and our own unique content with photos of cute kids and pets leading the list," Mike Allen says. "This is easy for us since we sometimes bring our



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Shown here are half of the service bays at Carfix in Garner, N.C.

dogs to work and our customers bring their pets and kids to Carfix.”

Other content that attracts their Facebook friends is trivia, tech tips and just the goings-on at the shop on a given day. That might all sound mundane, but there is a big payoff.

“We found that it is important to maintain a regular feed of interesting

items so our followers will pay attention when we put an offer or coupon out on Facebook,” Mike Allen explains. “Usually once or twice a month, we will post coupons or a short time frame special to fill bays on slow days.”

So what’s in store for Carfix down the road? Actually, there are two major initiatives. First is that Carfix is actively

pursuing fleet service, which James Allen says is badly underserved in their area. “This will take an outside salesperson to go after the fleet business.”

Second is the expansion into European auto service. “We have expanded our diagnostic equipment coverage to include Euro tools, as well as seeking Euro specific training for the technical staff.

These initiatives are just the beginning for the next generation of the Allen family that surely will adhere to James’ and Mike’s core values for the good of the business and community. **LL**



The customer waiting area with free beverage/snack bar, library and kids play area.



Larry Silvey is president of his own motor vehicle marketing communications agency called Larry Silvey Media LLC. A 30-year industry veteran, his experience runs the gamut of the motor vehicle industry in publishing, research, education, and marketing and public relations.

✉ Email Larry at [lsilvey@att.net](mailto:lsilvey@att.net)



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03 f260 fuel pump. replaced it, new pump wasn't making enough pressure. about 5 minutes on the phone with the tech guy and wallah! up and running. great customer service by Airtex now and to date. I've never had one

**"Great customer service by Airtex now and to date, I have never had one go bad. Thanks for the help!"**



### Airtex - Facebook

It was on an 02 Ford Escape. One side had the 'horse shoe' the other had a wide band, similar to one in the video where you had a clip on the back that you used a screwdriver to release. This one seemed to have retainers on two sides. I could have probably done it myself, I'm fairly competent, but on the other hand, I hate to get into an issue where I'm in over my head. I think a simple filter replacement should be straightforward. I can deal with the issues of fuel pressure and containment. I don't want to deal with a broken connector that would require professional help, particularly when the vehicle is in my garage. Your TV video is great, I've referenced it to

**"I have given the FuelPumpU web address to many people. It's about the best I've seen so far."**

have a reference, but they don't. It's very helpful to me and my customers. I have given the FuelPumpU web address to many people. It's about the best I've seen so far. - Murray W.



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no one in the  
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not even once have they ever let me down. I greatly thank you and I will always continue using the best and that is Airtex. - Kevin B.

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## TOP SHOPS 2013

# A LONG ROAD TO SUCCESS

STARTING OUT BY LITERALLY DRIVING HIS SHOP AROUND, THIS OWNER HAS COME A LONG WAY TO BE IN THE TOP 10.

BY ROBERT BRAVENDER | CONTRIBUTOR

**B**ob Dupre is on the verge of expanding his operation into multiple stores, but this top 10 finalist started small. His shop not only was about the size of a truck, it was a truck.

"I started the business in '72 as a mobile auto repair, which was primar-

ily a matter of economics, as in not having any money," says the Chicago-area CEO. But three years after founding CARS of America Inc., Dupre was firmly ensconced in brick and mortar in Glenview, Ill. Today, the shop employs 15 people and does almost \$2.5 million a year in sales. Ironically things have come full circle as he now spends most of his time away from the shop.



The CARS of America team is (from left) Kelly Thomas, Bill Krueger, Dana Andrews, Tim Wilson, Dan Lehman, Corey Mast, Frank Ilcin, Pete Sonzero, Mick Wingerter, Robert Dupre, Brian Nettles, John Schwall, Lisa Dupre and Brian Blohm.

### AT A GLANCE

#### CARS OF AMERICA INC.

Shop name

#### BOB DUPRE

Owner

#### GLENVIEW, ILL.

Location

1 / 41

No. of shops / Years in business

13 / 5

Total employees / Technicians

7,600 SQUARE FEET

Shop size

11

Number of bays

78

Average vehicles per week

\$536

Average weekly repair ticket

\$2.3 MILLION

Annual gross revenue

ASE BLUE SEAL, AAA, ASA, BBB

Affiliations



JUST SCAN IT

Scan this QR Code to read more on your smartphone about CARS of America. Or visit [MotorAge.com/carsofamerica](http://MotorAge.com/carsofamerica)

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Photos: CARS of America





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Managing partner Brian Blohm (right) hands off the keys to a future client.



Pete Sonzero, an ASE Master Tech, diagnoses a drivability problem on a Jeep.

"Normally, I get in here maybe four times a year," he acknowledges. "I work as a liaison between the staff and the shop, and with the outside firm

that we use for our marketing. We're looking to expand at this point into more facilities, so I'm more involved with that bigger picture rather than

the day-to-day operations. (Yet) I'm actively involved with the business. I have remote login capabilities where I can get into our computer system; I'm frequently in contact by phone with the staff here."

One reason he was in on this particular day was to distribute profit sharing checks. "(It's) a program I 'stole' from Les Schwab (Tire Centers out West)," Dupre explains. "We basically take whatever the company has made in a fiscal year and pay half of it to the employees, (the check amounts) based on whether they're full time or part time and how long they've worked here."

### What to Focus on

But the many aspects of expansion, even small things like revamping their logo, are what primarily occupies Dupre's mind these days. "Starting in about 2011, we spent a pretty fair amount of money on some branding," he reports of re-registering their red, white and blue icon, "so that we have some continuity in our marketing. Any printed material our customers see should all look the same."

About 5 percent of sales are spent on marketing, "allocated to whatever media seems to be getting us the best results," explains Dupre. "This year we have been drifting away from direct mail, unless for real specific purposes."

He points to the road construction going on in front of the shop as a prime example. "With the road ripped up, it's difficult to get in here. We ran a series of postcards, a broad mailing to everyone within about a one-mile radius of the shop. We offered some really deep and increasing discounts; the more you spent, the bigger the discount percentage. We already have free pickup and delivery, but we stressed that fact, adding that if need be we would bring a loaner to the customer, drop it off at their house, bring their car in for service and bring it back when we were done."

The majority of their marketing dollars goes into social media like Angie's List advertising, Yelp and Google Adwords. "I actually haven't seen any of the analytics back on that yet," Dupre concedes. "It's not that we're spending that much money on it. Somebody once said that half the money you spend on marketing is wasted; they just haven't figured out which half."

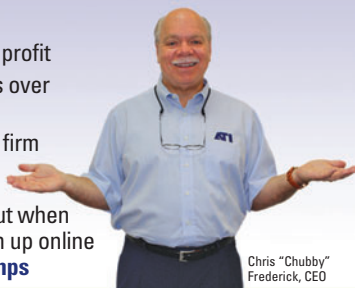
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Seen at left is the CARS of America customer service counter, while at right is the shop's parts and fluids storage area.

But who does the analysis, Dupre or his marketing firm? "It's a combination of the two," he answers. "They do some pretty sophisticated stuff; they can track a new customer through a five-, six- or seven-year time span. They can look at all new customers that came in for 2009, see how much they spent that year, the next year and so forth until they drop off the radar, indicating they're no longer a customer, which is defined as coming in once every 12 months. Meanwhile I pull the data for comparative car counts for this month versus a year ago this month, and some of the easier-to-track stuff like the number of new customers we get in a month and what the sources were, average repair order and profit margin on those new customers, things along those lines."

Social media also figures prominently in their customer relations. "Our rule of thumb is we respond to every single

review, good or bad," Dupre discloses. "Someone at the shop is assigned to check Google and Angie's List once a week, and they are backed up by somebody at the marketing firm in case anything's missed. They respond to any new reviews, either thanking them for a good one or trying to do whatever we can do to resolve an unhappy one. We want problems identified and resolved as soon as they occur, at the lowest possible level. Everybody in service is empowered with the ability and training to deal with difficult situations in the best possible way, right on the spot, so I think that has helped a lot."

Because of that customer service approach, the shop has customers who have been with them for about 40 years — almost the entire time the shop has been in business.

"We're working on a project right now to cull through our database and identify those people, but it's interesting how many there are; we're talking in the hundreds," he states. "Anybody who's been in this business knows that keeping a customer is probably 5 percent skill and 95 percent luck, because even though you didn't do anything dishonest or unethical or even technically incorrect, something in a transaction goes sideways and you lose a customer."

Another step in CARS of America's expansion process has been the development of a management team. Among the latter is a young man who's been with Dupre about 20 years now, managing partner Brian Blohm, and Dupre's daughter Kelly, who has worked with her dad even longer since graduating high school. "She handles all the back

office things, details such as payable receivables, HR payroll, that type of thing," he says. He enrolled both of them in the Bottom Line Impact Group, operated by RLO Training.

"I've used RLO for 10 to 15 years to train my service advisors. I needed to get Brian and Kelly to think more like owners as opposed to employees." Dupre should know; he did it the hard way.

"I've been in this line of work since 1962," he relates. "I started off working in a gas station, cleaning floors and changing oil. Then I became the night manager, then the day manager, then the owner of my own business. I don't know whether I started in the wrong place and ended up in the right place, or if I'm just some weird person who can do both things. I don't know. If you spend 50 years doing something, eventually you'll fail your way to success."

"I've had people who are MBAs tell me that as near as they can determine, I know as much as they do about business management," laughs Dupre. "That just proves that I spent 40 years learning what I could have learned in four years had I gone to college." *TM*



The CARS of America customer lounge.



Robert Bravender graduated from the University of Memphis with a bachelor's degree in film and video production. He has edited magazines and produced shows for numerous channels, including "Motorhead Garage" with longtime how-to guys Sam Memmolo and Dave Bowman.

✉ Email Robert at [rbravender@comcast.net](mailto:rbravender@comcast.net)





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Living in Cincinnati, OH, Lloyd has four children and spends all the time he can travelling on his touring motorcycle with his wife, Jean.



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## TOP SHOPS 2013

# FEARING NO COMPETITION

LIVING BY THE GOLDEN RULE MAKES FRIENDS IN MORE THAN JUST CUSTOMERS AT ONE CALIFORNIA SHOP.

BY LARRY SILVEY | PUBLISHER OF CUSTOM CONTENT

**“W**hat are the things that specifically differentiate your shop from your competitors?” is a key question in deciding on our Top Shop finalists. Well, there might not be a better answer ever given to this question than the one Gene Morrill provided.

“I don’t feel I have competitors.” That could be arrogance, brashness or over confidence. Could be, but isn’t. Truth of the matter is that the way Morrill runs Certified Automotive Specialists in Glendora, Calif., separates it in a way that other run-of-the-mill shops can only think about emulating. Evidence of that is that Certified is a repeat Top Shop (in fact, overall winner) from last year.

“We treat people the way we would like our moms to be treated,” Morrill



The Certified Automotive Service staff is (from left) Joe Gonzales, Alan Graner, Kyle Bachman, Jeff Christy, Dave Osborne, Max Saenz, Thomas Publico, Frank Montellano, Juan Cabrera, Cherry Aguilar and Gene Morrill.

### AT A GLANCE

#### CERTIFIED AUTO. SPECIALISTS

Shop name

**GENE & ROBIN MORRILL**

Owner

**GLENDORA, CALIF.**

Location

**1 / 35**

No. of shops / Years in business

**12 / 5**

Total employees / Technicians

**7,800 SQUARE FEET**

Shop size

**20**

Number of bays

**80**

Average vehicles per week

**\$470**

Average weekly repair ticket

**\$1.95 MILLION**

Annual gross revenue

**ASE, AAA, ASA, ASCCA**

Affiliations



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declares. "Our staff educates our customers on why the service or repair is needed ... and works hard to put together a budget for any items that can wait."

Instead of just "fixing what's broken," Morrill has implemented RMS — relationship maintenance service — with every customer. The first thing that happens when a customer comes in is that their vehicle is inspected from bumper to bumper. During the inspection, which Morrill calls "Pit Stop," his team makes a list of the items needed, starting with safety, followed by customer concerns and maintenance items. This process, Morrill says, will keep customers' vehicles on the road for 200,000 miles or more.

But it doesn't end there. "In a customer interview, we talk about how they like their car, how many miles they drive, how long they plan to keep the car and the budget they have for service and repairs," Morrill explains. "Not every customer wants to participate in RMS, but it sets us apart from other shops."

Face-to-face interaction with customers is preferable but doesn't work for everyone so Morrill instituted a new online program called AutoShopForms, which gives customers a sense of control over the automotive service.

"This system allows us to email an electronic symptom form to the customer so they can tell us in their own words and in detail what their vehicle concerns are from the comfort of their home or office. Then they simply click 'submit' and the form is returned to us," Morrill says. "And it only takes a few minutes to fill in the information. After that, customers just come in, drop off their keys and go."

Customers are sent reminders through the R.O. Writer point of sale system, which sends customers a

reminder notice via First Class Mail for service every 120 days or sooner, depending on circumstances. Morrill says this process has led to a 40 percent increase in customers returning.

## Going an Extra Mile

Of course, what every customer is concerned about are warranties. Morrill says their posted standard warranty is two years or 24,000 miles; however, Certified adheres to an even higher standard — a customer satisfaction warranty — which means if a part or repair doesn't last what Certified or the customer believes is reasonable, then Certified takes care of it, no questions asked. "If a water pump worked for 70,000 miles, then the replacement part and labor should last as long or more," Morrill emphasizes.

Another unique practice that customers notice right away is the number of staff in the front office. Morrill says that it takes four people to ensure customers receive a friendly greeting and that their concerns are solved immediately. "Most shops try to run a front office on a shoestring and can't deliver the level of service that we can."

Although Morrill says customers are king, it is his employees that he takes care of first. "Customers will be best served if you take care of your employees." What this means, he says, is that you have to trust your employees, train them and compensate them well.

Morrill recognizes that putting the employees first is what it takes to attract and retain great ones. He says that he pays on the higher end of the pay scale, offers paid time off, health insurance and retirement. Furthermore, Morrill emphasizes that he provides everything that is needed to do the job well, including two hoists per technicians, the correct tools and scanners



(Left) The customer lobby area. (Right) Cherry Aguilar prepares info for customers.



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and a team that helps one another. And one other thing, which might be more important than anything else to his employees, is a five-day work week.

### Learning from His Past

Clearly, Morrill knows what he's doing when it comes to running a successful shop. Not bad for a guy who says he barely graduated from high school and had no clue as what he wanted to do in life. He caught his break when his auto shop instructor presented him with a \$50 scholarship to the Citrus College Auto Shop program. After one course, he knew he had found his career.

This led to working for his instructor and mentor. After eight years working for him, Morrill, his wife, Robin, and a partner bought the mentor's shop. Along the way, he and Robin bought out the partner. Though they did all right, Morrill says he struggled for the first 25 years of his shop's 35-year existence.

"I thought I knew it all," Morrill admits. "Ten years ago, when I finally

listened to my wife and joined a professional training company, is when the company started functioning as a professional shop and making a profit."

Morrill, who earned an associate of arts in automotive technology and AAM degree along the way, continues, "Training, training, training is the absolute key to growth and success. Most owners are not educated in business, management, leadership, handling people or making a profit."

Furthermore, Morrill says there are many great training programs and trainers to choose from. "I recommend test driving all the companies that you like, and if they produce the results you want, stay with them. I played management ping pong for years and its very confusing getting advice from many different people. When I quit jumping around and signed with Elite Pro Service with Jim Murphy as a coach, we caught fire."

Of course, Morrill is committed to employee training. Perhaps the most important is in-house training focused on specific concerns. Then there are specific Webinars and YouTube videos targeted for their content.

Also, he used to send his staff to evening classes until one day he attended one and saw how fatigued everyone was having worked all day in the shop. Today, he still has employees attend evening classes, but with a caveat: he makes sure that he has checked out the instructor and the content to be presented and, most importantly, the willingness of his employees to attend. Morrill also points out that suppliers have recognized the evening fatigue problem so they have started "Lunch & Learns" where they come in, buy lunch for everyone and make a one-hour presentation.

Par for the course is six-month update training on his information systems: Identifix, iATN and ALLDATA. Morrill says they all have outstanding online training courses and updates.

One would be hard pressed to find an automotive repair shop that is more serious than Certified when it comes to website and social media marketing. Concerning the website, Morrill works with Zenergy Works, a well-known Internet marketing firm. With his guidance, Zenergy handles all of the company's online marketing,

which uses a "hyper local" approach by conveying value, trust and humor to entice and engage Web viewers.

When it comes to social media, Facebook is Morrill's preferred method of connecting with customers. He says his company use DemandForce through Facebook to create additional tabs for a better user experience. Users can access specials, reviews and set up appointments directly from Facebook.

"We share shop milestones, current specials, events and more with over 4,000 fans," Morrill says. "We also include useful information about car maintenance, as well as photos and stories about our staff so customers get to know them and feel connected to them. Facebook gives our customers a place to congregate and have their questions answered and their voices heard."

Morrill continues, "NWZ WORX Multimedia is responsible for all of our success with print, newsletters and other advertising mailings. I have been with them for six years and they help bring fresh, new ideas to market our company in a fun way."

None of the success Certified has is happenstance. Morrill firmly believes in a plan and a process. "A plan should include a model of what your company should look like, a target for profit and a budget to it done," he explains. "The process includes hiring the correct staff, and having a written policy, a written procedure, a mission statement, a training path for staff, and most of all, an effective leader."

With the business eight times larger than when Morrill bought it, the plan and process look to be working just fine. And the leader, who long ago was just a wayward 18-year-old with no plan, knows what he wants to do and where he's taking the business. **TL**



One alignment rack in the shop.



Frank Montellano replaced a battery.



Rental cars available for customers.



**LARRY SILVEY**  
PUBLISHER OF  
CUSTOM CONTENT

Larry Silvey is president of his own motor vehicle marketing communications agency called Larry Silvey Media LLC. A 30-year industry veteran, his experience runs the gamut of the motor vehicle industry in publishing, research, education, and marketing and public relations.

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## TOP SHOPS 2013

# WORKING THE WEBSITE

**CURT'S SERVICE UNDERSTANDS THE IMPACT OF AN ONLINE PRESENCE WHILE DOMINATING THE DETROIT SCENE.**

BY **LARRY SILVEY** | PUBLISHER OF CUSTOM CONTENT

**W**hen you land on the Curt's Service website, you have to wonder why anyone would think about going to a dealership. The website is professional looking, informational and easy to navigate. Ironically, it's what you expect from a dealership, and it's that much more refreshing to see an independent shop beating the competitors at their own game.

If anything, that's an understatement. The Curt's Service website is downright spectacular and engaging.

Warning: It will suck you in and have you wanting to schedule an appointment with them even if you don't live in the Detroit area. Yes, it's that good. From the clean, organized layout to the YouTube videos, the website is more of an experience that you're happy to have whether you're looking for auto repair service or not.

But as good as the website is as the face of Curt's Service, it is just the starting point for someone looking for expert service and repair. What's behind the website face is that really matters. And, as the name of the business implies, it all started with Curt Massoll, who



Curt's crew includes (from left) DeJare Leonard, Gregor Gunderson, Brian Nurmi, Tiffany Lemons, Greg Dargo, Keith Massoll, Michelle Shields, Curt Massoll Sr., Joel Hershoren, Chris Bunce, Katie Massoll, John Kaurala, Aaron Kaurala, John Corsiglia and Andy Massoll

### AT A GLANCE

#### CURT'S SERVICE

Shop name

#### CURT & ANDY MASSOLL

Owner

#### OAK PARK, MICH.

Location

**1 / 32**

No. of shops / Years in business

**15 / 7**

Total employees / Technicians

**13,000 SQUARE FEET**

Shop size

**15**

Number of bays

**95**

Average vehicles per week

**\$468**

Average weekly repair ticket

**\$2.2 MILLION**

Annual gross revenue

**ASE, AAA, ASA, BBB**

Affiliations



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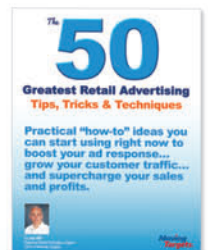


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against all odds not only built a service repair business, but one now recognized as a top 10 shop in the U.S.

It all started about as humbly as you can imagine. In the late 1970s, Massoll was an experimental build-up technician at Chrysler Engineering in Detroit, but like many Chrysler employees from that era, was laid off. That was bad enough, but to make matters worse, he had no luck finding a job when he applied at several repair shops. "I was left with the option of working on family and friends' vehicles at my home," he says.

Being forced into working for himself turned out to be a blessing in disguise, because it wasn't too long before he was so busy he had to look for leased space. First he moved into a Sunoco station, followed by a Mobil station. Five years later in 1986, Massoll moved the business to his current location in Oak Park, Mich., where he converted the existing building into a six-bay facility and positioned it to serve Metro Detroit.

And the story doesn't end there. Just last year, Massoll expanded the facil-

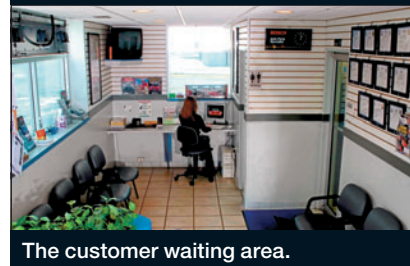
ity by nine more bays. "That's exciting enough, but Andy (Massoll's son) and I decided to go way beyond expansion," Massoll exclaims. "We decided that it didn't make sense to do anything less than a state-of-the-art green facility."

The addition was built from the ground up to the latest green standards, and features cutting-edge technology such as lifts/hoists that use compressed air and tap water instead of electrical motors and hydraulic oil, which keeps 420 gallons of oil out of the ground. And if you like that, the shop also features in-floor radiant heat, including two snow melt zones outdoors that are 100 percent fueled by a recycled waste boiler system; skylights; a UV reflective roof top; blown-in wall insulation; and EV charging stations.

Andy Massoll, who worked in the shop as a young child through his teenage years and came on full time after returning from college in 2001, says the investment in green expansion was well worth it, because it sets Curt's Service apart from competitors and



The customer service counter and waiting area.



The customer waiting area.

squashes any tainted image that consumers might have about repair shops.

"The cost of a green expansion is higher, however, the goodwill derived from the community knowing we're making a substantial green effort is priceless," the younger Massoll says. "On the practical side, it also enhances shop efficiency and lowers operating costs."

Hand-in-hand with the green building expansion is the Massolls' hybrid efforts, which proves that they not only are embracing the technology, but they also are living it. First, both Massolls purchased Chevy Volts that they use for their customer shuttle service and parts running. "When we shuttle people in the Volts, they can't stop talking about them. They truly appreciate that we act on our convictions."

Second, the Massolls are purposeful in offering hybrid service, with Curt's Service being Detroit's first and only independent shop to specialize in hybrid repair and maintenance.

"Not everyone can fix these cars because it takes specialized and ongoing training," Curt Massoll says. "We are uniquely positioned to be the alternative to pricey dealerships because we have invested in hiring and training technicians in this cutting edge technology. Our commitment to hybrid repair will allow us to grow with this business as the number of hybrids increase - which they will."

### Luring in Customers

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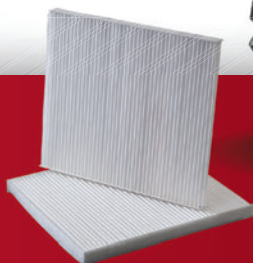


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Greg Gunderson works on a car.



A view of the service bays.



Ben Spear details a vehicle.

owners who work harder to assure the highest level of repair service. According to the elder Massoll, they achieve this by adhering to the most stringent certification and accreditation standards in the industry.

"Our shop is Bosch Service authorized, ASE certified, ASA approved, AC Delco preferred and AAA approved," he says proudly. "Moreover, we're BBB accredited."

The son opines that Bosch Car Service shops are the best independently owned auto repair shops because of the extraordinarily high standards that shops must meet. "To qualify for membership, a service center must pass a rigorous certification process based on the highest level technical skills, customer service, and facility design and appearance.

"Moreover, every quality repair starts with quality parts, which is how Bosch built its reputation and became the largest OEM manufacturer and designer in the world," he adds. "Who better to associate yourself with when you work on multiple vehicle lines than the company that provides the systems and components to all those vehicles?"

Curt Massoll also emphasizes that Bosch performs both pre-arranged

audits and surprise inspections that keeps the quality of service at the highest level.

If that isn't enough comfort for customers, the Bosch affiliation also provides customers with a two-year/24,000 mile warranty. Massoll points out, "That's twice the industry norm, plus it is valid nationwide giving customers the ultimate peace of mind."

Of course, this great service and an industry-leading warranty is all for naught if you can't attract customers. The Massolls have an answer for that, too, with several marketing techniques, including word-of-mouth, social media and traditional advertising. Perhaps more important is Curt's Service free, expert vehicle inspection called Pit Stop, a name chosen to emphasize speedy and professional service.

"By offering the Pit Stop inspection to new customers, they can get a feel for who we are," Andy Massoll says. "A lot of the times the consumer just doesn't know what to request and doesn't feel comfortable paying for something unless they understand why they need it and what they are going to get from it."

Curt Massoll adds, "Our inspections underscore safety and reliability. That's why we have ASE certified service technicians perform them. After conducting a comprehensive vehicle assessment — from the condition of windshield wipers to engine performance — the service advisor compiles a maintenance plan for customers, which works for customers interested in routine maintenance or those looking to keep an older car on the road longer. Additionally, we offer this service for customers who are considering whether or not to buy a used vehicle."

For customers who have lost track of their maintenance schedule, Curt's Service will obtain and present the manufacturer's recommended maintenance schedule to them, again at no charge.

Customers also are lured to the shop by its clean and professional appearance outside, which carries over to the inside. "Clean enough to eat off the floor" is actually a phrase that many of Curt's customers use to describe the shop cleanliness.

"To the customer, an ultra-clean shop is a reflection of the work that we're going to perform on their car,"

Andy Massoll says. If we care enough for our work environment, it stands to reason we will also care for the service we perform on their vehicle."

Other benefits of a clean shop, he adds, are very pragmatic. "A clean shop is an organized shop, which helps in overall shop productivity and employee motivation. Moreover, the image gained helps us lure dealership customers who are used to clean environments, plus it helps us recruit the best employees."

Speaking of recruitment, the Massolls always are on the lookout for great talent. "We are always accepting applications from the area's veterans, as well as rising stars of the industry," Andy Massoll says. "Our loyal, long-term employees who have been with us for more than 10 years are not threatened by this, because they understand it underscores our commitment to being the best we can be, which, ultimately, provides more security for them."

Those who apply for work at Curt's Service quickly find out that the father-son duo are looking for a rare breed who are prepared to work hard. "We strongly believe in performance-based compensation," Curt Massoll emphasizes. "If you want to be a professional in this industry, you should have as much control over your earning potential, which we provide, while being held to the highest level of work standards and ethics."

What this means is that the Massolls don't expect anything less of their employees than what they expect of themselves. This approach has worked for them and their employees over the years to the benefit of their customers. And that's why they will continue to lead service repair in the Detroit area for years to come. *TM*



**LARRY SILVEY**  
PUBLISHER OF  
CUSTOM CONTENT

Larry Silvey is president of his own motor vehicle marketing communications agency called Larry Silvey Media LLC. A 30-year industry veteran, his experience runs the gamut of the motor vehicle industry in publishing, research, education, and marketing and public relations.

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## TOP SHOPS 2013

# STAYING IN FRONT

KEEPING HIS BUSINESS TOP OF MIND BY CARING FOR CUSTOMERS BOOSTS THIS FULL-SERVICE SHOP.

BY LARRY SILVEY | PUBLISHER OF CUSTOM CONTENT

**"T**ake care of people first, then their car," is the code shop owner Doug Whiteman lives by.

"We view ourselves as a customer service provider, and much of what we do is relationship and convenience driven," Whiteman says. "By the time a service is completed, the actual repair is secondary

and the services we provide (are) what stands out to the customer."

This business tenant is emphasized further by Whiteman's view of the benefit of social media, which is keeping the business name in front of people. "It is easy for someone to be deferred by a coupon, a closer shop or the size or attractiveness of a dealership," he says. "But that is only skin deep. We believe that if people see our name, it triggers their memory of how



### AT A GLANCE

#### GEORGE'S SIERRA SHELL

Shop name

#### GEORGE WHITEMAN

Owner

#### FONTANA, CALIF.

Location

1 / 41

No. of shops / Years in business

10 / 6

Total employees / Technicians

1,200 SQUARE FEET

Shop size

3

Number of bays

61

Average vehicles per week

\$394

Average weekly repair ticket

\$1.05 MILLION

Annual gross revenue

AAA, NAPA, BBB

Affiliations

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The George's Sierra Shell team is (from left) Vincent Serna, Heather Stanton, Jessica Machuca, Tony Odom, Doug Whiteman, Erik Gonzalez, Raymundo Del Campo, Ingo Noltmann, Ricky Castro, Edgar Covarrubias and Daniel Wibert.

Photos: George's Sierra Shell







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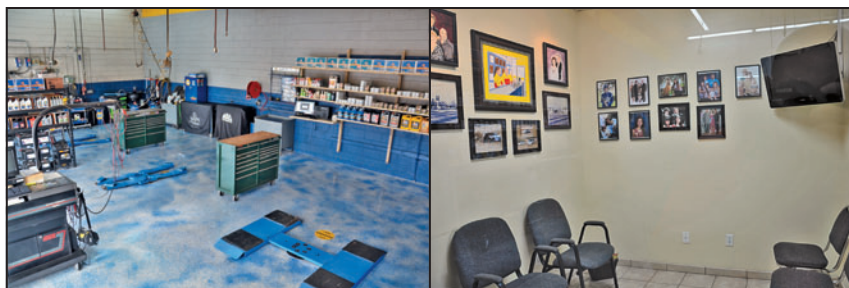
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(Left) An elevated view of the shop floor. (Right) The customer waiting room as seen from inside the shop.

we treated them, which will be more compelling than other market forces or marketing gimmicks."

There might not be a more straightforward, down-to-earth, well-run, well-maintained shop/gasoline station/convenience store in the country than Whiteman's business — George's Sierra Shell in Fontana, Calif., which was founded by Whiteman's father in 1972. It's not just because of Whiteman, who is one of the most affable people you'll ever meet, but because of the people he hires, who are friendly and service-minded.

"Everybody has to be part of the business philosophy," Whiteman emphasizes. "Treat people how we expect to be treated." There's a downside to this philosophy, Whiteman jokes. "Providing such high service expectations ruins our own experiences at different retailers and service providers."

Perhaps the best example of service on the gas station portion of the business is that customers nowadays don't expect to have their gas pumped, windshield cleaned and tire pressure checked. "We have a lot of customers who have been coming to us since my dad ran the business. They might not expect that level of service in this day and age, but we still provide it."

What this friendliness and service expectations translate to is something that Whiteman stakes his reputation on — trust. "You can't buy it, nor can you fake it. Honesty is the only policy when dealing with the public."

## Building a Relationship

One of the best ways to build trust is by letting customers see with their own eyes what needs to be done to their vehicle. "We like to bring our customers to our — always clean — shop floor to show customers what we see in our courtesy inspection," Whiteman says.

"And when customers pick up their vehicle, we'll show them the replaced parts and pictures that we took during the repair process. Other shops may not want to take the time to do that, but that's how you build a relationship."

Tony Odom, general manager, adds, "We need to make sure, that no matter what, we always keep a personal touch and work with every customer like they are the only one we have. Giving each customer special attention and doing the little things like replacing brake lights and cleaning floor mats as a courtesy keeps people coming back."

Of course, another trust builder is being a NAPA AutoCare Center that features a 2-year/24,000-mile warranty. Being an AAA Approved Auto Repair Shop also has built trust and confidence with customers. In practice, the warranty is actually better than that. "If we have a customer who doesn't drive as much and has an issue three or four years down the road, we take care of them," Odom says. "It goes back to the boss's philosophy of treating people the way we expect to be treated."

Nearby customers who need some help getting to and from the shop benefit from Whiteman's Home & Business Service. George's Shell will pick up their car, exchange it for a courtesy vehicle, perform the repairs, wash their car and return it — all at no extra charge. And, of course, there is a shuttle service for customers who don't need this level of service. Moreover, if all of the loaners are in use, George's Shell doesn't look for an excuse; rather, it rents a car from Enterprise for the customer at no cost to him or her.

After service is completed, the next regular appointment will be scheduled, and one week prior to the appointment, the customer will receive a reminder call. Two days after service is per-





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K200788	Honda Odyssey 04-99
K200789	Buick Skylark 98-94; Chevrolet Beretta 96-94; Corsica 96-94; Oldsmobile Achieva 98-94; Pontiac Grand Am 98-94
K200790	Chevrolet Camaro 02-93; Pontiac Firebird 02-93
K200791	Dodge Neon 99-95; Plymouth Neon 99-95
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(Left) An unused office has been turned into a training center for employees. (Right) Raymundo Del Campo performs a courtesy inspection.

formed, customers receive a follow-up thank-you phone call. If there are any additional repairs recommended, a call will be placed a few weeks after service and a reminder is mailed the following month.

Then there's social media to help stay connected to customers. Odom says they use Facebook and Google Plus in that regard. "We have over 650 followers on Facebook who we engage often with pictures, links to interesting automotive articles and our Fan of the Week app."

Odom points out that if social media content looks like it's promotional, viewers aren't as engaged as they are when the content is "honest and genuine articles and photos." For example, he said they got more than 1,000 views from the photos they posted of the entire George's Shell team attending the SEMA Show last year.

Some businesses talk a good game when it comes to community involvement. For Whiteman, giving back to the community is a basic tenant of his business. Two things, in particular, stand out. First is their local schools program where the shop donates 10 percent of a customer's bill to a school designated by the customer. Second

is its Adopt a School program where every Tuesday the shop donates one cent of every gallon of gasoline sold to the school the shop "adopts."

Of course, there's even more community involvement, including hosting a blood drive and sponsoring various charitable events such as the Special Olympics and the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life.

What's really unique about the shop's community involvement is that Whiteman spreads the involvement around with his staff. One employee is in charge of local school involvement, one represents the business at Chamber of Commerce functions and one attends city council meetings. "By splitting up the responsibilities, we have forged a number of new relationships and are able to maintain a strong community presence," Whiteman says.

With such a strong community presence, Whiteman is ready to expand. First, he plans to rebuild the present location completely in 2014. The service office will be expanded and two or three bays will be added. By the end of 2015, he hopes to add two other locations that will be service repair shops exclusively.

Whiteman and Odom are quite cognizant of why George's Shell is so successful and is ready to grow. "It all comes down to the employees," Odom says. "We trust and respect our dedicated and loyal employees."

To underscore Odom's belief, Whiteman says, "I truly care about my employees and their families, which is partly why they have stayed with us. We always try to make sure they can attend any special school events for their kids and have vaca-

tion time. We also get out together as a group to have fun, which includes bowling, go-kart racing, swimming and dining out."

From the professional side, Whiteman invests in his employees with ongoing training. All employees have access to NAPA's training site. Also, they are encouraged to take ASE tests with George's Shell picking up the costs; moreover, employees earn \$200 for each ASE test they pass.

Along with ASE training, all of George's Shell employees are cross-trained on NAPA Tracs, Mitchell 1's ProDemand, Demandforce and CustomerLink. "We encourage our sales team to listen to ATI teleseminars daily on their ride to work," Odom says. "Additionally, we participate in ATI and Demandforce webinars and any local events sponsored by NAPA AutoCare and AAA."

The success George's Shell has experienced is truly based on the concern Whiteman has for his customers, the community and his employees. In turn, they care about him and support his business. Frankly, it doesn't get any better than that. *W*



Also in the fleet is the shop's courtesy shuttle, a wrapped PT Cruiser.



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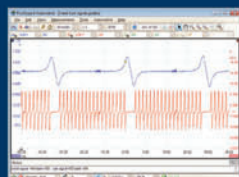
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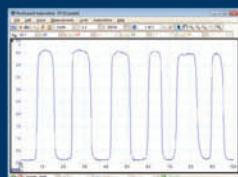
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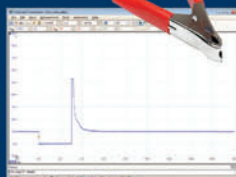
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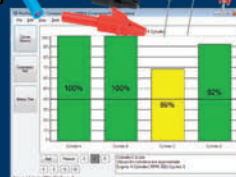
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## TOP SHOPS 2013

# SURVIVING AND THRIVING

EVEN AFTER LOSING HER HUSBAND, THIS SHOP OWNER MADE THE SHOP BETTER TO HELP ALL 'HAVE A FUN DAY.'

BY LARRY SILVEY | PUBLISHER OF CUSTOM CONTENT

Some people, if not most, would have thrown in the shop towel when faced with the loss of their spouse, who also was her business partner. But not Diane Larson. Although devastated and not totally prepared to run a busi-

ness by herself, she was determined that she would not only run Larson's Service, Inc. in Peabody, Mass., at the highest level, but also would become an industry leader.

"After John's death, I hired a team to carry on what he and I had started," she says. "I began by learning business skills and marketing from trade maga-



The Larson team is composed of (from left) Diane Larson, Brandon Benton, Kevin Siva, Artur Bercan and Taylor Hill.

### AT A GLANCE

#### LARSON'S SERVICE INC.

Shop name

#### DIANE LARSON

Owner

#### PEABODY, MASS.

Location

1 / 27

No. of shops / Years in business

5 / 3

Total employees / Technicians

1,700 SQUARE FEET

Shop size

4

Number of bays

33

Average vehicles per week

\$356

Average weekly repair ticket

\$610,000

Annual gross revenue

#### ASA, NESSARA, CAR CARE COUNCIL

Affiliations



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Photos: Larson's Service





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zines, iATN and by attending all of the conferences and training events that time and money would allow.”

Larson didn't stop there. She became ASE certified, earned her Accredited Automotive Manager (AAM) designation in 2009 and currently is working on her Automotive Aftermarket Professional (AAP) designation from the University of the Aftermarket.

The passion for running her shop exudes from her. She truly loves working with customers, but it is her interest in her employees that drives her passion for the industry. “I want to share the automotive industry with others, both by mentoring in the shop with the next generation and by volunteering in the industry.”

Passion might not be a strong enough word to describe her attitude and commitment to her business and employees. And there's the rare personal compassion that she wears on her sleeve that separates her from most employers. There's no better way to illustrate that than to look at a recent challenge she and her team faced.

“Watching a key employee have the heartache of a sick baby ... Watching him spend the last two weeks in a Boston hospital ... not knowing how to fix things,” Larson empathizes. “Our heart aches for him and his family, and all the while the shop is extremely busy. Our team of five, down a key employee, pulled the extra weight to keep our customers happy. The team worked overtime and business trips got canceled ... all very minor compared to baby Mason's problem.”



The staff showcases the waiting room and employee lounge.

This heartfelt investment in her employees' lives made it easier for Larson to form a team that could run the business with or without her being present. She needs the freedom to be able to attend industry functions and not have to worry about how things are going back at the shop. But this wasn't achieved just because she cares about her employees — it took a lot of hard work on her part, most of which was mentoring employees and setting up specific procedures.

“Documentation of everything, keeping the shop clean and organized are the main tools, as well as everybody working together,” Larson stresses.

And there is a payoff when everything works well. Monthly bonuses are awarded to all employees when the shop goal is reached.

One important goal is purchasing the right equipment. The process Larson uses involves the entire team. “Research is done by all, advice solicited from all and then narrowed down to a final choice,” she stresses. “This approach was used this year to acquire our new Hunter alignment machine and a strut compressor, assuring that everyone is happy with the choice of equipment they are using.”

### Staying More Than Busy

Recognizing the importance of involving her employees so that she can manage and mentor them effectively is a direct result of her industry involvement by attending industry meetings, conventions and events.

How involved is she? Picture her in a NASCAR driver's suit, but instead of corporate logos, her suit would be covered with the organizations that she either belongs to or with which she volunteers her time. She's been a member of ASA for 15 years; the New England Service Station and Automotive Repair Association for three years; and the Car Care Council Women's Board for four years.

Now take a deep breath. She serves on the following: ASA's Mechanical Division Operations Committee (four years); UniSelect's Auto Service Plus National Consumer Executive Council (three years) and local CEC chairperson (one year); Askpatty.com Automotive Expert Advisor Panel (four years); North Shore Technical High School's Automotive Technology Advisory Board (three years); and iATN as a contributing member (15 years).



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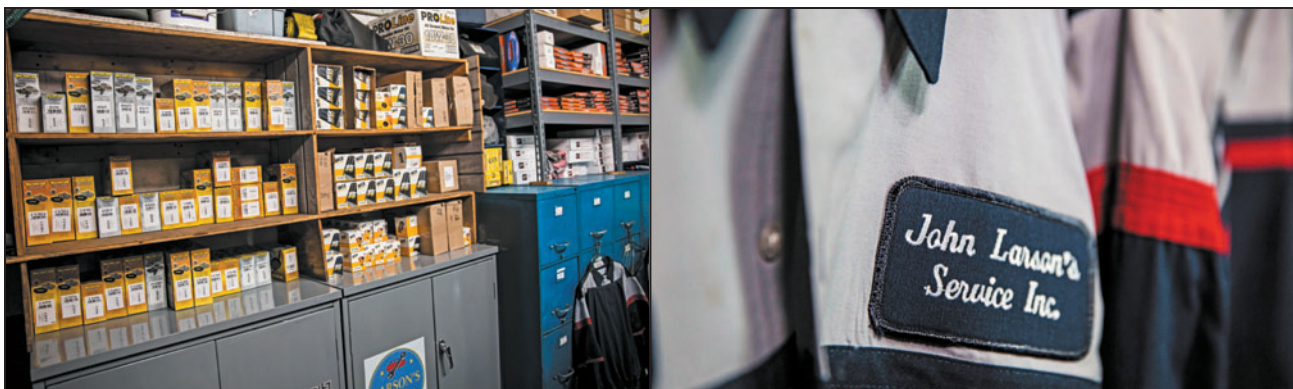


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(Left) The back parts room is shown. (Right) The team wears patches to carry on John Larson's legacy and all he taught them.

It is this kind of involvement that has led to a deep understanding of how to run a shop. Larson's was one of the first shops in the industry to offer an appointment maintenance program for its clients, which has been working well for the last 15 years.

"We see our clients two times a year for a complete, head-to-toe check over, which they schedule six months in advance — just like a dentist," she says intently. "Our clients adore the

convenience of this program, keeping their vehicles in tip-top shape and, of course, we love how it stabilizes our car count, which stabilizes our business."

This program is so successful that more than 90 percent of Larson's clients leave with an appointment card for the next six-month check-up. Realizing that people forget appointments, Larson hired a marketing firm that monitors appointments and sends email reminders to clients.

But it still is all about her employees. She knows that to keep them happy and to keep them working well with customers, they need ongoing training, which she covers financially. This includes SEMA, AAPEX, CARS, VISION and TST, among others.

Larson is about as astute as they come when it comes to Internet marketing. She says that consumer reviews are the new "word of mouth" and is imperative to the shop's success.



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TOP SHOPS 2013 ➤ LARSON'S SERVICE



Taylor Hill, service advisor, (right) consults with technician Brandon Benton.

"Having great reviews, answering them and having an active Internet presence are crucial to our marketing efforts," she exclaims. "We adore the educated consumer calling our shop after researching on the Internet. I look at it this way when they call — they already know us, who we are and what we do and that they want the services we provide. It's a win/win!"

Although Larson is a hands-on owner, her marketing firms keep a close watch of the company's social media sites.

"One of our marketing companies offers a service to post Tweets and relevant posts on our Facebook page, while linking to and monitoring those all-important customer reviews," she explains. "We also use Facebook

as much as possible to keep clients and friends involved and updated on what's going on at the shop and in the community, along with providing some education, and just as important — having some fun!"

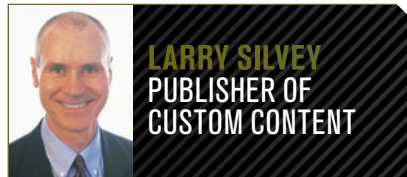
Speaking of the community, Larson is steeped in it. She says her shop is a frequent location for fundraiser car washes for local school programs and neighborhood yard sales. To make them more enticing, gift certificates for raffles and charity events are provided. Moreover, the shop has hosted DARE fundraisers, as well as both the Cub Scout and Girl Scout field trips for their young members to earn badges.

On a personal basis, Larson has volunteered for many community programs, including local jazz festivals, city hall concerts and seasonal activities such as the community's Fourth of July celebration.

Although faced with the loss of her husband — among the worst kind of tragedy anyone could face — Larson is one of the most positive and upbeat people in the business. And there's no better way to end this article than with her signature phrase, "Have a fun day!"



Brandon Benton works in the main building's bays.



**LARRY SILVEY**  
PUBLISHER OF  
CUSTOM CONTENT

Larry Silvey is president of his own motor vehicle marketing communications agency called Larry Silvey Media LLC. A 30-year industry veteran, his experience runs the gamut of the motor vehicle industry in publishing, research, education, and marketing and public relations.

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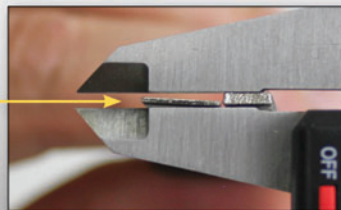
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## TOP SHOPS 2013

# REAPING THE REWARDS

STRIVING TO BE THE BEST MEANS AWARDS ARE EARNED AND CUSTOMERS BEGIN TO LINE UP FOR SERVICE.

BY LARRY SILVEY | PUBLISHER OF CUSTOM CONTENT

It is no surprise Rad Air Complete Car Care and Tire Centers, with its 10 shops in Northeast Ohio, was chosen as a Top Shop. After all, this ASE Blue Seal business was our Top Shop in 2011 and has been a finalist in 2010 and 2012. And, yes, the shops that qualify (due to time in business) are A+

rated by the BBB. Add to that, Rad Air has been designated an Ohio Motorist/AAA Approved Auto Centers since the program's inception in Cleveland 13 years ago and an Ohio E-Check certified emissions repair center since 1996.

Whew! Rad Air has earned the Angie's List Super Service Award two years in a row, was named Best Auto Repair in the local Fox channel's Hot



The Rad Air of Westlake team comprises (front row, from left) Roz Cuffari, Dino Cuffari; (middle row) Brittany Gumucio, Scott Duffy, Dillan Baker, Dave Giuttari, Andrew Tompkins, Mike Barran; (back row) Andy Fiffick and Tom Warmuth.

### AT A GLANCE

#### RAD AIR COMPLETE CAR CARE

Shop name

ANDY FIFFICK

Owner

WESTLAKE, OHIO

Location

10 / 38

No. of shops / Years in business

72 / 5 (OVERALL / WESTLAKE)

Total employees / Technicians

4,085 SQ. FEET (WESTLAKE)

Shop size

6 (WESTLAKE)

Number of bays

63 (WESTLAKE)

Average vehicles per week

\$404 (WESTLAKE)

Average weekly repair ticket

\$9.3 MILLION (OVERALL)

Annual gross revenue

ASE BLUE SEAL, AAA, BBB, MACS

Affiliations



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Photos: Rad Air Complete Car Care





List Contest numerous times and took home the BBB Torch Award twice.

But CEO Andy Fiffick and his 10 shop managers don't rest on their laurels. Rather, they embrace a basic business philosophy that recognizes the importance of both customers and employees, which has brought them great success for 38 years. In essence, they earn each customer's business every day and treat employees like the professionals they are.

"Concerning customers, we teach our staff there are three golden rules," Fiffick says. "Fix the car right the first time, charge a fair price and make sure the client is happy. Bottom line, we take care of our clients first. Profit and everything else is secondary."

That is underscored by the fact Rad Air doesn't rely on SPIFF programs, incentives, quotas or commissions to push employees to sell more service. This approach allows employees to focus on customer needs while knowing they will take home a decent paycheck. Moreover, Fiffick says that ensures long-term survival; indeed, about 84 percent of customers return.

It is this basic fairness, low stress approach, and the emphasis on each employee's contribution that attracts and retains employees. "We treat them with respect, dignity ... and like fam-

ily members," Fiffick emphasizes. "We never forget that they are the reason we grow and prosper."

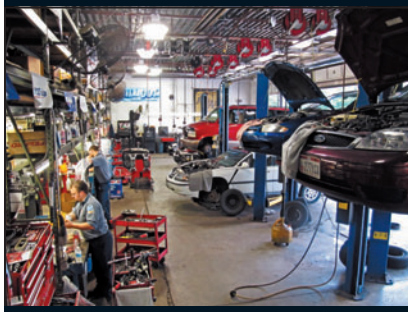
Fiffick and his managers work with each employee to reach their full potential, as well as keep them up-to-date on the latest technologies so they don't become bored or complacent. Ongoing training is a requirement that allows each technician to become the best technician they can be.

This is not a hit-or-miss proposi-

tion, rather a deliberate, well-thought-out program administered by Tom Warmuth, Rad Air's vice president of operations. In addition to using affiliate programs, Warmuth brings in some big name trainers in the industry so that Rad Air's technicians are prepared to work on all makes and models. Additionally, Fiffick always has valued special training events by sending employees to the MACS Convention, AAPEX, SEMA, CARS and ACDelco



Shown is the client service counter. Dino Cuffari is on the phone, while Tom Warmuth is on the computer.



The service bays looking to the south.



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Dillan Baker changes out a noisy idler pulley on a Jeep.



Mike Barran checks an oxygen sensor output voltage on laptop.

training. Not surprisingly, Fiffick is CEO and chairman of the board for MACS Worldwide.

## Staying On Trend

Though Fiffick doesn't use incentives to drive sales, he offers bonuses to employees who update their education outside company requirements, such as the GM ASEP program. Additionally, he says one technician each month is chosen to be featured on the company's website series "Meet the Mechanic."

The importance of his employees spills over into how Fiffick markets his business. "Our greatest marketing tool is our expert employees who calm client (a term Fiffick prefers) concerns, explain repairs and provide excellent client services," he says. He goes on to give his employees the ultimate compliment. "Because of my employees' performance, the majority of our new clients are referred by a friend."

Over the years, Rad Air has used traditional marketing such as advertising on TV and radio, and publishing a newsletter. Even better is the local TV and radio stations have come to Fiffick to speak as an automotive expert.

Showing off its marketing creativity, Rad Air employees have implemented a text message advertising program. This consists of Rad Air sending a text

message special to one-third of its contact list every three weeks, while each client receives an offer every 60 days.

"Using this technique, we are able to stay top of mind with our clients, control our costs and prevent annoying the customer with monthly text messages."

With that type of inventive marketing, it's not surprising Fiffick has a penchant for social media to promote the business. In fact, he is a social media leader with more than 3,000 Facebook "Likes." Because of its importance, Rad Air has a social media marketing/branding manager, Brittany Gumucio, running the program. Facebook is used to share company updates, news about the company's shops and technicians, as well as fun industry findings.

Social media has been an effective marketing tool, but Fiffick hasn't lost sight of getting people together with special events, including Wine, Women & Wheels, Protect Your ID Days and a weekly Car Show & Cruise-In.

With this kind of social media marketing, it's predictable Fiffick would have a substantial website presence. He uses keywords, meta descriptions, alt and H1 tags to improve the ability for search engines to rank the website, but he always keeps the key element of providing useful information front and center. He does this by creating relevant articles about Rad Air's services, community involvement, helpful tips, timely giveaways, online coupons and key info about his team.

Though Fiffick would say their loaner program is a customer service, it is an attractive marketing piece as well. With most dealers now providing free loaners to their repair customers, Fiffick has been ahead of the game with this convenient service by offering them for most of his time as a shop owner.

Fiffick is an unabashed car guy. At the age of 6, he was working in his dad's garage and already dreaming about owning his own shop. In pursuit of his dream, Fiffick spent two years in his high school's automotive program, which led him to attend Lincoln Technical Institute to become a Master Technician. But he knew he needed some business training if his dream was to become a reality, so he went on to earn an associate's degree in business management.

Fiffick's opportunity came in 1986 when Rad Air, a radiator and air conditioning specialty shop, became available for acquisition. Not only did he purchase it, but he repositioned it by renaming it Rad Air Complete Car Care so that he could attract a wider swath of customers. Obviously, it was the right move to broaden services since he has grown the one location to 10 with 72 employees. His newest location just opened in October 2012, and he has plans to open two more by next spring.

Fiffick is optimistic by nature and a ball of energy but he is not Pollyannaish. He understands the business is changing rapidly and he needs to change with it.

"There's no doubt the future of our industry will be built on maintenance and service and less on repairs," Fiffick explains. "Today's vehicles are simply manufactured better, have fewer failures and are lasting longer. Additionally, maintenance and service intervals are increasing and every system and sub-system is monitored and controlled electronically, both of which reduce major failures."

Last, but not least, is Fiffick's commitment to community involvement. Each of his shops participates in companywide philanthropic events, as well as individual shop programs where each shop sponsors its area's local school athletic programs, car washes and church events.

In addition, Rad Air sponsors a Toys for Tots program, and local food and blanket drives. And over the last two years, Fiffick has added the Muscular Dystrophy Association to his support list and became a corporate sponsor of the All-American Soap Box Derby. *TL*



**LARRY SILVEY**  
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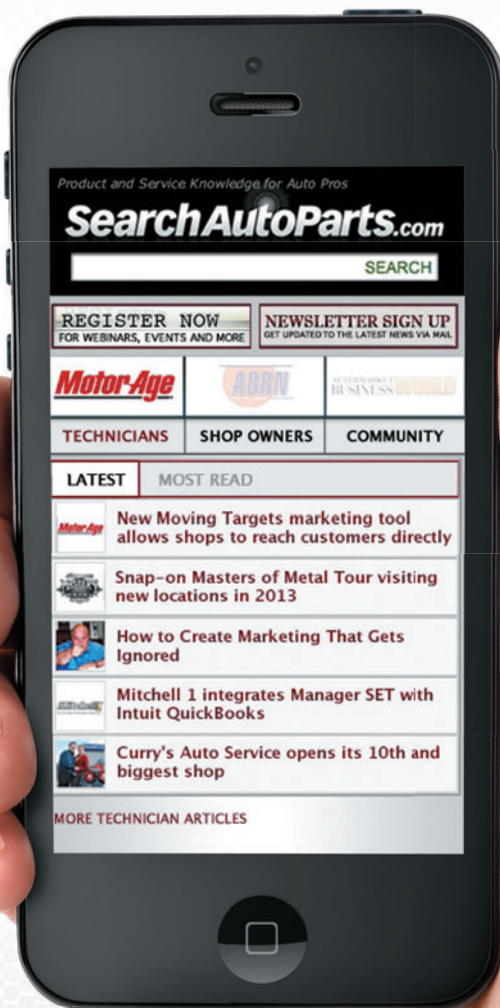
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## TOP SHOPS 2013

# A WINDOW TO THE SHOP

GIVING A LITTLE EXTRA SHINES THROUGH THE LARGE VIEWING WINDOW AT THIS CUSTOMER-CENTRIC SHOP.

BY JAMES E. GUYETTE | NEWS CORRESPONDENT

Being named to the top 10 in the 2013 *Motor Age* Top Shops Contest is icing on the cake for owners Steve Yacovone and Jürgen Ankert, as Sun Valley Imports of Tempe, Ariz., also celebrates its 20th anniversary.

"The 20 years went by like 20 days," says Yacovone, marveling at their

beautiful facility set amid a spectacular scenic backdrop.

Overlooking a golf course and the famed Camelback Mountain, "the shop has views that everyone would die for in their houses — so there's a 'wow' factor" as patrons bring in their high-end European vehicles for repairs, according to Yacovone.

"We bought a body shop five years ago — it's ultra-modern, and we



The Sun Valley team is (from left) Jürgen Ankert, Derek Lomax, Barry Breymeyer, Don Raymond, Steve Yacovone and Jared Chief.

### AT A GLANCE

#### SUN VALLEY IMPORTS

Shop name

#### STEVE YACOVONE & JÜRGEN ANKERT

Owners

#### TEMPE, ARIZ.

Location

1 / 20

No. of shops / Years in business

6 / 3

Total employees / Technicians

8,750 SQUARE FEET

Shop size

8

Number of bays

26

Average vehicles per week

\$540

Average weekly repair ticket

\$900,000

Annual gross revenue

ASA, BBB

Affiliations



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Photos: Sun Valley Imports







Service advisor Barry Breymer works with a customer.



Jürgen Ankert runs the parts department and the shop.

bought it from the guy who designed it." The collision repair element was at first retained on a sublease basis as the partners retooled portions of the building for mechanical work. Later the body shop business was brought in-house based on Yacovone's previous five-year stint at a major insurance carrier that had an extensive training program.

Grossing \$900,000 annually from eight bays averaging \$540 per ticket, the shop's walls of glass signal the full-service transparency that Ankert and Yacovone display when dealing with their customers.

"Sitting in the waiting room, you can see every bay in the shop," says Yacovone, describing the clarity that the clientele experiences. "It's just customer satisfaction. We've gained their faith and trust. We explain what happened, what needs to be done and we try to make the price palatable. We try to give them choices about spending their money, because we're consumers, too. The job needs to be done right, and the customer needs to not have to do that repair again."

A core value at the company is to "give a little something extra that is not expected."

"To us, good customer service means going beyond expectations. We train our staff that when they are servicing someone's car and the door is squeaking, even if the car is there for something else, just put some oil on the door so it doesn't squeak anymore," says Yacovone. "That extra care is what's going to make the experience beyond expectations. It sounds so cliché, but that's what customers want and that's what sets us apart. It's the little things that make a difference to our customers. We strive to serve our customers to this level every day."

"Another core value is to 'educate the customer.' Many years ago, I noticed that when a customer drops off his or her car for service and decides to wait, he or she often takes a walk around to the service bays to see what's going on with their car. We started making it a practice to take the customers back to the service bay and point out where the failure was and what it would take to fix it. That wasn't something that was common practice or accepted in the industry. But we took that to one more level," Yacovone continues.

"Many auto repair shops have beautiful customer waiting areas, but few have a view into their shop," he observes.

"It makes a great working environment, as a business can't have unprofessional employees when there's a viewing window. That is our philosophy; the customer should see and understand what's happening. It goes back to our value of educating the customer."

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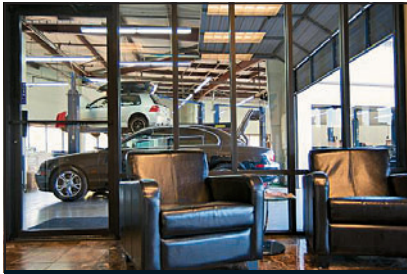
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The viewing window off the waiting area.



The clean interior of the shop.

"We won't use 'cheapie' parts," Yacovone declares, especially when German vehicles are on the lift.

"My partner Jürgen is from Germany, and he likes to use parts from The Fatherland. We always joke around, 'Show me your papers,' to ensure that a part's quality is assured," he reports, adding that the shop does seek less costly alternatives when available. Two key German manufacturers routinely compete on price.

"With our experience, if there's a part, and we can save the customer some money, we'll use that part," says Yacovone.

"Jürgen had extensive education in the repair and service of German-made vehicles, having earned a master's degree in automotive technology in Sinsheim, Germany," he notes. "I call him 'doctor' because his master's degree is equivalent to a Ph.D. in the U.S., and Jürgen certainly is our 'Doctor of Cars' with over 35 years of training and experience straight from the manufacturers."

Yacovone's interest in European cars began as a youngster. "When I was in my late teens, I bought an old Porsche as a restoration project. My frequent trips to the Porsche dealer for parts prompted them to hire me, and even though I was going to school to be a nurse anesthetist, I succumbed to my passion for Porsche and continued night school in business while working as a service advisor for the Porsche dealership."

Ankert and Yacovone later became acquainted while they both worked at a family-owned Porsche dealership in the Phoenix area. It became time to move on when the owners "sold to a conglomerate" that implemented a series of negative policies, according to Yacovone.

"Our customers were the ones who started the thought process of starting our own business, because they were not happy with the changes," he recalls. "Our customers had had dealings with this type of business model before — it was profit-profit-profit. It was a drastic change. They went from a family-owned facility to a corporate, profit-making facility."

The clientele "did not want to lose the personal relationship and level of service that we had been providing them. They encouraged, even pushed, us to open a business." Thus was born Sun Valley Imports in 1993, originally located at a high-traffic auto mall site until the duo purchased the sleek body shop building. Customers and technicians alike have remained loyal over the years, following Ankert and Yacovone as they set about building the enterprise, which carries a Better Business Bureau A+ rating.

### Daily involvement

Out on the floor, they have emulated management procedures found in large dealership operations. "We use a dispatch system in the shop that consists of a wall-sized dry erase board with each job being followed through its various stages," Yacovone explains. "We also utilize a technician time clock for each technician that tracks the job he is on and the ones he has finished. Estimates are accomplished by the shop foreman and service advisor. This helps to increase productivity with the technicians."

Potential equipment buys originate from the technicians with oversight by Ankert, who serves as shop foreman. "They have seen a need from their daily involvement with repairs. We then assess the frequency of use and return on investment before we make a purchase," says Yacovone. "We have a separate savings account used for most tool purchases, and then we purchase as-needed after doing our due diligence. We also utilize lease-to-

own for some of our major equipment purchases.

Attitude is the main attribute sought when a candidate is being sized up for employment.

"I can look past a lot of things if a guy or woman is excited about coming to work here," Yacovone says. "Sometimes I take someone without as much training because I train them anyway. I like people with a smile on their face who are eager to come to work — and the customers are glad to see them."

Air conditioning is among the most common repairs, as are problems created by the relentless sunshine that beats down in Tempe's desert locale. "When I moved here 30 years ago, you had to cover your dashboard because they would crack within a couple of months," he recounts, adding that OEMs since have done much to develop components that can take the heat. And most motorists keep their vehicles garaged or otherwise in the shade.

Still, though, "rubber and plastic parts fail faster here than in other climates," according to Yacovone. "A lot of times the check engine light is on because of a plastic part in the engine."

At age 63, Yacovone is contemplating retirement, and he encourages others in the industry to consider their own situations. "That has to be a thought even as you enter the business — how to get out of the business; it doesn't go on forever," he advises. "Jürgen and I have worked with an attorney and financial advisor on our succession plan, taking steps to protect each partner in case something were to happen to the other one and putting a plan in place for when we do actually retire." *JL*



A journalism graduate of Ohio University, James E. Guyette has covered the automotive industry since the 1980s after having served in assorted positions at magazines and newspapers. He's owned a few beloved cars in his day, including a customized 1979 Mercury Zephyr.

Follow him in the Workshop at MrJEG



# A NEW TOOL TO LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY

## SNAP-ON TECHANGLE TORQUE WRENCHES

**W**hy is torque important? Vehicle manufacturers have been investing heavily to reduce weight and improve fuel mileage. To help get there, they are using a wide array of materials that have different weights, strengths and oxidation characteristics, as well as improving manufacturing capabilities with higher manufacturing tolerances. All of these specifications are contingent on accurate, consistent torque and angle application.

The new Snap-on® TechAngle® torque wrenches (ATECH) make it faster and easier for service technicians to set or convert torque in any scale, anticipate target torque and slow down as they get closer to the desired torque levels. These innovative wrenches offer superior strength, smooth operation and minimal maintenance, leading to increases in performance and productivity.

One of the major features of the new Snap-on ATECH wrenches is adaptability. ATECH wrenches feature dual progressive LEDs which allow the operator to see active torque at various work positions. Mechanical torque wrenches that “click” are instantaneous signals that a user must react to and the same goes with audio signals on electronic wrenches. Dual progressive LEDs provide a huge advantage by allowing the operator to anticipate torque targets. Much like NHRA driver Cruz Pedregon anticipates launch from the colored “Christmas Tree” light on a drag strip, a service technician can anticipate torque with the ATECH because the dual progressive LEDs give a wider field of view, allowing the service tech to slow down as he or she gets closer to the desired torque level.

The large backlit LCD screen numbers become larger and bolder when active torque and or angle is applied, making it easier to read during use. The colors give the user the ability to anticipate torque and are visible in almost any work position: on the ground, below a lift or contorting around vehicle components. The user still can see and react to the LEDs given Snap-on’s unique design. Regardless of ambient noise, light conditions or orientation, the LEDs will provide a great means of applying the right amount of torque and or angle the first time.

Unlike mechanical wrenches, an ATECH wrench provides immediate feedback to the technician when too much torque is applied, as the progressive LEDs will run to “red” and the screen will show the actual torque applied. This is an important accuracy feature that mechanical wrenches don’t provide.

One challenge technicians have is how to figure out what affects torque. Adding an adaptor requires a calculation to interpret the added length and resultant torque difference. Snap-on TechAngle torque wrenches have a feature that



allows the user to enter this data directly into the wrench, then automatically calculate the right torque.

There is also much confusion over torque conversions when performing service work. Vehicles today have many different units of torque measurements such as in.-lbs. (inch-pounds), ft.-lbs. (foot-pounds), Nm (Newton Meters), dNm (Deci Newton Meters), Kgcm (Kilograms x centimeters) and angle. Kgcm and dNm measurements are used mostly in industrial and equipment applications. Having the right torque wrench that allows the operator to select from a wide selection of measurements, while automatically converting the torque values, is imperative to applying the right amount of torque. The Snap-on ATECH can easily toggle between these units of measure and automatically convert the reading for the user.

Service technicians must remember the numerous torque and or angle parameters for specific jobs. Over time, chances are techs will perform the same jobs frequently. Remembering the torque requirements for those jobs can be extremely challenging. The Snap-on ATECH features 10 presets (like on a car radio) with the ability to customize numerous functions. By utilizing the presets on an ATECH wrench, techs will save time and reduce the chance of error.

Torque and angle in the service bay are critically important and figuring out torque can be a challenging process. Snap-on TechAngle torque wrenches eliminate guess work and provide service technicians the new tools they need to apply accurate, consistent torque and angle to meet manufacturers’ specifications.

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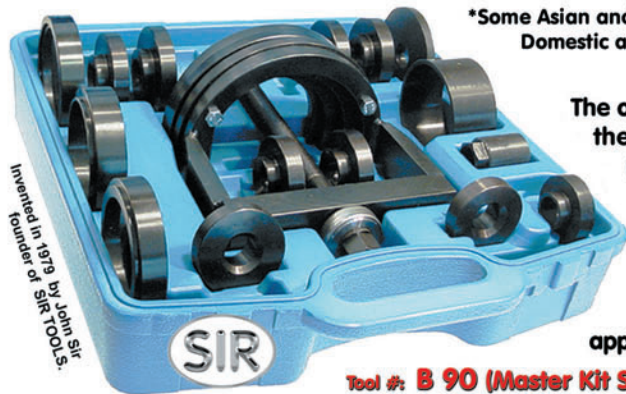
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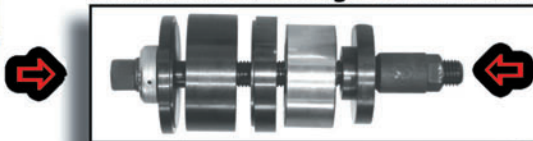
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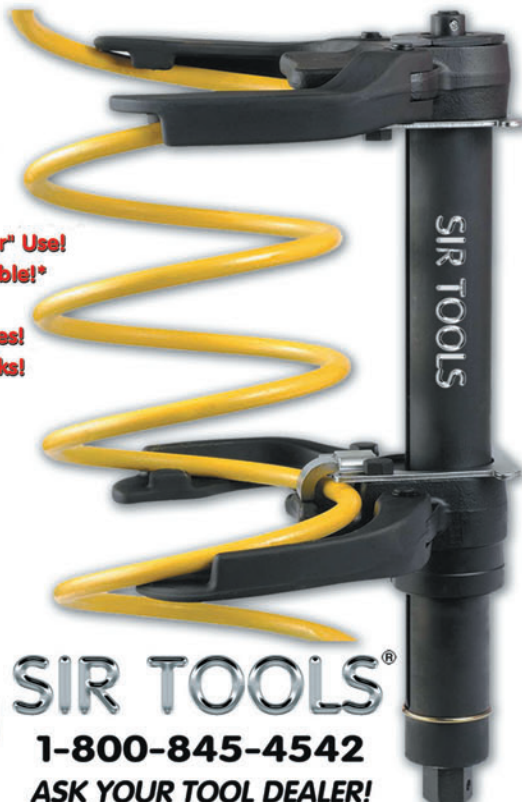
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AutoEnginuity, LLC announces the release of the Service Reset Tool for BMW / MINI 2001-2013 MYs. The Service Reset Tool is the first of its kind to perform the CBS oil reset and battery replacement registration without a personal computer. The Service Reset Tool can perform both the Service Interval Reset (SIR) and Conditional Based Service (CBS) oil resets and perform the battery replacement registration feature for late-model BMW / MINIs. The AutoEnginuity Reset Service Tool does not require a personal computer, nor does it require you to enter the make, model or year of the vehicle. With a push of the button, the hardware will intelligently determine the correct protocol for your vehicle and send the appropriate commands — it's a true one-touch reset tool.



AutoEnginuity

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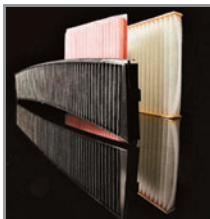
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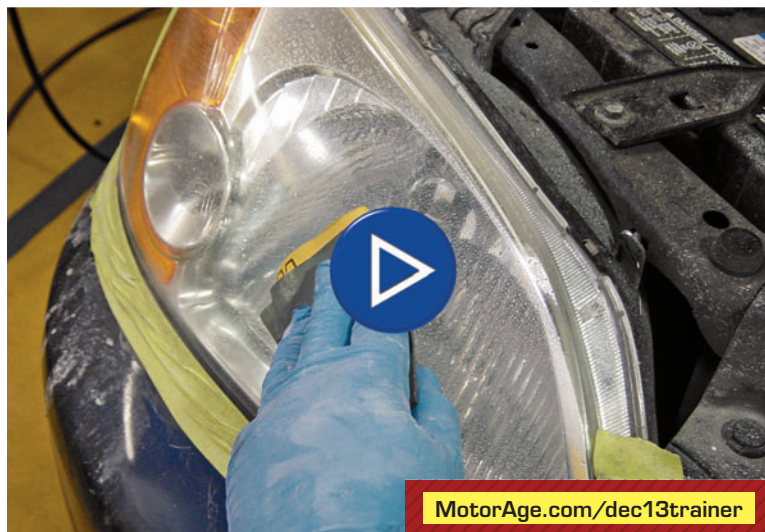
BY PETE MEIER

Technical Editor

The latest numbers show that the average age of the nation's "fleet" is 11.4 years. In bay speak, that means people are keeping their cars a lot longer than ever before, and that should be opening the door to increased maintenance and repair sales in your shop.

One often-overlooked area of automotive maintenance is headlight reconditioning. The polycarbonate lenses used on modern headlight assemblies take a pounding from the sun's UV rays, acid rain and other factors, and that leads to the loss of the protective sealant and the oxidation of the plastic. This yellowish discoloration reduces the light reaching the highway by as much as 80 percent, according to some sources, decreasing your customers' ability to see. No, headlight reconditioning is not a "wallet flushing" service, but rather can be one that actually enhances your customers' safety.

There are a number of kits on the market aimed primarily at the do-it-yourselfer, but the process is simple enough. Mask off the surfaces surrounding the headlight to be reconditioned to protect the car's paint first. Then, wet sand the lens to remove the



oxidized, discolored material. Start with 500 grit and finish with 1,000 to keep the surface smooth and free of scratches. Hand sanding is time-consuming, but it minimizes the risk of paint damage and is an easier way to deal with curved surfaces.

Once the majority of the surface is clean, switch to a fine liquid polishing compound to remove any remaining traces. Microfiber clothes can be used to clean the lenses of all traces of the process. You'll have totally removed any remaining traces of the original sealant, so it's a good idea to choose a product that includes a protective sealant for final application.

Want to see the process from start to finish? Watch this month's edition of The Trainer. [MotorAge.com/dec13trainer](http://MotorAge.com/dec13trainer)

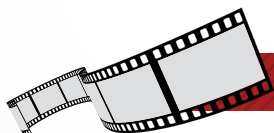
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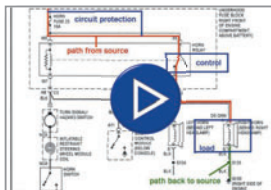
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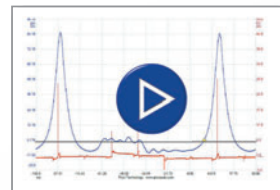
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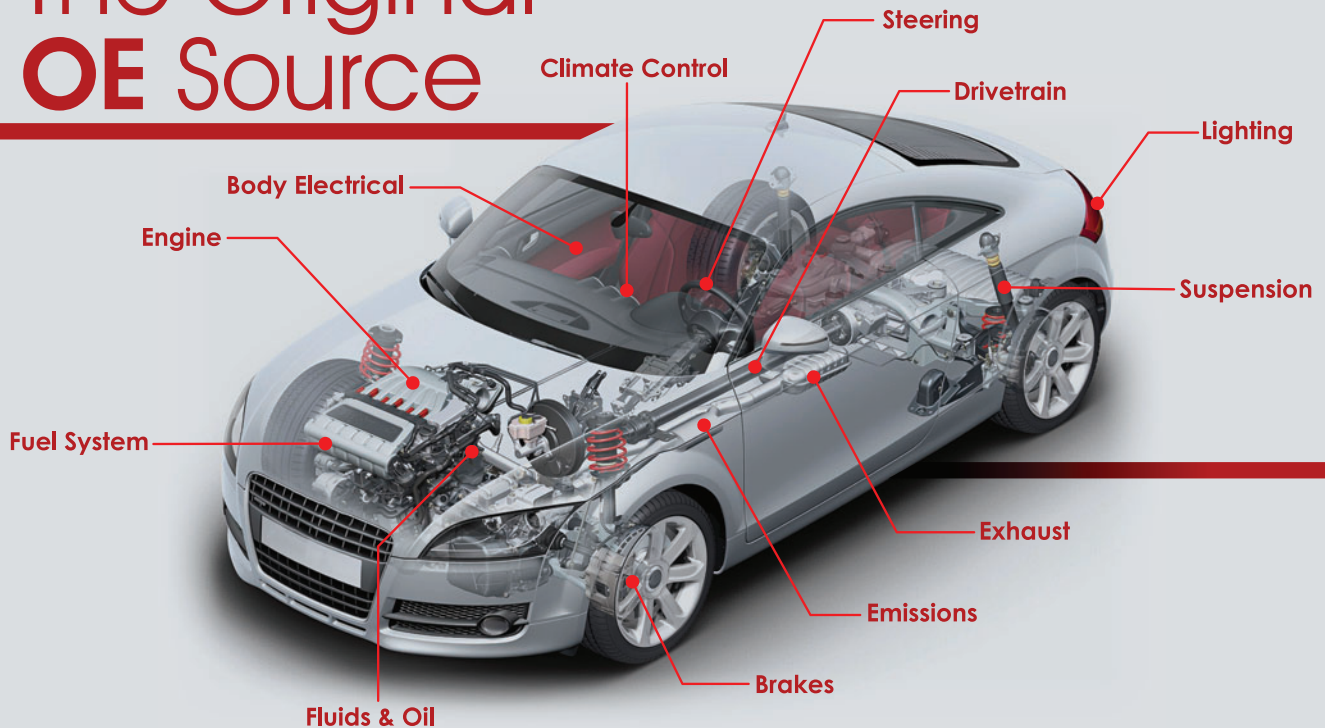
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