Automotive Repair – Change is the Name of the Game!

Better-built cars are driving a new reality in the automotive repair world. Are you still trying to be successful “fixing” cars? Maintenance -- for both vehicles and customer relationships -- is the new model for success.

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New technologies drive higher quality

The automotive industry has undergone a significant shakeup… for the better! New cars are more reliable than ever before. And that’s despite the fact that they are also more complex than ever before. The thing about technology is that it feeds on itself. Innovations build on each other and changes come faster and faster. Today, it seems as if new technologies occur with every new model year.

At the same time, the economic reality is that more people are driving their older vehicles longer. What does that mean for the average repair shop? It means that waiting for repair jobs to come to you doesn’t work anymore.

Success means recognizing a new reality!

Scheduled maintenance is the profit center that is here to stay, and that may mean changing the way you do business. Especially when it comes to building relationships with your customers.

ATI (Automotive Training Institute), a highly regarded training and consulting firm, says, “The game changed while you were busy fixing cars.” ATI’s instructors teach shop owners to stop aiming at repairs, which they call the “wrong target.” In the competitive automotive service business, repairs just won’t cut it anymore.

Besides, cars needing fewer repairs, increased competition is another dynamic driving a transformation in the auto service business. In just seven years – 2002 to 2009 – 9,200 shops went out of business in the U.S.* Between 1998 and 2010 there were 43,000 fewer service bays.** Every auto repair business is looking for ways to bring in customers – and keep the ones they have.

Here are some factors conspiring against you:

- Cars today don’t break as often
- Many repairs are more complex and less efficient to fix
- Manufacturers are promoting extended service intervals and fewer preventive maintenance requirements
- Extended warranties are heavily promoted
- New car dealer have learned to be more competitive

If you are waiting for repairs to drive through your bay doors, you are relying on an “event driven” business model. You have little control over your work mix. You do what lands on your doorstep.

From emergency fillings to scheduled cleanings

The dentistry business used to work like that – waiting for “repair work” to walk in. Fillings, extractions, root canals. Then, fluoride was added to municipal water supplies. People became more aware of the need for dental hygiene. They learned to floss. Toothpaste became more effective. Cavities virtually disappeared. Dental associations recognized that “repair-oriented” appointments were declining. Their world was changing. The industry responded quickly and developed strategies to protect dental practices from going the way of the public phone booth.

Now, dentists focus on maintenance, prevention and cosmetic dentistry. Before you leave the office, your dental hygienists schedules an appointment six months in advance. Vacations can be
scheduled, and everyone leaves the office at a reasonable hour to go home and spend time with their families. A dentist’s workday is no longer event-driven; it is schedule-driven.

**So, what do you do first?**

Educate your customers about the importance of scheduled maintenance: From transmission service to timing belt replacement. From oil change to tire rotation. From windshield wipers to replacing the cabin air filter. From seasonal inspections to preparation for a road trip. You know what needs to be done, but you need to get your customers on board.

Start with information at the counter:

- Maintenance Schedules and Tables
- Technical Service Bulletins
- Courtesy Inspection Forms
- System Descriptions and Diagrams
- Timing Belt Replacement Tables
- Props, samples, posters, third-party validation of needed services

Most customers want to be informed of their car’s service needs. If the vehicle is new, they want to keep their warranty in force, while protecting the resale value. If the vehicle is older, they want to keep it running safely, reliably and efficiently. Once you empower them to make the decision, they join with you in a common goal -- maintaining their vehicle.

**Automate the process**

Get a website. Today, most consumers search for goods and services on the Internet. Make sure you use a system that optimizes consumer searches, so your shop ranks high in the search and becomes more visible. Turn Internet searches into customers. Include customer testimonials to persuade drivers that your shop is their best option.

Preschedule future work and install software that automatically sends out email reminders. None of this is very expensive anymore, when compared with the cost of doing nothing. It simply means asking your customers for their email addresses. They probably expect it and will usually comply.

Discuss a car care strategy with your preferred customers, and create a “customer type” notation in your customer database. Create a page on your website that lets your customers view their service history. Start to help your customers accept scheduled auto maintenance the same way they accept regularly scheduled dental cleanings.

**Courtesy Checks**

Along with scheduled maintenance, courtesy checks are an important potential revenue source. Consumers today expect complimentary courtesy check as a normal component of the maintenance service. Often, components in need of legitimate repairs are uncovered during courtesy checks: brakes, hoses, belts, tires or leaking power water pumps. Courtesy checks are most effective when they are formalized and defined: “30-point courtesy check,” etc.
Conclusion

Technology and a focus on quality have made vehicles extremely reliable. Unless a shop owner is willing to work long hours for low wages, a shop can no longer succeed on repairs alone. Regularly scheduled maintenance and an emphasis on business management are the forces that drive profitability in today’s competitive world.

*AAIA 2011 Aftermarket Analysis
**Based on Lang Marketing 2010 Report