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**The following article was written by Heather M. Sumpter
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MUST DO: MARKETING ACTIVITIES FOR YOUR AUTO REPAIR SHOP

Many repair shops today are owned by technicians or service writers who grew tired of the daily grind of working for someone else, and decided to go in their own direction. Oftentimes the shop is a family business that has been handed down for half a century. Yet some the most successful automotive repair shops are not owned by the best techs in the business, but rather, they are owned by some of the best business professionals and those with an eye for marketing. Why? Because although you may be an ASE certified technician or Master Mechanic with 20 years of experience, knowing how to best market it can be an even bigger hurdle to overcome on the road to your shop's overall success. Here are some tips on how you can get started or simply improve your shop's marketing plans and start generating more business.

Do your research! Before you launch a marketing campaign, you need to first figure out who your customers are so that you know how to reach them.

Start by finding out who your potential customers are and learn everything about them -income, interests, habits- keeping in mind that they may be residents that are just down the street or commuters who work at a nearby business park. One shop was advertising on a male-dominated rock station and not seeing any results. Once they learned that more than 80% of car care maintenance/service decisions are made by women, they switched to a female-driven format and saw results instantly.

For established shops, use any and all data available to you from your shop management platform to see where you may be losing customers, as well as what your "best" customers look like in terms of demographics.

Research your competitors and what they are currently doing to drive their business, including their rates and specials. Sometimes a simple drop in your labor rates or creating package type specials are all you need to do to get the bays filled.

Get an understanding of who your brand is, what you represent as a shop and what differentiates you among the others in your area. Once you know what makes your shop so unique, drive that message home in all you do. For example, if your shop is different because you have bi-lingual service writers key in on that and tailor your marketing message and medium accordingly. If your shop has a unique feature, such as shuttle service to a local shopping mall or an on-site kids playground, use that to leverage your brand and show what makes your local shop special in the eyes of potential customers.

Take care of your existing customers. Whether it be by creating a customer loyalty program or an e-mail/snail-mail database, offering bounce-back and loyalty programs such as these keep your customers engaged, thinking of you and wanting to come back.

Implement a hands-on customer follow-up program with your employees. After a car has been serviced or had repairs performed, personally call the owner to say thank you and to follow up on the repair to see how the vehicle is running. This will help set your shop apart from your competitors

Utilize comments cards. The best I have seen are postcards that hang from the rearview mirror. The cards feature pre-paid postage and explain why the customer's utmost honesty and open feedback is far more helpful than sugar-coating their experience or simply not responding at all. If you can, use comment cards that offer a bounce-back reward to the customer as a thank you for their time and their recent visit.

Most shop management systems, such as Mitchell1 have CRM (Customer Retention Program) built in or available as an add-on. These CRM offerings typically come with automated email or postcard reminders for service that may be due soon, referral offers, bounce back mailings/offers, and even online account creation where a customer can keep track of their vehicle maintenance via an app or online account with automated email service reminders.

See if the customer is willing to schedule their next maintenance service before they leave, possibly at a discounted rate. This is similar to scheduling your next semi-annual dentist visit before you leave the office. No one enjoys having their vehicle maintained, so be willing to go above and beyond to simplify the process and make it automatic and pain-free for your customers.

Make your shop online if you want to exist in the eyes of your customers.

- It's still shocking the number of shops today who still don't have a professional-looking website. If you want to be found, you need to be online. Most people find a new repair shop via search engines, such as Bing or Google. If you don't have a website, you are invisible.
- Watch your online reputation. Even if you are not on social media or may not even have a website, your customers may still be talking about you, only you don't have any way to track this or respond if the feedback is negative. Utilize customer online review sites, such as Yelp, Google+ and Angieslist.com. If you see bad reviews, ask the customer to call you directly and open the dialogue -do NOT delete the review! Customers see this as dishonest, and would much rather see the conversation's resolution online to show that their opinion matters and your shop is committed to service and making the situation right.
- Make sure you are utilizing social media as tool to not only build brand awareness and monitor feedback, but also as a promotion-based tool to directly impact sales. On Facebook, run a campaign that focuses on one specific service to see the impact to your shop's sales. For example, in April focus on oil changes as your feature. You can post videos, tips, stats on the importance, and recommendations about changing your oil throughout the month. Make sure if you are running other types of advertising that you also include this there as well, so your campaign is fully integrated.

Use the resources and tools that are available to you from your parts suppliers. Many WD's and jobbers offer car care membership programs', most of which include valuable resources to help build your brand and increase your sales.

If you choose to join a car care center program, take full advantage of the program elements and use them to your advantage. Most platforms include shop imaging elements, POS signage, location finders, national advertising support, warranty programs, consumer promotions, and bounce-back offers. In addition, many come with amenities such as rebates on your parts purchases, discounts on CRM and marketing tools, deeper parts discounts and loyalty rewards, and access to shop upgrading resources.

Be sure you are familiar with Be Car Care Aware's website, carcare.org, and all of the free resources that are available to your shop. There are many tips and ideas on the site that will help you create excitements in your area such as twice annual check-lane events for car care awareness month.

Be active and visible in your community via local events and media relations. People like to patronize businesses that they have not only heard of but who are an active part of their local communities. Take this to the next level beyond sponsoring a youth baseball team by sponsoring or hosting some promotional events or making yourself available as a resource or expert for local media outlets, such as local news stations, bloggers, car clubs, and radio shows.

Network at any and all community events to help get your name out and start to build your brand of a community partner and expert. This will help establish trust and open countless opportunities for you and your shop in terms of word of mouth referrals. Small business groups are a great way to start to build your network, as in LinkedIn.

Contact your local media outlets and let them know about your shop, not only with a Grand Opening announcement but also for any community events your shop is involved with and stay in touch with them! Many times if a station needs an automotive expert they will take the easy way out by reaching out to members already in their network or someone with whom they are already familiar. Be that expert! It could get you and your shop free mentions and exposure that is priceless to building your customer's trust and your brand's credibility.

Community events can be your sweet spot and typically not cost you a fortune to execute. Great examples of this involvement would be to host a car care clinic for new drivers, offer a women's car care clinic, sponsor a local cruise in or car show, or volunteer your shop for service organizations or scouts. We had a car care center who partnered with a local church each spring for their youth group service project. Single mothers could bring in their cars for a free oil change and discounted wiper blade and air filter replacement, while the youth group washed and vacuumed the cars as part of their required volunteer service hours. Talk about a great way to get some free press!

Reach out to your parts suppliers for potential partnerships for community events. For example, our parts warehouse has partnered with a nearby repair shop to hold a community-wide toy drive for the holidays. We both benefitted from the free media mentions and combining forces allowed the charity to receive more toys for the worthy cause. Two locations, two Facebook pages, two marketing budget meant double the impact for all parties involved.

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