

Shop Owner

It's more than just fixing cars

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Stephens Automotive Earns Rave Reviews with Customer-Centric Focus

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By Colleen Brousil

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"I started out as a specialized Toyota repair facility about 16 years ago," says Stephens. "I had worked at a Toyota dealership for eight years before I started my company, and it just started to work more and more where our customers didn't just have Toyotas, and we felt kind of silly sending them away with their other car after we had worked on their Toyota."

Stephens says that currently just less than 50% of his business comes from work on the Comcast cable

fleet of vans. He sees the Comcast business as not only a secondary profit center but also a second business within a business. "You don't want the retail customer to feel like they are being pushed out for the Comcast people," explains Stephens. "We really are focused on making sure that everybody knows that the retail customer is still very important to us. I have people who are focused in on my retail customers and those service writers have their own crew of people who work on their vehicles."

As the variety of service work performed at Stephens has grown, so too has the size and expertise of his crew. Stephens currently employs a staff of 10 in his state-of-the-art facility featuring seven lifts and one alignment rack.

His two senior-level shop foremen mentor the younger techs and ensure the quality of the work performed at Stephens. "They are like in-house teachers for these guys," he explains. "We've got two really good techs who take the time to make sure that their group is test-driving, that thorough check-throughs are done, that diagnoses are correct and that the repair work is done. At the end, there is always a quality control check to make sure the job was properly done and the problem was fixed."



This in-house mentorship is reinforced with continuing education from providers, including one of Stephens' main tool suppliers that offers both in-house and online training backed up with a service hotline and printed materials. "There's a lot of good information out there, you just need to talk to the right people and get your guys involved with it," says Stephens.

Differentiate Your Shop

Stephens had added another level of customer service, as well as a new profit center, with the addition of a tow truck. Stephens finds that going on the tow calls personally allows him to connect with the Comcast customers in the field to understand the needs of this important business segment.

Customer service is extremely important to the Stephens team. "We have a lot of procedures in place that separates us from your average repair shop," remarks Stephens.

Stephens notes that, “with people’s financial state, it’s good to give them options and to have good communication with a customer. Some people say, ‘fix it, it doesn’t matter what it costs, it’s for my daughter or my wife.’ While others say ‘I want to fix this the absolute cheapest way. If I can’t, maybe I will let the car wait until I have another job.’”

As part of that top-notch service, the service writer places a signed sticker on every ticket that reads, “This car was quality-control test-driven to ensure a quality repair was performed.”

Not only does this final quality check ensure that all repairs are completed correctly, it allows the Stephens team to provide an extra level of service, topping off gas tanks and going the extra mile to ensure the customer is delighted. “It keeps the quality of our repairs up, and it also surprises the customer when he or she looks at their bill and they see the sticker on there,” explains Stephens. “There is the perception they are getting more than what they bargained for. It shows that we really care, and we want to do a good job for them. It gets us rave reviews.”



Multiple Marketing Venues

Customer loyalty and word of mouth have been keys to Stephens’ longevity, but Stephens understands the importance of advertising and the Internet in his marketing plans. The Stephens Automotive website - features a four-minute video tour that introduces prospective clients to the shop, available services and to key members of the Stephens Automotive team. Stephens relates that a customer recently recognized him from the website video in his waiting room. “He told me that watching the video of the shop gave him a good look of who he was going to be dealing with and what to expect when he got there. It put him at ease, and he had a good feeling about the trust factor when he came into our shop.”

The quality of the shop's appearance is also apparent in the website video, and this professional dealership-like environment is important to Stephens.

"Customers can sit in the waiting room and see their vehicle, they can see the professional equipment that we use, and it's a pretty impressive sight for them," says Stephens. "It gives us that dealership look."

Stephens' high standards for all - aspects of his business are apparent, and he turns to industry colleagues and community peers to continuously improve his business. Stephens is a member of the Palatine Execnet, a group of about 45 business owners who meet weekly to talk about one another's businesses. "They have been tremendous help for me and my business," says Stephens.

Stephens also credits his membership in the NCM Service Center Scholars for his consistent improvement. "There are not a lot of business owners out there who can have 20 friends who are in the exact same business to compare numbers to exact numbers and know how well you're doing."

It's that openness to continual improvement that keeps his business thriving and his numbers registering well in the black.



