

Emergency marketing strategies for car count lulls

Getting extra cars during tough times is about tenacity, ingenuity and the basics

If your shop's car count could be better, you might want to listen to Pennsylvania shop owner and ATI coach Mike Bennett explain how he keeps shops as close to capacity as possible. Most smart shop owners have a comprehensive marketing calendar that includes a balance of new customer acquisition efforts in concert with tried and true customer retention efforts. Marketing, by definition, is the total of activities involved in the transfer of goods (or services) from seller to consumer. More clearly defined for our industry, marketing is ANYTHING we do to get cars to our shop. I would bet for the most part, your marketing calendar and strategy does a fair job of keeping your bays full and your techs busy. It is inevitable, though — despite your best efforts, planning and management, that your shop will hit those brief periods where the schedule looks light and the fear of techs wandering around the shop with no cars in the bays looms ever larger.

As a shop owner, I know this very real fear. Honestly, it is more like a panic. It's that thing that keeps us up late at night or causes us to take that test drive by the competition to see how your fellow shops are doing. The phones aren't ringing, and everyone is looking at you for the magic bullet. As a coach, I have gotten the panicked call more times than I care to remember: "We are slow, and I need cars fast!!" Despite the best marketing plan, your shop will inevitably hit those brief periods where the normal reminder postcards or emails just don't seem to be working like they normally do.

Let's face it — we can't control the

weather, the economy, holidays, tax season, government, plagues, wars or elections. I'm sorry to say, but in these moments there is no single magic pill. Getting those couple of extra cars to your bays in these tough times is all about tenacity, ingenuity and yes, the basics. Over the years, we have developed what I like to call Emergency Car Count Strategies. As a procedure, we have a process in place that recognizes low car count situations and triggers a series of actions we take each time to combat the slow phones and get those couple of extra cars in the bays. Below are a few of the most successful immediate and near-term emergency car count actions, as well as some often overlooked longer term actions that I know can work for you.

DESPITE THE BEST MARKETING PLAN, YOUR SHOP WILL INEVITABLY HIT THOSE BRIEF PERIODS WHERE THE NORMAL REMINDER POSTCARDS OR EMAILS JUST DON'T SEEM TO BE WORKING.

Phone mining

Print out the last three months of recommended services or previously declined work. I am sure that most of you have a routine CRM program that touches your customers with either a postcard or email. Reach out directly to these customers and offer a 5 percent discount if they schedule in the next week. This is not discounting

at the counter presentation to get the sale. I am vehemently opposed to that sales tactic, and we have other more successful strategies to deal with a customer's pricing considerations. This is providing a special discount as a follow-up to drive cars to your bays in a period of time you choose when you are looking to fill your bays. It's a "special circumstance" incentive for them and for you. Ninety-five percent of something is better than 100 percent of nothing, right? The script for this phone call sounds something like this: *"Hi, Mr. Smith. I was looking over our notes on the Honda today. I see that when we had it in on (insert visit date) we discussed and recommended (brief review of recommendation and value). I know at the time you weren't quite ready to have that done. The reason for the call today is that I have a few openings in my schedule I would like to fill. As this is an important (service or repair) for the Honda, I thought I might be able to make a mutually beneficial offer. If you would be interested in getting the work done in the next five days, I would like to offer you an additional (discount offer) off the job as a special incentive for scheduling with me today."*

The key to being most effective with the offer is to get your customer on the phone and engaged in a conversation. If you are unable to speak directly to your customer and you have to leave a message, the script is a little different. I have found it most successful and likely to get a return call if the voicemail is something like: *"Hi, Mr. Smith. This is (your name) with (your shop). I needed to speak with you regarding the Honda you had in with us*

on (date and mileage). Could you please give me a call at your earliest convenience at (phone number)?”

Make four-month maintenance reminder phone calls. Look back in your management system history for vehicles that were in for an oil change/maintenance service four to six months ago that have not been back since. Call them up and present the following short-term offer: *“In reviewing your service history, it looks like the '08 Honda should be just about due for its next service at XX miles. The reason for the call today is we have our XX service special (seasonal special), which includes: XX, XX and XX, and it will be expiring in about a week. I wanted to make sure you had the opportunity to take advantage of the special, if you are due, before it expires. We would hate for you to come in in a couple of weeks having not known about the offer and lose out on the savings.”*

If you have fleet customers, now is a good time to call them and see if they need anything done. If you haven't visited or touched base with your fleets, local businesses, hotels, etc., in the last four weeks, then trust me — some have forgotten about you. Just a few weeks ago, my shop had an instant positive experience in revisiting local hotels' front desks and the community college information desks. We have traditionally had great relationships with them and have historically gotten a lot of

referrals. First, we were surprised that in more than a couple of cases there were new personnel that had no idea who we were. Second, we were amazed how quickly we got referrals after visiting them and reintroducing ourselves. Clearly, even those who knew us had “forgotten” who we were. We learned that you should have a list and calendar of fleet and business clients to visit on a four- to six-week rotational schedule.

Blast emails

Almost all of the Customer Retention Management (CRM) companies have now added email blast capabilities for their shops, so contact them if you're a customer to see how you can use this great tool. If you don't have a CRM provider, there are many available that can provide email blast capabilities at a very affordable price. I routinely see shops that use this type of tool generate an additional five or more cars a week. If you use radio, run an ad with a “limited time only” special.

Understanding that the average vehicle is driven between 12K and 15K miles annually and the average oil service is performed at 3K to 5K miles, it would stand to reason you should see your average customer three to four times per year if you are doing all of their service work, right? When was the last time you looked at how many of your existing customers were in for service six to 18 months ago, but may not have been back

in the last six? Almost all management systems allow you to run a report that will list customers by date range of their last visit. I bet you would be shocked by the number of your customers that would fall into this group. In most cases, if a customer has not been back to you in six months they have either missed a needed service, used another provider or they have moved. This can be a very fruitful segment to attack; they know you and will recognize your name.

Exit scheduling

Make sure you're setting the next appointment! Some of our clients use a mystery envelope, which is a great aid to make the exit scheduling process more like a game or contest. When the departing customer makes their next appointment, they receive an envelope with a surprise gift inside. And the gift is valid only if the envelope is opened by the service advisor at that next appointment!

With a review of our Car Count Stabilization Checklist, what basic/staple opportunities are you missing? “Where Have You Been” calls, exit scheduling, taxi certificates? It is called the MUST DO, SHOULD DO list for a reason. If you're not doing something then you're missing out on a huge opportunity.

We know these strategies work! If you would like your own copy of our Car Count Stabilization Checklist, simply go to www.ationlinetraining.com/2017-04 for a limited time. **TZ**

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is the CEO and founder of the Automotive Training Institute. ATI's 115 associates train and coach more than 1,400 shop

owners every week across North America to drive profits and dreams home to their families. This month's article was written with the help of Coach Mike Bennett.

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