

ATI Shoptalk



Issue 4

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Upcoming Courses:

Shop Owners

August 12-14
August 26-28
September 9-11
September 23-25

Service Managers

August 10-11
August 17-18
August 31
September 1
September 21-22

Advanced Shop Owners

August 20-21

Advanced Service Managers

September 30

Alumni Class

September 14-15

Master Mind

September 17-18

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A Time For Expert Help.

By Chris Frederick



Though I have spent a lot of time over the past months celebrating the opportunities presented by this economy, in recent weeks I find myself very concerned with the number of shops going out of business and the number of repair shop owners cashing it in and giving up. It would seem obvious that there are perils out there and certainly none of us know where this economy is going or where all of this turmoil will end, but if you are unsure of where you are in the midst of all of this or if you have concerns with the state of your business, I am strongly suggesting you reach out and get yourself some help.

Few among us would claim to be comfortable with change. The uncertainty of what is going on in the economy would certainly not have most of us diving in and revamping our operation. For most of us, it will be a lot more comfortable to just ride this one out and hope for the best. Advising you to fight that temptation to hunker down, I am going to strongly suggest you be cautious but begin searching for the types of help that will assist you in addressing your concerns. The type of help you would look for is of

course dependent upon what your perceived issues are but no matter the specialty, you need to go to great lengths to find somebody you can be comfortable working with in addressing your specific concerns. You are looking for competent help and that does not mean you have to be friends. It does mean it has to be somebody you can be confident in and easily interact with. I put a great deal of stock in our instincts in situations such



as these but in this case, I would also look for behaviors such as professionalism, dedication, timeliness and communication. I would look for somebody willing to challenge my beliefs and be willing to push when I was less than resolved toward necessary change. We aren't dealing with what color to paint the bathroom and the issues that I would address are those that are beyond my skill or knowledge to handle and those that have the potential to significantly impact my business.

Seeking help such as this is a very difficult decision for many of us but I would remind you that these are not ordinary times and we need to stretch

our comfort zones. We need to see and feel an urgency to act and understand that the survival of our business might be at stake. Even if our business is doing reasonably well, I am suggesting that we explore ways to improve on what we currently have going and position ourselves to take best advantage of the great opportunities presented by this economy. Flourishing is a much better journey than survival and this might be the time to step aggressively in that direction.

A good first step in this might be a self assessment of where we are versus our norm, where we are versus where we had expected to be and what we perceive as our biggest issues. If we are delightfully unaware of where we are and not exactly sure where the problems might be, I am suggesting that we talk to people we know in our area. There are any number of great sources out there and a good referral from somebody that we know and respect would be a great place to start in this process. If all else fails, do a *Google* search. As I noted, it is key that we find somebody we can work with and in this; we need to be very picky and particular. Remember, this is our business we are talking about. Out of this, we may choose to pursue experts in finance, accounting, inventory control, succession planning, HR, shop operations and any number of technical fields.

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In this effort, we may end up looking at our business model, staffing, the state of training and skill within our business and reconsider those goals we set many years before. Some of these folks might be better described as tech reps or trainers than consultants or coaches and their expertise would be in narrow but critical subjects or tasks. What they all have in common is an expertise in an area that we or our business is challenged by, or an area or direction that we are looking to move in. An example of this last might be a full service repair shop looking to get into the tire business.



Before you attempt to move into sectors of the industry that you are unfamiliar with, you should talk to somebody knowledgeable enough to point up the positives and point out the pitfalls. You pay (often dearly) for their expertise and knowledge but you will benefit with a rational, doable plan. Now the tough part; doing what these experts tell us to do. That is truly where the rubber meets the road and determines where we and our business will go from here. Remember, a life preserver only works if you grab it. Admit it, you don't know everything. Now might be a great time to get the help that you need. If we don't change anything, nothing will change. I guarantee it!



What Happened To The Dream?

By George Zeeks



While talking to shop owners & helping them realign their business for success, the conversation of staff always comes to a head at some point. Building the team that works well together can sometimes take years. In those years of adding people and working with everyone to find the best spot for their skills, we build a sense of loyalty to those who have been with us through the good times and bad. Loyalty is a cornerstone in any organization and is vital to its growth, but at what point does loyalty become a liability?

The average worker in the U.S. typically reaches their maximum earning potential between the ages of 45-55. They have paid their dues, they know the job and have become good at it. In many occupations, the golden years can continue past 55. In order to do that, continuing education plays a major factor in maintaining ability at its peak level. The senior tech in many of our shops may be 50 or older, may have worked with us for an extended period, may have been valuable to the organization and may have reached the end of their best producing years.

This article is written for those technicians and the shop owners who employ them. We all know we cannot stop time and the effect it has on the body, but it is even harder for the technician. After 30 years of bending under a hood, the up/down/squat/kneel of setting thousands of lifts, the busted knuckles and the strain on shoulders and elbows; the body starts to protest. I have never been a technician, but I am well aware of the limitations that my body is starting to place upon

me. The key here for myself and the technicians we are talking about is to keep the experience and knowledge that we have now at the forefront of the industry. We cannot fall behind. My wife has reminded me that our experienced workers are usually the ones that come in on time, are willing to go that extra mile and call out from work less often. All that is well and good, but if we do not encourage the continuing education of these same technicians their skill level can drop too far.

When cars switched from carburetors to fuel injectors, some people fell behind. When the computers became part of the cars' operating system, some people fell behind. When those same systems switched from OBD I to OBD II, some fell behind. Now we have Electric cars and who knows what else in the future, how many more will fall behind. As shop owners, are we providing the opportunity for continuing classes? Are you making education part of the culture of your shop? Are you encouraging your staff to attend? Do we sponsor the atmosphere for growing the knowledge base? As technicians, are we attending these classes? Are you seeking out training on your own, if it is not provided to you through the shop? Are you taking the responsibility for your professional and personal life? If you are not finding that additional training, growing your knowledge base and putting it to use, then problems are looming on the horizon that will rob you of your "Golden Years".

It is July 4th, a national holiday. I am headed for a cookout and a great day with friends and family. The sun is out, the weather is perfect and I am deeply troubled. On Monday, I will have to advise one of my shops to let a technician go. He

is 59 years old, was a master technician but now is as skilled as the average 'C' tech. He has not kept up with the changes in the industry. The work that he is performing can easily be done by technicians making far less than his \$28/hour flat rate wage. Worst of all, he is only producing, on average, 26 hours of billed hours a week at that lower skill level. He is producing too little; at too high a price for the tasks he now has the ability to perform. There was once a time when any technician could get a job almost instantly. That time is not now. Shops are closing and literally thousands of shop bays are now behind locked doors. Who bears the ultimate responsibility? We all do. Shop owners need to reward the loyalty shown them and encourage the constant technical upgrading that is vital. You need to provide training and support so your staff can prepare for their future. The painful alternative is letting someone go who has been with you for years because the industry has passed him by. The technicians need to find the classes and attend, the training must never stop. If your shop does not actively support training, then you must find it on your own. It is, after all, your life we are talking about here. The industry must continue to provide the education so we are equipped to satisfy the consumer's needs.

I have fun writing most of the things that I do, but not this time. Hot food and cold beer with good people is always good. Today will be a good day. Monday will not. On Monday, I can assure you that the taste in my mouth will not be from a burger, hot off the grill.



ATTENTION SHOP OWNERS AND MANAGERS:
If you have something you would like to share,
e-mail your coach or ATI at
office@autotraining.net.



Six Super Secrets To Shop Success.

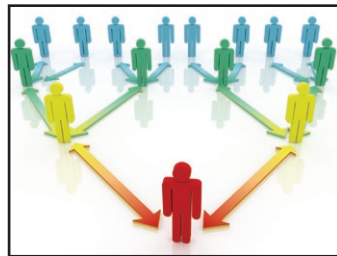
By Brian Canning



Although I have been an early riser since my Army experience decades back, I find it very easy to drive the twenty odd miles to work each day because along with the normal routine, I get to talk to and interact with some of the best, most successful shop owners in the USA every week. I get to learn from them, I get to grow with them, I get to validate the things I believe in and I get to learn. This is a very elite group though it is hard work more than genius that has made them successful. Though each has a unique story, I would take a moment to describe three among the many shop owners I have gotten to know over the years.

The first owner I will describe is an incredibly intense, incredibly bright owner who has worked very hard all of his life and I would bet will go to his grave with a list of twenty things he would need to get done before they close the lid & put him in the ground. He is the only client whom I ever got into an argument with on the welcome call as he was entering the program several years back, & I would describe him as tireless in his efforts to take his good shop and make it even better. Our issues have never been his commitment or his willingness to spend money or time to get something done or to address a problem. If we needed a lift, he bought a lift. If we needed to hire or fire somebody, we did it and moved on. He is a very complex person, a willing leader who is not scared to ask for something better. One of his greatest challenges was stepping back and letting his very capable Service Manager

take the reigns. What has been a key with this owner has been in his willingness to change, his commitment to training and his willingness to try new things. He is very knowledgeable in every aspect of our business and well beyond. At times, when he did not fully believe in things I was asking him to do, he was willing to fully commit to change and demand a full effort from his people. Mostly, we have been successful though both he and I know our journey is far from over and our goals are yet to be fully achieved. He runs a very nice, very busy shop and parts store in western Massachusetts.



The second I will describe is a shop owner who, in his effort to provide extraordinary customer service, has built himself a beautiful facility, filled it with the very best equipment, surrounded himself with quality, motivated people and set the bar very high. The result has been a shop that provides the best, most consistent customer service I have ever seen and margins & efficiencies that set new standards for our industry. What sets him apart from most of the shop owners I talk to, is his willingness to lead. In everything he does, he demands the best from his people every day and to his credit, his people deliver on that every day. On the odd occasion where somebody or something falls short of our expectations, he is very willing to ask questions to understand

and willing to ask for better. I would describe this owner as on the quiet side, a nice guy but relentless in assuring that his customers have a great experience every time they walk through the door. Extraordinary customer service and strong leadership are what sets this owner and this shop apart from the rest. He runs a high end European specialty shop in eastern Washington State.

The third owner I would describe owns 7 tire/service stores in or around Charlotte North Carolina. Though these facilities are beautiful, well equipped and impressive in every way, the very moment you walk in the door you know that it is a family owned business. Though you are met with large, comfortable, well lit waiting rooms, fresh popcorn and flat screen TV's, you are nearly always welcomed within seconds of entering as a long lost cousin. A friendlier more consistently professional group I have never met; but never forget, you are family and family first. This owner has put together a chain of stores that are well situated, very visible and easily accessible. What sets this owner apart in my opinion, is in his ability to get his people to buy into his vision and in his willingness to both set high expectations and his willingness to give his managers the elbow room they need to succeed. They are held accountable but given every tool, opportunity and encouragement to succeed. Most of the managers have found a way. Another very important aspect in what I believe has made this owner successful, is in his promoting a General Manager from the ranks and empowering him to drive the business as the owner would drive it himself. The choice here was fortunate

in that this General Manager is always willing to lead, willing to demand the very best effort, willing to reprimand and very willing to celebrate the success. This is a very complex organization and probably the best group of tire stores I have ever seen. Did I mention that they train continuously and on all aspects of their business?

By very weird coincidence, I have visited each one of these shops, so I am speaking from the coaching perspective, but also from firsthand observation. I would be the first to note that these shops and these owners are very different, but they do have certain things in common as well. Each one of these shops has an owner with a vision and a willingness to do what it takes to turn those visions into reality. Each of these owners has set very high & achievable expectations in place and is willing to lead in that direction. Each one of these owners is committed to training and to getting better. Each one hires tough and is willing to hold their people accountable. Each one of these owners has a nearly bulletproof inspection process in place and they are willing to demand that it be used and enforced every day. Finally, I would note that each one of these owners is committed to extraordinary customer service, going about it in their own way, but committed to their customers having a great experience every time they walk through their door.

I know that I have disappointed some of you in writing this and have not provided that expected magic pill, but I would ask you to look a little closer. The secret to your success is here and more importantly, it is proven and shown to work. Doing it is up to you.



Sam's Corner: Reflections On Warm Breezes And Facilities Utilization . By Brian Canning

Last year, in the very midst of what has turned out to be the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, I had the great fortune of attending the best business retreat I could ever hope to be a part of. Noting that the guest speakers were extraordinary, what really made this event for me was the incredible group of attendees. These people happened to be from the automotive repair industry, but it was more the attitudes & eagerness to learn

that set this group apart and that made this event memorable for me. Now I wouldn't lie and say that there weren't the normal number of partygoers, but I wasn't arrested or anything and more importantly, I left completely reenergized and ready to take on the world.

Does it matter that the event that I am describing was our Super Conference held in Cancun, Mexico last February? I have taken part in several of these now and have watched

this event grow from a very modest event somewhat dedicated to fun & liquid refreshment to become a big event, very dedicated to lasting impressions, best practices and solid content. It is hard to be imaginative & innovative when you are stuck behind that counter. I am not attempting to intimate that palm trees and warm breezes help us solve problems, but I think that an event such as the Super Conference allows you to catch

your breath, put things in perspective & gives you an opportunity to plan & prepare yourself for the next step. You will get an even bigger dose of me.

With this year's event planned for Marco Island in Florida next March, I am sure this event will be the best yet. As the economy recovers, as every economist in the world is now predicting, you will want to take the time to reflect on where we go from here. I expect to see you in Florida next March.

Seven At the Top, *Congratulations To All!*



This Month's Winners are:

Rick Dionne

Believer's Automotive
235 Willow Street
Manchester, NH 03103

Rich Kemp

Roselle Tire and Auto Service
692 West Lake Street
Roselle, IL 60172

Tom Harvey

Hollin Hall Automotive
7926 Fort Hunt Road
Alexandria, VA 22308

Dan Schrier

Japanese Auto Repair
1846 Del Amo Road
Torrance, CA 90501

Jeff Hallman

Hallman's Silver Spring Garage
3569 Marietta Avenue
Columbia, 17601

Mike Barker

Crossroads Exxon
1720 Walnut Street
Cary, NC 27511

Barry Balaban

Black Bear Auto
56 Frederick Street
Bristol, CT 06010



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