



Customer service is an effective and affordable way to differentiate your shop. ■ Steve Relyea

BUILDING RAPPORT

Customer service is an effective and affordable way for auto repair shops to differentiate themselves from competitors, a recent survey suggests. To provide that service, businesses must get feedback from customers and provide feedback to the frontline employees who serve them, says Matt Wozniak, president and CEO of National Shopping Service, the mystery shopping firm that conducted the survey.

“No matter if it’s a service or if it’s a merchandise business, customer service, attitude, and rapport is king,” Wozniak said. “It is the one differentiator that you can control without it being crazy expensive.”

In its survey, National Shopping Service found that the three highest priorities for customers of auto repair shops are a reasonable price, an understandable explanation of the service or repair, and not being talked to in a condescending fashion. The survey asked consumers to rate the importance of 24 items related to auto repair, cost estimates, and purchase of services. No provider of automotive service was mentioned.

“What is the customer’s expectation when they go to an auto repair facility? ‘It’s dirty, the guy’s going to be rude, the guy’s going to be condescending to me, my car’s going to be greasy when I pick it up, and I’m probably going to have to take it back a second time.’ We saw that in this survey and we kind of knew it before we went into it,” Wozniak said. “But, I mean, how easy is it to step out of that stereotype and be stellar and just blow your competition away? It doesn’t cost anything to do that, really, other than training your staff and gathering metrics to make sure that they’re adhering to the training and execution.”

National Shopping Service offers

businesses a combination of mystery shopping resources and measurement solutions focused on brand alignment and customer retention. Automotive clients, typically larger ones like chains, networks, associations, and manufacturers, account for 2.7 percent of the company’s revenue. Wozniak himself is an automotive enthusiast and a licensed aircraft mechanic, fixed wing pilot, helicopter pilot, and private investigator. National Shopping Service evaluates service in person, over the phone, and on the web.

“The key premise behind mystery shopping is getting non-biased, arm’s length observation of your typical customer’s perception,” Wozniak said.

“One of our most successful programs is to call up an auto parts store, ask for something that we know is not in stock, and see how we’re treated. No one wants to be told, ‘Nope, don’t have it, sorry.’ Everyone wants to hear, ‘Hey, I don’t have it, but I see that I can order it and have it here tomorrow. Let me call you back when it’s in.’ It’s amazing the percentage of people that don’t take that step. There’s a golden opportunity to get a customer in and satisfy the customer.”

Collecting feedback from customers is a way to make sure you’re not operating in a vacuum, Wozniak said. It’s too easy for managers to see what they want to see, rather than what customers see, and to keep doing what they’re doing without knowledge of things competitors may be doing better. To deliver service that will differentiate you from the competition, he concluded, you have to measure it, track it, and let frontline staff know how they’re doing.

More information about National Shopping Service is available online at www.nationalshoppingservice.com, as is *2005 Customer Survey, Automotive Survey, Composite Results*. **IAPA**