

## **Find Ways to Engage Customers**

To grow their customer base, quick lube shops used to advertise in the phone book, mail some coupons and maybe advertise in local publications. That doesn't work so well anymore, partly because competition is fiercer than ever. If the market can withstand another shop in your neighborhood, somebody will open one.

Customers have changed too. "When people are trying to find what they're looking for, they're getting on their phone, tablet or computer, and that's where they start looking," says Daniel Smith of PISTN Marketing, a firm that helps the automotive care industry with automated marketing programs.

The first step is to have a functional website that offers a pleasant user experience. It should be designed for mobile devices, with high-profile information — address and phone number — clearly visible. Presenting a professional image starts the trust-building process that's necessary to convert visitors into customers.

An offer for discounted services should also be front-and-center, as a way to entice customers who are looking for a deal. However, that offer should be accompanied by an invitation to join your shop's mailing list or a text-messaging service.

## **Engage and Build Trust**

One of the industry's challenges is that customers are wary of shops trying to sell them services they don't need. Shop owners can break down those barriers with engaging customers with trust-building mechanisms. For example, when reminding customers to get their oil changed or come in for preventative maintenance, Smith recommends quoting the car manufacturer in marketing messages. "We try to convey that they don't take the shop's word for it," he says. "We say this is what the manufacturer of your car recommends. We try to build trust that way, and once we help build that trust, we start knocking those walls down and our marketing tends to have better results."

Tailoring communications to the customer has another benefit. “As these ads and coupons come through, people get callous to it,” Smith says. “What we have found is when they notice that it's specific to them, the impact is greater.”

When customers trust you, they're willing to let you communicate with them directly, through email or text messaging. That's why giving them an opportunity to sign up through the website or after service in the shop is important.

On PISTN's platform, when customers sign up for text messaging through a shop's website, they immediately receive a special offer on their phone. Then every month or so, the customer automatically receives a message determined by the shop owner. “You don't always want to do the same offer,” says Smith. “If we constantly give them \$5 off, they're conditioning us to think the only way they'll come to us is if we give them a deal.” He recommends including reminders about other services. “If you're in Florida, you're going to potentially do air conditioning checks. If you're in the north, you can do a battery check in the winter. You can throw in something that's going to educate the customer that's also going to help you potentially add an upsell and do it ethically,” he says.

## **Community Engagement and Social Media**

Is it worth your time to market through social media platforms like Facebook? It can be, if you make social media part of an overall strategy to engage the local community. “If you're in a neighborhood, it's very much a community. The most important thing is for you to show the customers you're not just there to siphon from them and not give anything back,” says Sam Hamade of Top Lube Center in Commerce, Mich.

That means finding out what drives a community and brings it together, then supporting those efforts. “You have to help out. You might have to give to the football team. You might have to sponsor the Little League team,” he says. “You're doing that through the parents and through the customers that come to you.”

Hamade sponsors the football team and in return has the shop's name on the scoreboard. He also hosts charitable car wash events for local organizations, including sports teams. When they ask what he wants in return, he only requests

that they write a good review. “If you do all these things for them, they will be happy to do it for you and to spread the word,” he says. “So that makes you very relevant in the neighborhood. Giving back to the community becomes very important, and that's how you become popular on social media.”

For example, a new customer told Hamade how he'd found him through Facebook. “There's a subdivision about two miles down the road from us. That entire association is on Facebook together,” he says. “A couple of customers, people that live in the association, started talking about how nice we were and how good the rate was, how courteous we were, and the work we do in the community. That literally translated into a discussion with about 300 to 400 people in the association.”

In other words, community involvement and social media go hand-in-hand. Because everyone in a community is tied together through social media, it can be a powerful marketing channel. “By showing that you care, they're giving you sales by giving reviews,” says Hamade. “Reviews are very important. If you screw up, you're going to hear it. And if you do good, you're going to hear it.”

###