

Rules of Business Help Make Mitch Smith Auto Service a Success

By Debbie Briggs
Contributing Writer

When you've been in business as long as Mitch Smith, you develop some surefire ways to ensure top-quality service and repairs that result in satisfied customers and repeat business. Which leads to one of Smith's rules of business, or "Mitch-isms" as he calls them: Do to/speak to/service your clients better than anyone else.

"We maintain mainstream direct mailings to both old and new demographics," explains Smith, who co-owns the Anderson, IN, shop along with wife, Mary Smith, "but we send mailings with discounts to our loyal client base. Loyalty is a lost art; we believe in rewarding those who support us best.

"Funny thing is, good clients tell everybody; however, so do mad clients! It is simple-stay focused; keep your eye on the ball. It works. Word of mouth is key."

And keeping that word-of-mouth advertising positive just goes back to treating customers how you would want to be treated, Smith says.

"The whole world is used to hearing, 'No, don't block our doors. No customers in the shop,' " he explains. "Why do we say these negative things to our potential clients? It's everything we hate to hear when we are trying to get parts or payment. Just do the opposite: Make these humans feel special. Make them feel glad they're here."

"Here" is Mitch Smith Auto Service, which Smith opened in 1991 in an old dairy farm that dated back to 1942. Now the business boasts two buildings - one with 10 service bays and one larger truck bay, and the other dedicated to truck and RV repairs with three 80-foot long bays. The shop currently employs five ASE-Certified techs who repair just about anything: Domestic, European and Asian vehicles; RVs, semis and boats (with car engines); and even a Rolls Royce now and then.

"We work as a team; no one is allowed to be stumped and chance losing interest in a certain job," Smith says, who adds that he and his office manager are ASE-Certified Master Techs as well. "We team up on the crazy issues that take place in this business."

While attracting new talent can be a challenge (Smith says "it seems like all the good young people want to be are computer programmers"), he tries to offer an environment where current employees feel valued.

"We just try to treat every associate as family," Smith says. "We provide a state-of-the-art facility, where all equipment is up to date. Our shop is air conditioned, the employee lounge is a great and comfortable place to relax during lunch, and the shop sound system is second to none."

In an effort to entice the next generation of techs, Smith adds that he's been involved in the Anderson Community Schools' Co-Op Program for the past 17 years.

"We always hope to gain and educate new talent," he says. "This has worked for us in the past, and we still try hard at this approach."

Smith describes his business as a "hard-core shop," offering a variety of services from engine and transmission repairs to acting as a warehouse dealer for several brands of tires. It's no surprise that the shop is a Jasper Engines & Transmissions Preferred Installation Center and has earned the ASE Blue Seal of Excellence. And speaking of quality service, Smith is quick to point out another one of his Mitch-isms of business: Never discount oil changes.

"Why do good shops do this?" Smith asks. "Our oil, lube and filter service is the most important service we do. Look at this way: We fill all fluids, rotate wheels, check the brakes, check all filters, sweep, throw away trash, and replace all burned-out light bulbs??all included in the price."

That attention to detail carries over into every aspect of the customer experience at Mitch Smith Auto Service, which leads to yet another tenet of business: Let us work for you, so you don't miss work. That translates into hours of operation from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.; pre-payment and over-the-phone payment options to allow for vehicle pickup at any time, even after hours.

"We have pickup and delivery service," Smith says. "We have an after-hours key drop, complete with pens and paper. We sweep out every car - whether we fix it or not. We also wash and detail many cars at no charge, and we offer loaner cars."

Mitch says the shop itself is also impeccable, and what customer would want it any other way? Catering to the customer through a clean, inviting facility should really be Shop Owner 101.

"I have given many shop-owner seminars and attended shop seminars where the shop owners are their own worst enemies. In most cases, the shop owner will attract/retain what they are and, what they look like themselves. If they don't mind a filthy, grease-laden shop, well, neither will their clients! The same holds true for everything we do and represent: appearance, bathrooms, waiting rooms, shop, and dialogue. There is not one piece of a puzzle - this is a whole package. What we do is what we are, and what we are going to attract. Everybody makes this so hard."

Which leads to another Mitch-ism: Don't be a salesman for the other guy. Customers will leave with an impression of your shop, and it's up to you whether it's positive or negative.

"Make it an experience," he says. "I was taught many years ago when I was still a very active technician that when that phone rings, someone is going to spend hard earned money, so smile before you answer. I believe that when training yourself, or whoever is going to be answering the phone, they need a mirror right in front of them. We all answer the phone how we look." Maintaining that level of professionalism also means providing not only a quality repair, but a prompt one as well.

"First and foremost, we get a great qualifying budget from the client," Smith explains. "For example, if the repair will be less than \$300, we ask if we can we just fix it. This avoids trying to contact the customer and wasted bay time waiting on approvals.

"Also, when we make appointments, we try to get a feel for what service is needed, and we get the parts ahead of time. Communicating well with the technician is also important: Be clear on timeline expectations."

So what's made Mitch Smith Auto Service the success it is today? It's really a number of things,

from shop appearance to customer convenience to top-notch service as well as accepting that mistakes will happen from time to time. But according to Smith's final Mitch-ism, it's not the problem; it's how the problem is handled.

"It's more than, 'I'm a great tech. Let me fix your car!' "Smith concludes. "The whole shop has to be on the same page. And we're all human, and we're going to make mistakes. Just put yourself in the other person's shoes."

Sound advice, indeed, for any shop owner hoping for the longevity and success that Mitch Smith Auto Service enjoys today.