



PREMIUM LUBRICANTS

Are you getting full value out of your most valuable asset – people?

BY BILL BEYERLE AND ANGI SCHOOLCRAFT

As the automotive service business recovers, we continue to hear from shop operators that staffing is one of their biggest challenges. It's especially challenging to find and retain experienced people who know the business and have acquired the skills to perform at a high level with minimal supervision. This puts pressure on shop owners to recruit and hire from outside the business, train and motivate less experienced people, and equip them to make a valuable contribution to the business. It also means striking the right balance between being selective in hiring and ensuring you have adequate staffing levels for periods of peak demand.

Simply finding and attracting people is the first part of the challenge. A good place to start is with your existing employees. Who do they know? Consider setting up a referral bonus plan that rewards employees for introducing candidates who can make the grade and ultimately get hired. Referrals and relationships are still the most common avenues for matching open positions with available talent.

That said, people who are looking for work are looking online. Use your social media presence to let people know you are hiring. Make sure your website is easy to find, and that it prominently features messaging on career opportunities in the field and at your business. Take advantage of local job search sites. Other industries like tech and retail are going through layoffs for purely economic reasons, providing there is a growing pool of capable people out there looking for a new direction.

Quick lube and auto service shops need to be in "always hiring" mode. Even if you think you are fully staffed, you should still be talking to people and considering candidates who demonstrate a service-minded attitude. Some owners are actually over-hiring so they have a buffer against attrition, and they can handle peak times without making people work overly long hours. The important thing is not to let the customer experience suffer because of a shortage of people – be sure every customer who comes in feels they are getting the attention and service they need and expect.

Once you have people on board, what can you do to keep them engaged and performing up to your needs and expectations? Successful businesses cultivate a team spirit, which gives people a sense of belonging as well as respect for their co-workers. It's a good strategy to rotate people through

different roles, from the front counter to the bay, so everyone has some understanding of everyone else's job. Besides giving people well rounded experience, this also educates them and helps them understand how the business operates. They will be better prepared to take on bigger responsibilities and managerial roles. Encourage and incent those who would qualify to pursue industry certifications, which not only helps them advance their careers, but also helps build a professional mindset and reputation for your business.

Investing in training will most certainly pay you back in the form of employee loyalty and better performance. Training should encompass not only the technical skills employees need to change oil or perform inspections and tune-ups, but also the "soft" skills of good everyday work habits, teamwork, and above all, customer service. Everyone who works in a small business, even those who spend most of their time under cars, is likely to come face-to-face with a customer at some point. They should know how to represent the business regardless of their roles.

Compensation matters, of course, and you want to be sure you're paying competitive wages. However, people also appreciate recognition and a sense that their work is valued. Work/life balance is a good thing for both the employee and the employer. People will also appreciate some flexibility on your part if they have to take some time off to attend to a family matter. Those are the things that will make them think twice about jumping to another job.

When employees take pride in the business and care about their work, customers can tell. Developing a strong team ethic may turn out to be the most successful marketing strategy and competitive differentiator you can employ.

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