



Change for the Better

Customers welcome new safety protocols

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In his 40 years in the automotive service business, Fred Saraiva had never seen anything like this.

In early March 2020, Saraiva's Chevron Havoline® xpress lube® also known as Sierra Lube Express in Yuba City, Calif., was servicing between 49 and 53 cars a day.

"We were headed into the 70s this year, easily," Saraiva says. "We were gearing up for summer, getting into the training process, getting ready to just go gangbusters."

It all came to a crashing halt on March 19, when the Sutter County health department issued the stay at home order in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"That put the brakes on our business overnight," Saraiva says.

Saraiva's first concern was his employees. In normal times, the business runs between 9 and 13 employees—including his wife, April, and their two sons.

"They classified us as an essential business," Saraiva says. "We could have stayed open. But my employees were very worried. Some of them are younger guys with kids. We care about the people who work for us—they're like family."

Having no idea how long the shutdown would last, Saraiva gathered his employees together and asked them what they wanted to do. He was prepared to apply for the government's Paycheck Protection Program, but the group decided to shut down and take layoffs until they could bring the business back up again.

Meanwhile, Fred and April ran the business from home.

"My wife runs the office part of the store, so we took her computers and fax machine home, and kept the business alive for seven and a half weeks," he says.

Customers called every day, while April posted updates and fielded inquiries on the shop's Facebook page. A lot of the business is from loyal, repeat customers, and they were willing to wait out the storm.

"I think there's a trust factor there," Saraiva says, "and that bought us time."

He used the time to strategize about how to reopen safely.

"I'm an old horse, and I always had my way of doing things. But I knew I had to change our whole way of doing business," he explains.

The first step was to remove the greeter and cashier roles. Instead, the shop acquired portable, wireless point of sale computers so all transactions could be performed at the customer's car window with minimal contact, and invoices could be sent by email.

The second step took a bit more planning.

"We always had our employees drive the cars into the shop and take control of the service," Saraiva says. "Now, we've implemented a safety protocol where

the customer drives in and stays in the vehicle while the service is going on."

Would it work? On May 2, the 15th anniversary of the shop's opening, Sierra Lube Express reopened for business with its new protocols in place—and the response, says Saraiva, has been phenomenal, customers are tearing down the doors. He rates customer satisfaction with the new process at 99.9 percent. What's more, the new procedures have not slowed volume or throughput down at all.

Sierra Lube Express has essentially moved the customer experience from the waiting room to the shop floor.

"We had a gigantic waiting room that could hold 10 people, with a big 70-inch monitor where customers could actually watch their cars being serviced," he says. "Now, we can't really use the waiting room, so we've moved the monitor out into the shop and the customer can watch the technician working on the car in the pit."

In fact, Saraiva has seen a huge increase in efficiency with the new procedures, including the use of technology that enables faster and more effective service.

"I never thought I'd ever say that," he says. "These changes we've made are 100 percent permanent."

Sierra Lube Express is part of Chevron's Havoline xpress lube network of independently owned and operated quick lubes. During the shutdown, he says, Chevron called several times a week.

"They asked me what I needed, what they could do to help," he explains. "The red carpet was laid out for me. It was an unbelievable experience."

The whole experience has taught Saraiva and his team what matters in running a business.

"Good always comes out of bad," he says. "The key factor is focus on the customer. Even with a mask on, they may not know your smiling, but keep smiling. It's more personal than a waiting room."

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—Fred Saraiva, owner,
Sierra Lube Express

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