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The following article is from the August 2014 edition of the APRA Global Connection publication. It was written by Dan Smith, of Arrowhead Electrical Products

WOULD YOU DO BUSINESS WITH YOU?

What is the image of your business in the community?

- When a first time customer walks into your place of business what impression do they get?
- How does it compare with their preconceived idea of your business?
- Is the first thing they see a welcoming, clean, professional looking store front.
- Is the counter area clean and clear?
- Are signs conspicuously posted?
- Are your rates clearly posted listing hourly charges, testing fees, specialty services such as parts cleaning or pulley swaps?
- Is there a clear set fee for consultation time?
- Are credit cards or checks accepted?
- Is there a clear no smoking sign?
- Do you have OEM parts boxes openly on display?
- Are recognized name brand accessories Deka, Cole Hersee, Arco, on display?
- Do you have units and components on display?
- Is there plenty of opportunity for add on sales and impulse buying?
- Do you have awards or membership plaques on display?
- Are areas where customers are not allowed clearly marked?
- Is there a clean waiting area where a customer can sit?
- Is there literature to read or music in the background?
- Are your personnel well dressed and friendly?
- Do you have trash and recycling properly sorted and stored? Or is it a dirty pile of junk attended to by a grease monkey?

Many auto electric shops are still operating in a 1950's marketing mode. This was an era when small auto electrics were just work-shops. The primary clientele were other tradesmen, mechanics or do it yourselfers. Female customers were almost non-existent.

We were not competing with big box stores and large, national chain-parts houses to sell our rebuilt units. All of that has changed dramatically.

Does your attitude change when YOU are the CONSUMER? What do you look for when seeking services? What helps to instill confidence when you first walk into a business? Is convenience an added value that influence your choice? Do you buy on price alone?

Think about how you feel if you walk into an unkept shop:

- When there are piles of cores or junk on the floor and counter -does that give you a positive impression?
- Do dirty clothes and greasy hands convey professionalism?
- Does it build your confidence when you hear loud music or vulgar language coming from the shop?
- Do you have any idea of what to expect to be charged for parts and services?
- Does the business look prosperous?
- Do you have confidence that you would have recourse if you have a repair done and a problem arises?
- Would you be comfortable sending your wife or daughter to this establishment? Would they be comfortable there?

Now apply this thought process to your shop.

Today we have large parts retailers, “Jiffy this” and “Quick that” and they are all offering a café atmosphere with free Wi-Fi and coffee. Dealers are setting up large screen TV rooms and offering loaner laptops for customer use while waiting for service repairs. Women now make up a significant portion of our customer market. Against this the old time “fix it shop” mentality does not stand a chance.

Walk into any prosperous parts store and you will see dozens of displays, signs everywhere, clean floors and counters, and uniformed staff.

Quick lube shops and car dealers have displays touting their brand of products and services. Awards for excellence and training achievements are posted everywhere. Payment terms, Credit cards accepted and rates are clearly presented. Certifications such as SAE training are proudly on display and member associations such as BBB or AAA are visible for all to see. Their visual presentations are informative, inviting and show pride in their business, their industry and their employees.

How does your shop compare? Small things go a long way in creating your business image.

- A clean clear counter gives a welcoming first impression and defines the space where you can professionally greet your customer and determine their need.
- Uniforms or at least neat clean work clothes present a professional image.
- Name tags or badges help newcomers to know who they are dealing with.

- Training certificates on display instill confidence.
- Units and parts on display give the impression of a well-stocked inventory.
- A chart spelling out labor rates, testing charges and consultation fees makes it clear that you value your time and expect to be compensated for your skills.
- Posted signs restricting access to the shop, this let your customers know up front that they are not welcome to follow you.
- Association with larger organizations gives the image of a business involved in an industry as opposed to a fix-it shop.

Be sure to highlight the ECO/GREEN aspect of your business. Display copies of articles from trade papers that show the positive impact of rebuilding and recycling or print up your own description of the how your specific shop is working to help preserve the environment.

- If you provide a waiting area it must be kept clean.
- Make sure there is literature and magazines to read.
- If your company has ever had special recognition in a newspaper or by a local community group have it on display.
- Be sure that any sounds that can be heard in the counter/waiting are not offensive. Have a language policy for the shop.
- Never leave promotional fliers from your suppliers in open view.
- If you offer additional services be sure to have that on display as well.
- Keep the rest rooms clean.

Once you have professional looking store front and counter area you can begin to work on your community image.

Smaller local shops cannot afford a large advertising budget. The good news is that you can make a large impression with limited expense. There are several low cost ways to promote your business and improve your image. Build your brand:

- Create a logo/image that will be used on all of your business communications and promotions.

Everyone recognizes the UPS logo and knows it stands for United Parcel Service. People in the automotive field recognize the STP logo but very few know that it stands for Scientifically Treated Petroleum. The point is to create an easily recognized and remembered image. It does not have to correspond directly to your business name. It can just as easily be a representation of the product you sell.

- Your first and lowest cost form of advertising is your business card.

Try to print informative business cards, spend a little extra to print both sides and use an eye catching color or logo.

Print a batch of first timer business cards with a discount coupon on the back, take

it from the customer when you do a job and give him back one without the discount. These can be used in several different ways.

A simple copy of your business card, used on placemat advertising in a restaurant or diner frequented by construction workers is cheap and targets a lucrative segment of our market.

- Taking out sponsorship ads in local children's sport or school programs builds your image as a concerned member of the community. Parents will support a business that supports their kids.
- Co-op with another business that sponsors a cruise night or classic car show.

Each of you can have a stack of fliers printed promoting the event and each other's business. This can be used with or without a discount coupon. You hand out theirs and they hand out yours.

Sponsor one of the awards. Attend the event and hand out your business cards to the car owners. Use your first time discount cards here.

- Put together a short presentation on proper battery care and maintenance and offer to present it to groups like classic car, heavy equipment, ATV and snow machine owners.
- Local Fairs and Farmers markets are a good place to reach the Agricultural market. Again here is a good place to just introduce yourself and hand out a card.
- Every month there are articles in our trade publications about unit or vehicle specific problems and fixes. Use this information to print your own monthly "Tech Tip".

Put these on your counter, hand them out to all of your installer customers, create an E-mail list of your customers and send it to them each month along with a monthly special promotion.

The constant and free information that you give them builds confidence in your skill level and helps to keep you in their mind when a need for a service arises.

If you do on vehicle work promote this every chance you get. If you do not then you should try to partner up with at least one good local installer/electrical diagnosis shop. Trade coupons with them and put a sign in your shop and one in theirs. Use a simple statement like "WE RECOMMEND XYZ FOR ALL YOUR REBUILDING NEEDS" or "WE RECOMMEND ABC GARAGE FOR ALL YOUR DIAGNOSTIC AND INSTALLATION NEEDS"

- Make it a point to introduce yourself to the managers of the parts stores in your area. It is especially important to meet those who do not buy from you. Offer to do their specialty R&R work or leave them a small quantity of your discount business cards that they can give to their customers as needed.

- This is a WIN/WIN. It drives business to your shop and the manager makes points with his customer because he got them a discount on the rebuild.
- If there is a regional monthly publication high lighting trades and services take out an ad and change it at least every other month. Use this to drive seasonal business like plow pump motors and marine starters.
- If your budget allows print a calendar or note pad/want book promoting your business or seasonal specials in the appropriate months.
- There are many inexpensive and simple ways to improve different areas of your business.
- You can give the appearance of a larger inventory by keeping clean but empty boxes on the front display shelves.
- Keep a file of unit type or application specific “Installer” tips and stuff them into unit boxes or hand them out with the invoice.
- Keep a destroyed drive and solenoid and a burnt stator in the back that can be used, as a quick show and tell, when trying to explain the possible damage that can be caused by bad batteries or cables.
- Use your knowledge and ask questions when evaluating incoming units.
- Discolored solenoid studs and burnt pulleys are opportunities to up sell new cables, belts and terminal ends.
- Corrosion on a main starter solenoid switch terminal opens the door to sell an additional relay or IMS.
- Offer a free battery test with the sale of a starter or alternator. This helps you to know that your unit has a chance of surviving. If the battery is weak you can add on a battery sale or wave warranty on your unit.
- Ask for vehicle mileage when an alternator comes in with a clutch pulley. Always recommend a replacement if more than 50K miles on the unit.
- If you sell new units offer to properly dispose of the core at no charge. A simple sign stating that all starters and alternators contain lead and should be disposed of properly can entice a customer to leave the old core with you for the proper disposal. This can add up to a sizable amount of core income over the course of time.

As you can see there are many ways to improve the image and build confidence in your business. Your competition is working every day to lure your current and potential customers. You have to work just as hard. Don't be shy of using an idea from another business. If you see something that works take that idea and modify it to fit your needs. The most important thing is to not stagnate. Always look for ways to improve what you do. If you build a strong well recognized and respected business you will have a valuable asset to sell when the time comes. If you just run a fix-it shop when you go it goes. The choice is yours.

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