

Auto repair strategy gets tune-up

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Heather Zaccone, owner of Reflex Tuning in Hooksett, didn't realize that she was operating an essential business until the state declared that automotive shops could stay open even during the height of the stay-at-home order.

The ability to continue doing business was a comfort to Zaccone, who opened the shop 13 years ago.

"That made me feel more confident this is a good business to be in," she said. "We have to get people to work."

Still, she recognized that things were going to change for her business, which provides service to Audis and Volkswagens. Immediately, she had her five full-time employees step up their disinfecting, both around the shop and within the vehicles they were working on. Now, when a vehicle comes in for servicing, techs check it in and then wipe it down with disinfectants; they do the same when the work is done. Customers began dropping their keys via a service window rather than walking into the shop.

At first, Zacccone needed to test which disinfectants were effective but gentle for the high-end cars that she works on. Then, she needed to get her hands on personal protective equipment and disinfectants. One month, she spent \$3,000 on gloves alone – she wanted to order enough to establish a stockpile in case of supply chain interruptions.

One of the biggest changes was the closure of the waiting room. Zacccone no longer gave people the option to wait on-site while their cars were being serviced – they needed to drop their vehicles off or exchange them for a loaner vehicle.

Although Reflex Tuning had allowed people to wait in the past, Zacccone quickly recognized that having a drop-off system made more sense for both customers and technicians. The mechanics could take their time identifying a problem, while customers didn't have to spend hours waiting for a diagnosis and estimate.

“We’re going to keep this forever,” Zacccone said of drop-offs. “It’s better for us and for the customers.”

Zacccone was wary of whether or not customers would be spending money on their cars during the financial uncertainty of the pandemic. She was pleasantly surprised that people were not only still coming to the shop, they were doing work that they otherwise would be putting off.

Although Zacccone is seeing slightly fewer cars per week – about 25 on average – each has a significant amount of work done on it, she’s found.

“As things progressed and people were not driving as much, people could drop off their vehicles. Then they tend to get a lot more fixed,” she said. Optional upgrades have gone down slightly, but the price per job is still up, she noted, often reaching thousands.

Zaccone and her technicians needed to adjust how they educated the customers. Zaccone has always emphasized teaching customers about their vehicles and necessary maintenance. When customers were in the waiting room, mechanics would regularly bring them back to show them any issues on a vehicle.

With social distancing, that isn’t possible. Instead, the techs now rely on a thorough digital inspection, complete with 50 pictures. They send the inspection report to customers and then go over it remotely in order to give the same level of service that Reflex Tuning has always provided.

“We can paint a picture for the customers,” Zaccone said. “We can talk about it, go through it and see what’s going on. That’s pretty important.”

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