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Training and tools help shop tackle diagnostic challenges

by Kevin Loewen

Kansas City, Mo.—Joe Sevart, co-owner of I-70 Auto Service, recognizes that the shop's 30 years of success are no guarantee that it will remain busy, so he said he aggressively pursues changes to ensure the future of the business.

Sevart said his father, Tom, purchased the business—originally a Getty gas station with three bays—in 1979 after

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having leased it for three years. His own experience began almost immediately as he helped out pumping gas and then learned to repair cars. His father is now semi-retired, and they are partners in the business, he said.

The original 2,000-square-foot shop was expanded by another 3,000 square feet in 1983, Sevart said. The new space had high ceilings that allowed the shop to expand into light- and medium-duty commercial vehicles, he said.

Sevart said that until the last several years, repair and preventive maintenance work for local fleets had accounted for around 30 percent of the shop's business. In recent years, he said he has pursued additional fleet business that has allowed it

to grow to about 50 percent of the shop's revenue.

"The last two years our business has grown tremendously," Sevart said, "most of it due to us going out and working the commercial side."

While attracting new customers is important, Sevart said it is also important to try to get all of the work for the fleets they service. "We can be competitive on maintenance work with the Jiffy Lubes, and it allows us to keep an eye out for other problems," he said.

Service is very important to the shop's fleet customers, Sevart said, which includes getting the vehicles in and out as quickly as possible and identifying issues that could cause breakdowns.

Sevart said his fleet customers also appreciate the shop's willingness to pick up and deliver vehicles. "This way, an electrical company, for instance, doesn't have to pay two guys \$30 an hour to bring

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I-70 Auto Service is a family affair with, from l., father and Co-Owner Tom Sevart, son and Co-Owner Joe Sevart, grandson and Service Writer Matt Sevart, and son and Alignment Technician Tom Sevart Jr.

a van to us for service," he said.

Pick-up and delivery has also helped the shop build its retail customer base as well, Sevart said. "A lot of our customers are professionals," he said, "and I didn't realize how important (pick-up and delivery) was until I started getting a lot of thank-you notes."

Sevart said pick-up and delivery has also helped them gain business from neighbors who would have otherwise been unlikely to drive the long distance to the shop. "We all live out east," he said, "and we probably bring in two to three cars a day."

The shop has also sought to capitalize on its relationship with NAPA as an AutoCare Center to attract business that passes by each day on the two busy streets next to the

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shop, Sevart said. About two years ago, he said, he chose to paint the shop the NAPA blue and add AutoCare signage.

“It’s been tremendous,” he said. “Since I’ve painted the building, I’ve had a lot of people stopping in for service who had driven by for years.”

The shop’s relationship with NAPA has tightened in recent years, Sevart said, and he credits his NAPA Salesman Steve Shawnan with some of the ideas and tools that have helped them grow.

Sevart also credits NAPA with stepping up when there has been a problem. For instance, he said the shop was seeing shims on some brake pads coming off. “NAPA had an engineer come into the shop to study the problem for two days,” he said. “It was awesome.” He said the engineer discovered that some shims weren’t adhered properly, so now the shop checks them closely before installation.

Customers who drop off their own vehicle for service have access to the shop’s three loaner vehicles, Sevart said, adding that he also has an E350 loaner available for his commercial customers.

Whether a commercial or a retail customer, once the vehicle is in the shop, providing a proper diagnosis is critical to satisfying them and ensuring that they will come back again, Sevart said. To that end, he has been making a strong effort in recent years to upgrade his technicians’ skills and to ensure that they have the proper tools to do the job, he said.

The shop’s four technicians, including Sevart, attend regular training provided by NAPA, CARQUEST, and Star Warehouse, he said, as well as the Automotive Service Association of Missouri/Kansas’ Vision Hi-Tech Training & Expo, held annually in Overland Park, Kan. “They get some of the top trainers in the country coming in

for Vision,” he said. “It’s something we really look forward to.”

Sevart said the shop has an Alldata information system used for information such as wiring diagrams and technical service bulletins but that when it comes to diagnostic information, he primarily uses iATN.

“I use it every day to back up my diagnosis,” he said. “If I know that I have something scheduled the next day, I will look it up the evening before to get a jump start on the process.”

Technicians Thomas Foust and Dan Blurton work in the shop at I-70 Auto Service. “It’s real experience that I’m getting,” Sevart said. “I’m reading what other technicians have already done.

“I even use it when I’m looking to buy a new piece of equipment,” he said. “I look at what others have said are a tool’s pros and cons.”

For diagnostic equipment, I-70 Auto Service is equipped with two OTC Genisys scan tools, a Snap-on Vantage, and a Champion Leak Master smoke machine, Sevart said. He also purchased a Midtronics ESP 1000 for testing starters and batteries, which he said has led to many sales for the shop.

Other equipment includes an Ammco brake lathe set up for rotors and an FMC brake lather set up for drums, a Sun MotorVac CarbonClean system, and a Viper A/C identifier. The shop’s Robinair R-134a recycler gets regular use, Sevart said, while its R-12 recycler is now stored in a shed in back because it is rarely used anymore. “We have switched most of our customers over to R-134a,” he said.

Sevart said the shop’s Hunter D111 alignment machine was bought used several years ago when the shop to which they had sublet went out of business. He



Technicians Thomas Foust and Dan Blurton work in the shop at I-70 Auto Service.

said that keeping alignments in house has allowed them to ensure quality and timeliness. His brother, Tom Jr., performs the alignments, he said, adding that one of the shop’s next big equipment purchases will be a new alignment system.

The shop is heated by a Reznor furnace that burns used oil and transmission fluid collected year round, Sevart said. “That saves us a lot of money,” he said. “I was spending thousands of dollars to heat this place.”

The investment in training and equipment has paid off, as about 30 percent of the shop’s business now involves some drivability or electronics diagnostics, Sevart said, adding that the percentage has been increasing. The shop charges a \$75 an hour flat rate, he said, but that increases to \$85 an hour for diagnostics.

Sevart, whose son, Matt, is a service writer in the shop, said that one of the tools he sometimes uses when explaining work to a customer is the Car Care Guide produced by the National Car Care Council. “There are a lot of people who just don’t know much about their vehicles,” he said. “This gives them another avenue to understand how important it is to maintain their vehicles. It’s something they can take with them and thumb through.” ■