

By Allan Janssen

benefit from the same kind of relationship we have?" Most people will be flattered to be asked, and they'll either give you some names of friends and neighbors, or they'll promise to contact them for you. Either way, you win.

2. Develop a good referral program

If you don't want to ask overtly, set up an incentive program which has the same effect. Ask new customers how they learned about you, and if it was through an existing customer, come up with a thank you gift for that customer. Once you've got the details ironed out, let everyone know about it at the counter. Some reward programs are extremely generous and are based on the amount of new business generated. But even little perks can make a big impression on people.

3. Partner well

If you're in a retail area, you may be able to partner with local businesses to build your client list and make your customer's day a little better. One shop offers customers a coupon for a bowl of soup at the restaurant next door. It's a win-win for both businesses. You can do the same with bookstores, or hair salons, or spas. Look around your neighborhood and figure out how your customers can "kill two birds with one stone" when they visit you.

4. Offer gift cards

This is different from coupons. We're talking about professional-looking certificates which your customers can use as an innovative way to treat the people in their lives. Your best customers – the ones who really love your service – will be thrilled to be able to give quirky, somewhat off-beat auto-related gifts for Christmas and birthdays. Have fun with it.

5. Improve your image

We're talking about your brand here. Everything you do needs to line-up with

10 WAYS *to grow your oil-change business*

For many shops, the basic oil change represents the cornerstone of their preventive maintenance program.

It's what keeps people coming back every three months or 5,000 kilometers.

And of course the premium service includes a complete vehicle inspection, which drives the rest of the maintenance work.

So a good list of oil-change customers is money in the bank for any shop... but how do you grow that list? That's what it's all about, isn't it? Growing your list of regular customers, and offering them the service that keeps them loyal?

Here's a dozen good ideas, culled from

conversations with shop owners across the country.

1. Ask your customers

Everybody talks about the value of word-of-mouth advertising... but few actually solicit it from their best customers. They hope it will happen organically – and sometimes it does. But it doesn't hurt to prime the pump a bit. If you've never asked your best customers for referrals, you're missing a great opportunity. The request goes a little like this: "I really enjoy dealing with you, and I want to grow my business through customers like you. Do you know anyone who would

the impression you're trying to make on consumers. Obviously this starts with your premises, both inside and out. Make sure the public areas of your building are clean, bright, and comfortable. Outside, use signage and landscaping that improve your curbside appeal. But it extends to everything from business cards, to uniforms, to company vehicles. In everything you do, stick closely to the image you want to project. Consumers are drawn to companies with a strong sense of identity and purpose.

6. Go digital

Do you have a website which allows people to learn more about you? Can people make appointments online? Can they check their maintenance record or the status of their repair from home or work? There are plenty of features that a corporate website can have – and people are starting to expect them. If nothing else, your own site lets people get basic information like your hours of operation, your price structure, your services and products. It also gives you a chance to blow your horn a bit by profiling your star technicians, and highlighting positive customer feedback. This doesn't have to cost a lot of money, but it is increasingly important in today's marketplace.

7. Be the expert

Become a source for the local newspaper, radio stations, and TV channel for automotive-related items. It might take some time, but offering your services to journalists never hurts. And if you can write a column for the paper, or be a guest on a show, you'll increase your credibility factor dramatically. Ultimately, you want to convey to people that you understand oil. You know which brands are right for their car, and why. Be able to prove to those who think oil is oil that there's more to it than that, and that it makes sense to go to a professional who is taking all of it into consideration. Your staff needs to know how to answer questions effectively too. Develop a list of FAQs and run through them with your staff so they can answer them when they're posed.

8. Advertise effectively

In troubled times many tend to reduce their advertising spend. There's a strong

argument to be made that when the economy is rough, it makes *more* sense to advertise. The old rule-of-thumb was to spend between 2 and 5 per cent of revenue on advertising, but more and more companies are making ad decisions strictly on ROI. In a small marketplace it will take less money to have an impact on consumer habits. In a big marketplace it will take much more just to move the needle. Look at your options. Outdoor, television, radio, newspapers, yellow pages... Don't take anything for granted. Evaluate each carefully. Many think yellow pages are dead. If so, what's taken its place? Should you be advertising on the web? Can your name pop up when someone Googles 'auto repair' in your area? Whatever you do, be creative. Be unique. Try something new. Separate yourself from the crowd. Above all, don't forget the 'call to action.' Give people a reason to act right away.


9. Don't overlook fleet opportunities

Most large companies are required to put their repair and maintenance business up for tender on a regular basis. Work with your staff to devise a service program that makes sense for you and is irresistible to a bottom-line-oriented company. Keep your eyes open as you drive around town to see what opportunities are out there.

10. Reach out to demographic groups

Create strategies to spread your message to groups with whom you have a genuine connection. It may be ethnic, religious, or social in nature, but proceed carefully so as not to look opportunistic. It's best if you belong to that group personally. You know where they hang out and what they view as important. You can cater to their specific needs and interests. You can even open your shop to special events that will introduce your business to potential customers.

"Thinking outside the box" is a tired expression, but shop owners who manage to do it are rewarded with growing customer lists.

Oil changes are a basic service which most people understand. Find the right way to present yourself as the best solution to their car maintenance problem. 



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