Modern Car Care

10 Things you need to know to run a SUCCESSFUL express exterior carwash
For those of you who are fans of David Letterman, you are certainly familiar with his Top 10 list. While my list is considerably less humorous, it should be a little more educational.

Here are the 10 things you need to know about running a successful express exterior carwash. Over the next few months, I will be examining some of these items in more detail in my new column for Modern Car Care. But for now, here’s the list.

10. **Education.** We all have things we need to learn. Even physicians have to dedicate a certain amount of their time every year to continuing education. If you are reading this article, that’s a good start. There are countless associations, Web sites, magazines and trade shows. Take advantage of every resource at your disposal. Call your chemical supplier and learn how the chemicals work. Then train your managers and employees. You should do the same thing with your equipment suppliers. The more you and your managers know about how things work, the easier they will be to fix.

9. **Reconciliation.** Today’s computer/controller manufacturers have made employee theft extremely difficult, but not impossible. You should be checking your paid receipts vs. your relay counts at least once a week to ensure that everyone is being honest.

8. **Advertising.** I can’t tell you the number of clients who say to me, “We’re doing 5,000 cars per month and haven’t done any advertising.” My question is, “Why not?” Even the most successful companies in the world have to advertise to stay at the top. (Have you heard about the company that didn’t advertise? Me neither. It went out of business.) You don’t have to be filming TV spots at your location, but you should be allocating a percentage of every dollar you take in to some sort of advertising.

7. **Goals.** Have you ever heard the saying, “Aim at nothing, and you’ll hit it every time?” This applies to carwashing as well. What are your goals for this quarter or this year? If you don’t have set goals for yourself and your employees, how are you measuring your performance or theirs?

6. **Time management.** This may seem somewhat unattainable in the carwash business. However, there are some things you can do to help manage your time more effectively. Set weekly meetings with your employees and have a time limit. Prepare an agenda in advance. Schedule meetings with vendors and salespeople. It’s your time. Take control of it.

5. **Recruiting.** Don’t wait until you desperately need an employee to start recruiting. This can force you to hire someone who may not be right for the position, or keep someone who needs to be let go. You should always be looking for good people.

4. **Training.** Just like education for yourself, training your employees should be ongoing. Making sure your employees are cross-trained keeps you from being held hostage by employees, their limitations and their schedules. It also keeps your employees engaged by giving them new challenges and responsibilities.

3. **Equipment maintenance.** With considerably higher volumes in express exterior washes, one of the most important factors in profitability is keeping the equipment running at peak performance. You should have an aggressive maintenance program in place and ensure that it is being followed. Don’t wait until a rainy day to grease a few bearings and assume that will suffice. Install a daily, weekly and monthly program to make sure your equipment is being maintained correctly. Ask your equipment supplier for an evening schedule that includes specifications on bearing lubrication and replacement, nozzle replacement, conveyor tension, etc.

2. **Labor.** One of the main attractions to the express exterior model is the reduced labor requirement. Still, you must manage this labor efficiently. With the significantly reduced average in dollars per car, your labor percentage becomes even more important. This further increases the need for proper training, scheduling and recruiting.

1. **Customer service.** Although there is certainly reduced customer interaction with the advent of unattended terminals, auto loading and the like, there is still a customer experience that must be managed. If you are using unattended terminals, they should be checked every day for proper operation. If you are using a service advisor, make sure he is properly trained to provide great customer service while producing acceptable dollars per car. Keep your entire property clean and inviting.

Have I missed anything? If I have, let me know. Over the next few months, I will explore each of these items in detail in my new monthly column for Modern Car Care.

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In last month’s Perspectives column, I listed the top 10 things you need to know about running a successful express exterior carwash. For the next 10 issues, I will discuss each item in more detail.

When I talk to people who are looking to get into the carwash industry, they want to learn everything they can about the business. They attend trade shows, subscribe to all of the industry magazines, hire consultants and talk to other successful operators. Once they have learned the basics of carwashing, they realize it is not as easy as they once thought, and that there is still so much to learn. As they are opening the carwash, they solicit advice and council from the equipment manufacturer, the computer/controller company and the chemical supplier. For the first 12 to 18 months of operation, they are usually open to exploring new, more effective ways of running their operation successfully. I know from experience that getting through the first year of business in any industry, especially the carwash industry, is extremely difficult. So why is it that once a lot of these same operators reach their two-year anniversary, they feel they have learned all there is to know about washing cars? What is it that makes us so hesitant to accept new ideas from outside sources? I used to be the same way.

As the owner/operator of a fast lube for almost 13 years, you couldn’t tell me anything about changing oil that I didn’t think I already knew. Sure, I would attend a trade show once or twice a year, but that was mostly to get away from the lube shop. Looking back now, I can see so many areas where I needed help. How much more successful could my business have been if I had taken the time to educate myself further?

I think the biggest trap owners fall into is in thinking, “I’ve made it this far on my own. I must be doing something right.” And no doubt, you are doing a lot of things right. However, to truly learn as much as you can about your business, you need to start with what you don’t know.

While controller manufacturers dedicate considerable time, money and energy into their support staff, there are certain problems that can be resolved without placing a support call. There are a number of controller manufacturers, so I cannot go into specifics for each one. However, there are certain things you should know how to do, such as measure and recalibrate the pulse length/timing of the conveyor, adjust the timing of a specific piece of equipment, change product and/or service pricing and turn off inoperable pieces of equipment.

Once we have identified the things we don’t know, we need to find out where and, sometimes more importantly, how to get the information and how to disseminate it. If you are like most carwash owners, neither you nor your managers have the time or energy to read every owner’s manual, let alone try to understand them. Instead, ask your managers to make a list of issues they don’t know how to resolve. Meanwhile, make your own list of things you don’t know. By the way, a manager hearing his boss admit there are things he doesn’t understand will have an extremely positive effect on education at the wash.

Combine the lists and assign different areas of learning to each person. Give them the contact information for your equipment, chemical and controller suppliers. Then have everyone teach his new area of expertise to the group. Don’t be surprised if some people in the group already know how to do some of the things on the list. Often, employees consider it “job security” if they are the only one who knows how something works. What needs to be conveyed to them is that someone who knows how to perform complicated tasks at the wash and can teach them to others has job security.

“To teach something is to learn it twice.”

Let me know how it goes.

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This month, I will discuss item number nine on my Top 10 list of the things you need to know about running a successful express exterior carwash.

Carwash owners are almost always looking for ways to increase sales. Some operators use coupons, promotions, advertising and marketing to drive up their gross dollars. There is one method, however, that is often overlooked—getting paid for all of the services you are already performing. For express exterior operators, this may not see as much of a concern as it is for full-serve and off-line full-serve washes. Typically, the express exterior wash’s cash transactions are handled not by a person but by an unattended terminal. Controller manufacturers have gone to great lengths to make their terminals as difficult to circumvent as possible. However, in certain circumstances, it is still feasible to do so. And while we would love to believe that all of our employees are upstanding, honest people, that isn’t always the case.

So how can you make sure you are getting paid for all of the wash services you are providing? The answer is reconciliation.

There is a multitude of controller manufacturers out there, and each one works a little bit differently. So while I cannot go into specifics for each, here are some general guidelines for performing a true reconciliation outside of the normal cash and credit-card reconciliation at the end of the day.

There are two specific areas you need to make sure are closely monitored. The first is the carwashes themselves. Most controllers keep at least two separate records: the number of washes performed and the number and dollar amount of washes that have been paid for. In many cases, there will be a variance in these two numbers. Depending on your controller, you should look for “unloaded,” “unpaid” or “washed but not paid” washes. These numbers should be checked against one another at least once a month. To ensure this information is accurate, wash codes should be set up in your point-of-sale system to account for such things as re-washes, free washes, refunds, etc. If you give away a free wash with an oil change or have pay-at-the-pump washes available, there should be identifying codes for these as well. Make sure your attendants know how to properly execute all of these types of transactions. If everything is set up properly, there should be no variance in the two numbers.

The second area that requires attention is extra services. In addition to monitoring how many total washes are performed, we also need to reconcile that information in concert with what specific services are included with each wash. For example, let’s say only your “Best” wash includes on-line tire shine. Not only do you need to know how many of your “Best” washes were performed and paid for, you also need to know on how many vehicles you applied tire shine. On many controllers, this is known as a relay report. The number of times the tire shine relay came on in a certain period should be identical to the number of your paid “Best” washes in the same period.

While this may sound like a lot of unnecessary work for an express exterior wash that is doing 10,000 washes per month, these reports are generally easy to run and they provide valuable information. Some systems even allow you to run these reports offsite. Having a dishonest employee is not always the cause of giving away free services. Sometimes, wash packages have been set up incorrectly or have been inadvertently changed. All of these things add up.

Don’t know how to set up or run these reports? Call your controller manufacturer and tell them you want to run a report that shows any variances in services performed vs. services paid for. Run the reports and if there are any unexplained discrepancies, work with your supplier to find and remedy the problem.

You are already doing the work. Shouldn’t you make sure you’re getting paid for it?

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Express Carwashing—ADVERTISING

This month, I will discuss item number eight on my Top 10 list of the things you need to know about running a successful express exterior carwash—advertising.

It happens every day. Two carwashes in different parts of the country with similar advertising budgets start advertising campaigns. So why is it that one of these washes sees only a 1 percent to 3 percent increase in volume and the other sees a 10 percent to 15 percent increase over the same period? We all have access to the same basic resources, but the ones who succeed know how to put together a total advertising plan to improve advertising results at affordable costs.

If you are looking for an advertising plan that works without fail in every market, good luck. I haven’t found it either. However, I would recommend that you try different advertising venues and see which one gives you the most favorable results.

No matter what direction you choose, you should be allocating a certain percentage of gross dollars every month to your advertising budget.

Here are a few things to keep in mind when running any type of advertising campaign.

1. Ownership. The advertising campaign you or your agency comes up with must match your vision for the company. It’s up to you to set the tone and clearly define the goals. For example, if you are at or close to maximum volume levels on weekends, your goal shouldn’t be to increase volumes on those days.

You want to increase volumes on Tuesdays and Wednesdays or increase your ticket average on the weekends. Make sure the plan you come up with meets those objectives.

2. Listening. Your customers will tell you what marketing works for them. They’ll even tell you what they want, how they want it and how much they are willing to pay for it. All you have to do is ask them and listen carefully to the answers.

3. Teamwork. A successful advertising campaign does not begin and end with you and your advertising agency. Everything you do is advertising—from the attendants all the way up to the owner. The key is to engage your entire staff and let them offer suggestions. This will give them a feeling of importance, and they will be more likely to actively promote whatever campaign is decided upon since they were included in the decision-making process.

4. Organization. The best planned advertising campaign cannot succeed if there are barriers or restrictions to sales. Don’t expect customers to jump through hoops to save a couple of dollars on your product or service. Make it easy. If you use unattended terminals at your wash, make sure they have been programmed correctly to ensure ease of use for the customer with a discount coupon.

If you use service advisors, make sure they are trained how to deal with customers who have some sort of discount coupon, etc.

5. Direction. Unlike larger corporations, you probably do not have to compete with other departments for a share of the advertising dollar. Use this to your advantage by focusing all of your efforts to a narrowly defined target audience. Remember, “If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time.”

6. Progression. Just as most carwashes are constructed one block on top of the other, successful advertising campaigns are built one on top of the other. How do you know which ones are successful? You must set quantifiable advertising objectives and make sure you track them diligently. Carefully review each advertising program and repeat the ones that worked.

7. Adaptability. Another advantage you have over the larger corporations is the ability to quickly adjust to changes in your marketplace. If an advertising program is not producing the desired results, change it immediately. Don’t wait six weeks. Investigate the problem and fix it.

8. Consistency. Styles change. Style doesn’t. Your name and identifying graphics (logo) should be static for all of your printed advertising. The term “branding” actually means to burn an image into someone’s mind so he cannot forget it. Methods and strategies can vary, but your name, logo and trade slogans should not.

9. Forethought. Did you ever notice that some operators are just a little bit ahead of the curve? These operators have the ability to evaluate their competition, forecast changes in the marketplace and are willing to try new products or services. These owners don’t have a crystal ball. They simply are not as afraid to take risks as others are. Don’t react to trend changes in the industry. Create them.

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Top 10 List

1. Customer service
2. Labor
3. Equipment maintenance
4. Training
5. Recruiting
6. Time management
7. Goals
8. Advertising
9. Reconciliation
10. Education

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This month, I will discuss item number seven on my Top 10 list of the things you need to know about running a successful express exterior carwash—Goals.

So, you finally get to take a vacation from the carwash. You pack everything you need in the car, gather up the family and off you go. You decide that even with the higher gas prices, you are going to drive to your destination. A few hours outside of town, however, you realize that you have forgotten to bring the directions you printed off the Internet. Being an explorer at heart, you just keep driving and never reach your destination. You know where you want to go. You have all of the resources to get there, except the written directions. The same scenario can play out with a business owner with dreams but no written goals.

Here are a few suggestions to help you in writing out the directions to your business’ success:

1. **Write your goals in the positive.** Set goals for what you want, not for what you don’t want. The more positive the goals, the more positive the results.

2. **Know what you want.** If you want to spend less time working on your business, it probably is not a good idea to set a goal of expanding to 15 locations. There’s an old saying that goes, “To punish us, the Gods give us what we ask for.”

3. **Be specific.** Don’t write, “I want to make more money”; write, “I want to increase net revenues by 5 percent in six months.” The more specific the goal, the easier it is to gauge your performance. Also, when writing goals for employees, there is no ambiguity in what is expected when goals are specific.

4. **Be aggressive.** Make sure your goals are high enough — for yourself and others. While you certainly want to set achievable goals, don’t be afraid to shoot for the moon. Learn the difference between planning and setting goals.

5. **Integrate goals.** All of your goals must work together, not contradict one another. If you are running your business with any efficiency now, it would probably be contradictory to set a goal of significantly increasing volume while setting another goal to significantly reduce labor. Furthermore, if you are already at or near maximum capacity on the weekends, a significant volume increase may not be possible.

6. **Balance.** Setting goals is not just about making more money. You should balance your goals to include all parts of your business and life. Business goals should also include things like quality of products and services, being a good citizen in your community, being a good employer, respecting the environment, etc.

7. **Write.** This, to me, is the most important part. If your goals are not written down, they are dreams. You are driving around without your directions. Sometimes, the simple act of writing the goal can put it in motion.

8. **Follow up.** After you have written your goals, make sure that you review them frequently. Put them where you can see them every day. Review with your employees any goals you have given them. This will allow you to gauge their progress and provide motivation and assistance if necessary. Sometimes, you have to go back and re-write a goal. That’s OK. Don’t think of that as a failure. Think of it as a success. Circumstances change, and you have the foresight to make the requisite changes in your goals.

Let me know how it goes.

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This month, I will discuss item number six on my Top 10 list of the things you need to know about running a successful express exterior carwash — Time Management.

Ever hear of the Pareto Principle? It's also known as the “80:20” rule. This principle basically states that 80 percent of unfocused effort generates only 20 percent of the results. The remaining 80 percent of the results can be achieved with only 20 percent of focused effort. While this ratio isn’t always the same, it happens frequently enough to be referred to as the rule in many circumstances. So how do you manage your time at the wash well enough to be on the right side of the 80:20 ratio? Here are a few ideas to assist you in managing your valuable time at the wash.

**Daily to-do list**

Write down all of the tasks you need to accomplish in a day. This will consolidate all of your tasks in one place. Next, prioritize the items on your list so you can complete the most important ones first. You will find that you are spending less time on the less important, often time-consuming things that rob so much of your precious time. These lists are most helpful when you need to do a lot of different tasks or tasks in a lot of different places. While it may seem simplistic, to-do lists are extremely effective, both in getting things done and in reducing the anxiety of doing them. Often, larger tasks seem so daunting that we don’t even know where to begin. Creating a to-do list will allow you to break these large tasks down to their most basic elements, making them more manageable.

If you aren’t able to complete all of the tasks on your list, that’s OK. Simply transfer those to tomorrow’s list and re-prioritize. The most important thing is to make sure that you get all of the high-priority things done every day.

**Priorities**

For those larger, long-term tasks, it’s often difficult to tell which ones to start with. If you will take the time to analyze every long-term project using the following criteria, you will find those projects much easier to prioritize and complete.

- **Purpose.** What is the importance of completing this job? Write down a one-sentence mission statement for the task.
- **Deadline.** The closest deadline does not always make the highest priority. You must use all of the criteria in making that determination.
- **Tools.** Make sure you are using all of the resources available to you.
- **Cost.** What are the acceptable cost boundaries that you can work within?
- **Task completed.** Ensure what is acceptable. Strive for what is exceptional.

**Delegate**

Once you have created and prioritized your lists, don’t be afraid to delegate some of these tasks to your employees. Over time, you will find that there are certain tasks others are better at than you. This is a good thing. The more tasks you feel confident in transferring to others the more time you will have to focus on growing your business. You will also find there are certain tasks you don’t necessarily enjoy. Don’t just assume that everyone who works for you dislikes those tasks as well.

If you have delegated a task to an employee, make sure the employee makes a list of his own. You will also want to add an item to your to-do list to follow up with the employee to ensure the task was completed.

**Scheduling**

One of the things I see keeping so many owners from completing their high-priority tasks is simple scheduling. I think giving your manager the day off and taking his place at the wash is a great idea. However, you must do this with the understanding that you may not complete any of the tasks on your list. You wouldn’t want one of your employees running the wash while simultaneously trying to complete a full list of other tasks. Remember the 80:20 rule?

**Meetings**

Want to have a meeting with your manager and/or employees? There are some guidelines you need to set before you have your next meeting. The meeting needs to have a start time, a location, an agenda and a stop time. The longest a meeting should last is one hour. Allow your managers and employees to add things to the agenda. Anything that is not covered in the meeting should go to the top of the next meeting’s agenda.

A lot of carwash owners couldn’t survive without the assistance they get from their vendors. Chemical suppliers, equipment suppliers and advertising salespeople provide valuable support and services to the wash. The important thing to remember is that you are the customer. You have the authority to set the ground rules. Vendors and salespeople need to schedule appointments to see you. An appointment consists of a start time, a meeting place, an agenda and a stop time. This will not be easy. But it will be effective, and you will stop wasting so much of your valuable time in meetings.

It’s your time. Take control of it.

*By Mike Matthews*

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**Top 10 List**

1. Customer service
2. Labor
3. Equipment maintenance
4. Training
5. Recruiting
6. Time management
7. Goals
8. Advertising
9. Reconciliation
10. Education

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Express Carwashing: Recruiting

This month, I will discuss item number five on my Top 10 list of the things you need to know about running a successful express exterior carwash—Recruiting.

One of the advantages to operating an express exterior wash is the need for fewer employees. That, however, does not lessen the importance of recruiting. Even in an express-exterior operation, your people are your number-one asset. So it is imperative that you recruit properly to ensure you are attracting the best people available for each position. Here are a few guidelines to help you do just that.

Job descriptions

Before you can properly select the right person for the job, you have to define what the job is. People want a job that is appealing and rewarding. Start by giving each position at the wash a title. While the final job description may be the same, to some, titles matter. “customer service attendant” conveys significantly more professionalism and importance to a prospective employee than “guide-on person.” Once you have the title, provide an overview of the responsibilities and qualifications required for the position.

Start with all of the positives of the position. Flexible hours, good pay, paid training and the ability to work outside are just a few examples of positive aspects of the job. Be sure to include physical requirements such as the ability to lift up to 50 pounds or be on your feet for eight hours. Equipment maintenance, computer operation and the ability to perform mathematical equations are some examples of requirements for managers and assistant managers. You’ll also want to make sure the job descriptions are open-ended, to include any future tasks you may wish to incorporate under different job titles.

Candidate descriptions

Now that you have defined the job, define the candidate. Before you start looking for the perfect candidate, you should already have in your mind what that person’s attributes should be. This makes it easier to recognize those traits when you see them.

Attracting candidates

The newspaper is not the first place you should go to attract candidates. If your carwash is already in operation, it’s generally the last place you should go. The first place you should look is your own employees. They already understand the position, know what is expected and they will usually tell the person who is interested all of the good and bad things about the job. Most important, if an employee recommends someone else for employment, he will usually take it upon himself to see that the employee performs up to standard. Other places to attract employees are work programs from local schools or colleges, employment agencies and the employment ads in the local newspaper.

Pre-screening

This is the one place where most employers make a mistake. They don’t pre-screen applicants. Pre-screening does two very important things. First, it allows you to spend the bulk of your time with the candidates that most closely match the candidate description you developed earlier. Second, it allows you to “sell” the position to the prospective employees. Typically, the carwash employee position is looked at in a negative light by wash customers and potential employees alike. This is your chance to change that perception. If you pre-screen properly, you can professionalize your job openings even to people who don’t get the job. Here are some of the things you want to find out about the candidate through your pre-screening: work availability (days and hours), transportation to work, work history, wage history, qualifications, etc. Whether it is a resume, a phone screening or a walk-in, every potential candidate should be pre-screened in the same manner.

In-person interviewing

Once you have separated the qualified from the unqualified through pre-screening, it’s time to interview the qualified candidates.

Conducting successful interviews requires a good deal of time and can be quite challenging. An interview is simply an opportunity to gather a little more information than you would get over the phone. An interview should never become an interrogation or inquisition. The interview process provides you with an opportunity to sell your wash, while professionalizing the overall perception of the carwash industry.

Establish a routine for conducting your interviews. Put it in writing. No matter how many interviews you have done, you will probably need to refer to it from time to time during the interview. List all of the questions you wish to ask and areas you want to cover. By having it in writing, you can make sure nothing of importance is missed and you make sure each person is asked the same questions. This is the only way you can make accurate and fair comparisons of the candidates.

After each interview, a decision should be made as to whether or not that person is a candidate. This prevents forgetting which person was which after a long day of conducting interviews and running the wash. Rate each person on his appearance, motivation, qualifications, work history and attitude. It is important to rate all of the candidates on these attributes individually. You should not rate one candidate against another. The most important thing to remember about choosing candidates is that there are no “maybes.” Either they are candidates, or they are not. If you aren’t sure, it’s a no. Ask yourself, “Am I excited about this person coming to work for me?”

When you hire someone, congratulate him and welcome him to your team. Schedule his orientation and let him know when to be there, what to wear and what to bring. For those people you are not going to offer a position to, thank them for their time and wish them good luck.

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This month, I will discuss item number four on my Top 10 list of the things you need to know about running a successful express-exterior carwash — Training.

Running an express-exterior wash and not having to worry about drying or performing express details on customers’ vehicles doesn’t make training any less important. The most important thing to remember about training is consistency. There may be 100 different ways to do something. The key is finding out which method you want to use and sticking with it. Everyone at the wash must be doing each task the same way every time.

To start training, it is important to keep in mind that people learn in many different ways—hearing, seeing or reading about the task, or actually doing it. Or, it will be some combination of the four. Make the best use of your training time by ensuring that you hit all four of those areas — seeing, hearing, reading and doing.

Once you have decided the exact way you want your employees to perform a task, you should write them down step by step and compile them into a training book. When writing your procedures, be specific. Don’t simply say, “Guide the customer onto the conveyor.” Instead, start with where the employee should be standing. Does he use one hand or two? Where should he stop the vehicle? What should he look for on the customer’s vehicle? Once you have all of the procedures written down, you are ready to start training the employee.

Training begins

The first thing you want to convey to the employee is the desired outcome of performing the task. If the task is guiding on a vehicle, the objective could be “to guide a customer’s vehicle onto the conveyor as quickly and safely as possible.” The important thing is to ensure the trainee knows why he is performing the task.

Let the trainee know what tools he should be using, if any, and what tools are at his disposal if necessary. This doesn’t just refer to actual tools. The employee’s eyes could be tools used to look for damage to a vehicle before it enters the tunnel.

Explain each step of the task to the employee. This is usually the most difficult part of the process. People who learn by hearing are sometimes distracted by the demonstration of a task. So it is important to explain the task without performing it. Demonstration is the step for most people. They take a new employee and say, “Here’s what I want you to do.” Then they perform the task once and training is completed. While that method could work for some employees, it is not always effective and alienates the other types of learners. Perform the task at regular speed without explaining it. Again, we don’t want to distract the trainee who learns by seeing. Once you have demonstrated the task, ask if there are any questions. If not, proceed to the next step.

Now it is time for the employee to perform the task. You want the trainee to perform the task at regular speed, without explaining what he is doing. Another way people learn is by making mistakes. So be sure to let the trainee complete the task, mistakes and all, before you correct him.

Once the trainee has completed the entire task, you can provide feedback. Make sure you tell him what he did correctly and what he could do better next time. Feedback should always be positive. Let the employee try the task again until he has performed it correctly.

So when is training on a particular task completed? It depends on the task. However, that should be a part of the written description of the task, i.e. training is completed when the employee performs the task three times without error. If the task is one that has a lot of steps or takes more than one session to train, give the trainee a copy of the written procedures so he may study the steps before the next training.

Key points

Once the initial training is completed, inform the trainee of any specific areas of concern or potential problems to look for when performing the task. For example, if you were training someone to guide vehicles onto the conveyor, you might want to tell him to look out for a specific year, make or model of vehicle that has a history of damage claims. Or tell him what to do when a vehicle that will not fit onto the conveyor pulls up.

Some key points for the trainer are:

• Make sure you are performing the task exactly as is written in the procedures
• Always train off-line, never on a real paying customer or his vehicle
• Train even the seemingly simplest tasks the same way

The most frustrating thing for a new employee is not knowing exactly what he is supposed to do. Proper training not only gives you better performance from your employees, it also helps you retain them longer.

There are only two types of employees: trained and not trained. Which are yours?

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Express Washing—Equipment Maintenance

This month, I will discuss item number three on my Top 10 list of the things you need to know about running a successful express exterior carwash — equipment maintenance.

With considerably higher volumes in express exterior washes, one of the most important factors in profitability is keeping the equipment running at peak performance. Unlike a full-service operation, where the manager’s main focus is on customer service and employee management, the express exterior manager should be most concerned with equipment maintenance.

To produce a clean, dry vehicle, often without any prepping, carwash tunnels are being built with more and more equipment. While this greatly reduces the need for production labor, it increases the amount of time and frequency with which preventive maintenance needs to be done. So where do you start? Here are a few steps to help you implement a comprehensive preventative-maintenance program.

Consult your manufacturer. Ask the company for the maintenance specifications for every piece of equipment in your tunnel. Be sure to get specifications for any peripheral equipment, such as a reclaim, reverse osmosis or water-softerning systems. Also, contact the manufacturer of your automated terminal(s) if you use them. Often, these units also require cleaning, lubricating and calibrating of parts. Once you have the specifications, figure out how long it would take to perform the required maintenance. Schedule the procedures over the course of one month in half-hour to one-hour increments. This will allow you to perform the maintenance every month without taking an entire day or waiting for a rain day to complete them.

Perform these daily tasks. In addition to scheduled maintenance, there are some tasks that should be performed every day. Before you perform a wet-down in the morning, walk through the equipment room and tunnel and check for any hydraulic fluid leaks. They will be easier to spot then because the floors will have dried overnight. After your leak check, walk back through the equipment room to make sure you are not low on any soaps or chemicals. You can also test all of your hydro-minders at this time to make sure they are operating properly. One last walk through the equipment room will give you a chance to check the oil level in the power packs.

Check for function and quality. Now that you are open for business, take a look at your controller and identify a vehicle that has purchased your top wash. Walk along through the tunnel to make sure everything that comes in that package is working properly. Be sure to check the extra service signs as well. Sometimes a sign is the customer’s only indication that he received a service he paid for. You should also take a walk outside to look at vehicles that have already gone through the wash. This will give you a good indication of your wash quality. Make sure you instruct your employees to convey customer feedback to you. A few customers in a row may comment to an employee that their wheels did not come clean or that their vehicle is still wet. However, if this information never gets to the manager, he will not be able to investigate and fix problems.

Inspect the conveyor. After closing for the night, take one last walk through the wash tunnel. Take a look at the conveyor tension and inspect the chain and rollers. Make a note of any repairs or maintenance that needs to be scheduled.

Watch for damage claims. Proper documentation of damage claims is an often overlooked part of preventive maintenance. If you review your claims monthly and see three instances of passenger side mirrors being damaged, that could be an indication of too much pressure on the passenger side wrap or incorrect RPM speed on the wrap. Or, a wrap foamer may not be working properly. Make sure you are documenting claims precisely and reviewing them often.

Train others. While the manager is ultimately responsible for equipment maintenance, he doesn’t have to do all of it himself. Schedule some time to train employees to perform maintenance procedures. Take the time to demonstrate exactly how a procedure is to be performed.

Major maintenance. Some maintenance is only required once a year or once every two years. However, these procedures are usually more time-consuming than regular preventive maintenance. Tasks such as replacing rollers or taking links out of the conveyor chain are made more important due to the infrequency with which they are required.

Document everything. If you have a prepared maintenance schedule and you follow it and document your maintenance as well as your equipment repairs, you never have to wonder if you missed something. This will also give you a great tool for identifying other problems. If you are constantly replacing the same bearing or the same motor, this may be an indication of more serious problems with the equipment or your maintenance schedule.

Even with carwash equipment, the old saying holds true: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Let me know how it goes.

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The retail sector, and small businesses specifically, have been getting a lot of press lately. From minimum wage hikes in California, to proposed minimum wage increases nationally, to the hiring of “illegal” employees, it’s difficult to watch a news report or read the paper without some mention of labor. Ask anyone that operates just about any type of business, and they will tell you that managing labor is the most difficult part of their job. We’ve already looked at how to recruit the best people, and how to train them properly. The final step in the labor equation is how to manage that labor effectively. Here are a few guidelines to help best manage your workforce:

1. **Set proper expectations early.**
   So often, I see carwash operators that do not set the proper tone with new employees. Since the labor market is so difficult to begin with, sometimes it’s easier to let an employee get away with something “one time” than it is to reprimand the employee for it. The problem, obviously, is that the employee now thinks that this is acceptable behavior. Make sure that employees have a copy of your policies and procedures the day they begin working for you. Enforce those policies every time with every employee. Don’t play favorites.

2. **You get more of what you reward.**
   Let’s say that you have an employee that comes in late, leaves early and doesn’t do what they are told. If you continue to reward that employee with a paycheck every week, you will continue to get those behaviors. Conversely, if you have an employee that goes above and beyond what is asked of them, looks for new challenges and accepts responsibility, reward that behavior.

3. **You cannot afford to have an employee that you cannot afford to lose.**
   I know that sounds counterintuitive, but it is not. It’s great to have employees that you can rely on. Just don’t put yourself into a position to be “held hostage” by that type of employee. If they know that you cannot run the wash without them, they have an advantage over you when it comes to time off, raises, policies, etc.

4. **Training.**
   You’ve read this from me many times; the most frustrating thing for a new employee is not knowing exactly what they are supposed to do. On average, 50 percent of hourly employee turnover is in the first 30 days. There are usually two reasons for this: 1) improper or no training, and 2) unrealistic expectation of the job by the new employee. Make sure you are properly training employees, and that you are properly explaining what the job entails to the people you are recruiting.

5. **Recognition.**
   A recent survey of hourly employees conducted by a national research firm concluded that the majority of hourly employees are motivated not by a raise, but by public recognition. Obviously, you have to give raises to employees after some tenure on the job. But, also remember to publicly praise employees in front of their peers. Create a celebration for “one year of service” to the company. Now they get a week vacation and a different colored uniform. Employee longevity will become a badge of honor with your employees.

6. **Respect.**
   The aforementioned survey also reports that 63 percent of hourly workers stated the No. 1 way to motivate and retain employees was by conveying respect and value. There has long been a saying in the retail industry: “The customer is always right.” I happen to disagree with that somewhat. Sometimes the employee is right. As an owner, I always felt my first obligation was not to the customer, but to my employees.

   If you take care of your employees, they will take care of your customers.

   Let me know how it goes.

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It’s time for the finale of the Top 10 things you need to know to run a successful express exterior carwash… and No.1 is: customer service. Countless books and articles have been written about it, and everyone I talk with talks about it – about how they are providing, or are going to provide it more and better than everyone else.

People speak of “customer satisfaction” as a tangible thing. As in, “We have a 95 percent customer-satisfaction rating.” While that sounds great, I wonder if anyone has ever stopped to find out if that’s what customers care about.

In my opinion, a satisfied customer in the carwash industry is not something to advertise or strive to attain. Of course, I would choose satisfied customers instead of dissatisfied customers. But are there only two choices? Is that the only measure of how well I am running my wash?

To me, “satisfied” means that you, as my customer, got exactly what you paid for. Nothing more, nothing less. It wasn’t awful; it wasn’t great. It was just a carwash. So what else is there?

First and foremost, there’s customer loyalty. I want a loyal customer, a customer that is going to drive past three other carwashes to get to mine. A satisfied customer views getting his or her car washed as a chore. A loyal customer will tell his friends about the great carwash he found. A satisfied customer goes to your competitor when they have a coupon. A loyal customer understands that value is more important than price. So how do you create loyal customers?

Understanding the customers’ motivations is the first step to gaining loyalty. My contention is that the majority of carwash customers come not just to get a clean car. They come to feel better about themselves and their vehicles. They don’t necessarily like a clean car in and of itself; they like how a clean car feels and smells. They like how a clean car looks to other people. When people go buy a mattress, they aren’t buying fabric, wood and bedsprings. They are buying a good night’s sleep. What are your customers buying?

Once you’ve recognized your customers’ motivations, you have to gain their trust. Trust is one of the most important factors in gaining loyalty. This trust goes much further than your customers knowing your equipment won’t scratch their vehicle or that your employees won’t steal anything. This trust is about integrity. And it starts with giving the customer good service at a fair price.

As it progresses, it is about customers believing that you are the expert when it comes to the appearance of their vehicles, and that you will take care of each vehicle as if it were your own. After trust is gained, customers need to feel as if they are special every time they come in – the feeling of “knowing someone on the inside,” or getting VIP treatment. (I am not advocating giving away extra services; I think that you should produce a clean, dry car and charge accordingly.) While this is most difficult in the express exterior environment, it is not impossible.

Have one of your employees walk through the vacuum area once an hour and talk to customers, making sure they love the wash they received – and make sure that your employee is empowered to help the customer if this isn’t the case. Throughput is very important at an exterior wash, but don’t be afraid to stop the conveyor if someone is confused or scared about the process. The long-term revenue that you would lose by alienating that timid customer in the tunnel is a far greater loss than the loss of the extra car you would have been able to run that hour.

Lastly, the entire culture of your company should be aimed at creating loyal customers. Anytime I’m in a retail establishment and the company’s mission statement is posted, I read it. Often I am surprised at how frequently they speak only of themselves, and not the customer. It’s always, “We will strive to … We will make … We promise to.” I believe that a mission statement should be a very simple, straightforward customer-focused idea that guides your every thought and action at the carwash. Do you have a mission statement? What does it say about your customers?

Let me know how it goes.

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