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SHOP DRIVEN TO 'GIVE BACK'

Making sure techs, community, customers have what they need moves Wilhelm Automotive.

By Tschanen Brandyberry, Managing Editor

While the philosophy at Wilhelm Automotive Service Centers is to keep a customer for life, it could be continually "giving back." From giving to the community through service to working with the industry via internships and training programs or new technology for technicians, Wilhelm continually gives back. And that's just fine with the leadership of the five-shop group.

"I don't see how you run a successful business, especially in tough times, without giving back," says Thom Gyder, president of Wilhelm Automotive Service Centers.

Starting with the industry, Wilhelm is making sure the future is secured as best it can. The company regularly offers internships to seniors in area high school automotive programs. They match the students with at least

one if not two technicians and show them how the repair industry operates.

"Though we do try to teach them the basics, like how do you mop a floor, how do you clean up, how do you organize, we also like to get them involved and exposed to the repair process,"

Gyder says. "How does paper flow through the shop and what does a technician do so they don't come into the trade thinking, 'I don't want to be a technician, I'll just mop floors my whole life.'"

The giving back continues with support of the Automotive Technical Institute (ATI) and Universal Technical Institute (UTI), which Gyder says are essential to continue to have a pool from which to draw good, quality employees in the future.

"Our industry has had a shortage of technicians for the last couple of decades. They just aren't making any more. And as quickly as they make a new technician, old ones are dropping off. And I don't mean dying, they're leaving the trade," he explains. "There aren't a lot of technicians, but there are a lot more cars."

Working to prepare the future while improving on the present helped Wilhelm Automotive Service Centers place in the top 10 of the fourth annual *Motor Age* Top Shops Contest.

Community Based Growing

Getting out into the community and serving not only makes the company a good corporate citizen, but also helps business. For instance, Wilhelm's locations offer free inspections for senior citizens and



Part of the top management team at Wilhelm includes (from left) Thom Gyder, Charley Gyder, Doug Gyder and Chris Garman.



Shop Talk

Name: Wilhelm Automotive

Location: Peoria, Ariz.

(main location)

Number of stores: 5

Years in business: 81

Shop designations: BBB

No. of employees: 44 (all locations)

No. of ASE certified employees: 18 (all locations)

Square footage: 15,000

(main location)

No. of bays: 17 (main location)

Weekly vehicle volume: 47

(main location)

Average repair cost: \$368.41

(main location)

Annual revenue: \$900,400

(main location)



Wilhelm Automotive's shops are utilized often for training. Whether it's a supplier training or another option, technicians' feedback is taken into consideration.

armed service personnel. The off-site, 60-point visual inspections, as well as a test drive and one-on-one consultation, wrap up with a written evaluation.

The vehicle health inspections are done off site and consist of a 60-point visual inspection, a test drive and the findings of each inspection. Each inspection comes with a written evaluation and is completely free.

"It's just responsible to do a free inspection and to help people out. And of course any time you do that, you can have the work done here, you can have the work done somewhere else," Gyder says. "But the basic safety inspections, especially on-site for senior citizens, is another way of giving back to the community."

Another way the facility gives back is through Wilhelm Volunteers. Each of the five locations chooses a representative to identify a group to support. They give their time and energy to these groups, logging more than 500 volunteer hours annually. So whether it's just sponsoring a youth sports team or getting out there and coaching it too, Gyder says there is no reason to not give back.

"And you can use the same philosophy of backing up good customers. They come to you and they ask you to help out on something, and that kind of stuff is very synergetic," he states. "That's where you get your business from. Your business comes from the community, so if

you support the community, people in the community know it. And they come in and they support you."

This helps the shops fulfill their philosophy of keeping customers for life. Wilhelm employees institute their service spirit into their daily work, making sure problems are fixed.

"It doesn't matter what you do to make your customers happy if you don't fix their car right. We have a very heavy



Wilhelm's waiting area keeps customers close to the desk for updates.

emphasis on fixing the customer's car," Gyder offers. "There's a lot of places that sell repair work, but they don't necessarily repair the car and they don't necessarily fix the customer's problem. When somebody brings a car in, we put a lot of emphasis on figuring out what is the problem and let's make sure that we fix the problem."

And that's where the company's efforts to give back equipment to its employees factors in.

Planning, Planning and More Planning

According to Gyder, technology purchases at Wilhelm are not taken lightly. Shop managers meet monthly with the owners to discuss and plan key management decisions and to monitor annual goals.

That includes looking at the shops' computerized diagnostic and scan equipment and the training necessary to perform diagnostic repairs. Gyder says they are very careful about implementing new technology.

"Technology can be very expensive, and it has to serve a profitable purpose," he says. "And I'm a firm believer in simplicity. I haven't always succeeded in that area, mind you, but any technology we look to implement, whether it's technical out in the shop as far as on board diagnostic units or whether it's a software system in the office we use to manage our customers and fleets and our repair order system, the key is to keep it simple. Before ever buying it, we look for something that's simple that we can keep working."

The staff at Wilhelm develops detailed plans for technology and software upgrades before diving into any changes to make sure the process is as smooth as possible and work can continue to be completed. However, no matter the technology utilized, training is not sacrificed at any point.

The shops' network is set up so that all technicians can talk with one another, problem solve and train on the job using real-life situations. Other training opportunities are promoted through vendors and suppliers.

"When we identify a class, whether the training comes to our shop or the trainer comes to another shop, and our shop is used a lot, we usually have a very high turnout," Gyder says. "What's really interesting is that if the class is good, they'll tell us. And if the class is boring or a sales job or really had no information, they'll tell you that too, that it was a waste of time. They don't like wasting their time."

After all, they could be giving their time back in other ways. *MZ*

Photos: Wilhelm Automotive Service Centers