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Surviving the winter cold

Many auto workshops in the southern part of Australia and in New Zealand are very familiar with the downturn in repair and maintenance sales starting with the first bite of winter.

This is common across all manner of retail sales, and studies have shown that the weather can indeed influence shopping patterns.

It is possible to turn the winter months into profitable months with a little forward planning. Here are some ideas:

1. Run a winter promotion – Email, SMS, mail or social media can be used to run a promotion to your database. This might sound crazy, but the detail of the promotion itself is not overly important. What is important is that you have put your brand and business in front of the customer. The idea is to keep your shop top of mind. Obviously, you need a good, qualified database to start with, so if your workshop is not collecting mobile phone numbers, email addresses or encouraging Facebook 'likes', the sooner you start the better.

2. Contact customers about items you forecast may need attention – During summer many items requiring attention are not attended to for various reasons. It can be very worthwhile going back through past invoices to follow up customers who had been advised on previous invoices that some parts may need to be replaced or some repair carried out in the future. This can be a very effective strategy, and you will find many automotive software programs are starting to build this function into their customer reminder systems.

3. Follow up quotes – Every day, workshops deliver many quotes – formal and informal – many of which are never followed up. This is a resource going begging. Some may have been just over the phone or optional repairs that might have been identified during a service. These are all hot prospects. This is where the quote book plays a big part. Every quote, regardless of how it is delivered, must be written in the quote book. At the same time, enter a date for a follow up to the quote. Some may be in the next 48 hours, others may be months away. It doesn't matter, they are all potential jobs and someone just needs to be given the daily task of following up the entries in the quote book.

For more information on this topic refer to the September 2013 article (*Quote book – Don't wait for customers to call you*) at www.tatbiz.net.au/resources

4. Follow up customers who didn't return for the service – When the workshop is busy, this chore is often overlooked, but during winter, a phone call to those customers who were sent service reminders but did not respond could be a hidden money earner. You would be surprised how many customers simply forget to book in and your phone call will often push them over the line.

5. Annual price review – The new financial year for Australia is 30 June, while New Zealand is 31 March. The logical time to review your hourly labour rate and pricing structure is at the start of the new financial year. The costs of parts, rents, wages and electricity rise every year, so it makes sense to adopt incremental rises in your services each year, rather than large increases every few years which can come as a big surprise to your customers. Most people understand and accept small increases in costs at the beginning of every financial year.

6. Winter is a good time for projects – Every workshop has an enthusiastic car restorer on their books. These can be great fill-in jobs during winter and enthusiasts might be encouraged to get their classic car restored if you offer them a winter-only discount rate for the job.

7. Focus on air conditioning servicing – Proactively selling aircon repairs and services is something the industry does poorly in summer and usually not at all in winter. However, air conditioning systems are still required to work during winter, to help with window demisting, so take the blinkers off and start proactively looking for aircon opportunities. When you identify one that needs attention you need to alter your sales pitch to emphasise the safety aspect of a properly functioning aircon system. The risk of driving on wet roads during winter with a fogged-up windscreen is a good enough reason to push the service.

8. Winter can bring out the worst in cars – Even if family vehicles have been prepared for the winter months, there are issues that can arise unexpectedly. In winter, cars may run rough, stall or not start. Customers need to be advised that, regardless of time of year, a car not running as it should, needs to be inspected by a technician. Many problems will only worsen if cars continue to be driven, even during the winter months, without being checked.

While a car may take a bit longer to start in cold weather and run a bit rougher, it is unlikely the cold weather is causing any other issues, so repairs should not be postponed simply because your customer thinks it is the cold causing their problems.

These are just a few ideas to keep your team busy during those dreary winter months. The ideas may require a bit of work, but the efforts will be well worth it for the financial rewards.

The place to start is www.tatbiz.net.au/resources.

Just go for it!