

TOP SHOP

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COMMITMENT COMPASSION CUSTOMER CARE

2017 MR. TIRE/BIG 3 TIRE TOP SHOP AWARD WINNER
Northtown Auto Service & Tire Center
McHenry, IL

FINALISTS

Budget Tire
Lincoln Park, MI
PAGE 8

Kirtlan Automotive
Wabash, IN
PAGE 13

Trail Tire
Dundee, OH
PAGE 18



K&M Cares was formed in October 2015 to enhance K&M's philanthropy efforts by focusing specifically on our local communities, K&M employees, and their families.

In the first year, K&M Cares successfully raised over \$64,000 through fundraisers, item sales, and donations from employees. Nearly 60% of the money raised has been donated to individuals and local organizations like the Kids Summer Breakfast Program, the Give Back Program, Suppers-on-Us, and many more.

Currently, K&M Cares is participating in a number of community outreach programs, soup kitchens, and nursing homes throughout the Midwest and Great Plains.

If you are interested in more information about K&M Cares,
please e-mail K&MCares@kmtire.com.

A black and white photograph of two hands shaking, symbolizing agreement or partnership. The hands are positioned centrally, with one hand from the left and one from the right, gripping each other. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

**"WE MAKE A LIVING BY WHAT WE GET,
BUT WE MAKE A LIFE BY WHAT WE GIVE."
- WINSTON CHURCHILL**



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Congratulations to the owners of Northtown Auto Service & Tire Center, Mark and Kristin Hartmann, and their entire staff on being selected as the Winner of the 2017 Mr. Tire/ Big 3 Tire Top Shop Award. Your unwavering dedication to customer service and to your community, along with your keen managerial style, has helped you earn this honor. Let me congratulate you personally as well as on behalf of our K&M Tire employees.

As an ideal representative of your industry, you are being presented with this award, which is powered by Hankook Tire America and supported by O'Reilly's Auto Parts. You were selected for the honor based on the high number of outstanding reviews that reflect your commitment to your customers and your dedication to your community. The customer testimonials show that you always strive to make the customer the most important person in your business. In addition, your community involvement displays a servant's attitude and your desire to make a positive difference within your community. Your efforts organizing the Knights of Columbus' holiday meal program, participating in a mission trip to help impoverished areas of Kentucky, supporting local sports teams, areas schools, Gigi's Playhouse benefitting Down Syndrome, Senior Services, Kiwanis, St. Vincent de Paul Society and many more local organizations, along with helping to provide scholarships for area teens, are to be applauded.

Having over 100 Google reviews with an average of 4.7 out of 5 stars shows your commitment and dedication to customer service. Considering the many great dealers within the Mr. Tire/Big 3 Tire programs, the competition to be awarded the 2017 Mr. Tire/Big 3 Tire Top Shop was very stiff; but your mission, vision and values helped you surpass the other outstanding dealers.

We are honored to be doing business with such an exceptional company! Northtown Auto Service & Tire Center, you are among the best of the best and are worthy of being the 2017 Mr. Tire/Big 3 Tire Top Shop Winner. Good luck in the national Top Shop competition.

Sincerely,

Ken Langhals
President
K&M Tire, Inc.

Northtown Auto Service & Tire Center

How Commitment, Compassion and Customer Care Built a Culture of Excellence

By Patti Renner - Editor, *Tire Review*

THE DETAILS:

Location:

McHenry, IL

Founded:

1995 by John Colomer

Owners:

Kristin and Mark Hartmann

Brands stocked:

Hankook, Mastercraft, Carlisle

Gross sales: \$1.9 million

Revenue mix:

19% tires / 81% service

When Kristin and Mark Hartmann were invited by her retired father to help him start an auto-service business, they decided to build something truly unique in their hometown of McHenry, Ill.

"My father (John Colomer) had been in the automotive business for years, but was awfully young to be retired and soon grew antsy," Kristin recalls. "He did have a couple of independent shops that were more specialized – radiator and cooling service – and he was a parts distributor. Mark was in the automotive business (a master technician) as well. They got together and decided that this area was in need of a general auto repair and tire center, but one that is different than anything that this town had ever seen."

The goal was to create a customer-centric service business that would stand the test of time. Mission accomplished. And it's the level of quality, customer focus and exceptional service that made such an impression

on the panel of independent Top Shop judges who selected Northtown as the 2017 Winner of the Mr. Tire/Big 3 Tire Top Shop Award, sponsored by Hankook Tire America Corp. and supported by O'Reilly Auto Parts.

A member of K&M Tire's Mr. Tire marketing group program, Northtown primarily stocks Hankook, Mastercraft and Carlisle lines. With Goodyear and Firestone company stores nearby, the brands they carry are used as a way to differentiate the business among customers. The business does \$1.9 million in gross sales, 81% from service work and 19% from tire sales.

While they sell a lot of tires, according to Mark the focus is to provide a complete car care solution to the customers they serve.

"We want to capture the customer," explains Mark. "We want the customer to use us for the majority of their auto needs. The major services people look for are general auto repair, tire service,



When designing Northtown Auto Service & Tire Center, shown here, the goal was to create a building that was easy to maintain, professional and would stand the test of time. While the Hartmanns would not disclose the amount spent on its construction, they did say the facility has helped them stand out and differentiate Northtown from competition in the area.

and oil change. You'd have to visit different shops to get all three in this town so we decided to put it all under one roof – a one-stop shop for all three."

In 1995 Northtown Auto Service & Tire Center opened its doors. More than a decade later, Mark and Kristin bought out her father. "We haven't looked back," says Kristin. "We officially purchased the business seven years ago, so we are now the principles with no outside investment. It simplifies things, but it's a gamble – but one that has paid off so far."

Both Kristin and Mark are lifelong residents of McHenry, a small town of roughly 30,000 people that sits in the heart of the Fox River area, about 50 miles northwest of Chicago. Mark started out his career as a technician at a different independent repair shop. He met Kristin while picking up a parts order at her father's business. "Twenty-five years later and here we are," he smiles, glancing over at his wife.

BUILDING FOR SUCCESS

Built from the ground up on the same site where the Worldwide Fireworks factory spectacularly burned to the ground when Mark was a kid, the plan was always for Northtown to spark something special. The space itself shows attention to detail. When you enter through the shop's front door, a residential-sounding doorbell chime ("ding dong") announces your arrival. The front counter is well placed for friendly engagement. Upstairs offices allow for more privacy and better use of interior space. Bathrooms feature artwork and appreciated personal accoutrements. Colomer and his architects designed the 14-bay shop, with Mark outlining the



Q: Is it a problem that you don't really look like a tire store?

A: "It's funny, that the split-face block actually worked against us in the beginning. Even though it said "Auto and Tire" on the front of our building, people thought we were a medical facility. It took a lot of advertising in the beginning to overcome that, and we continue to use a picture of our building in our marketing."

- Kristin Hartmann

in-bay locations for workflow, equipment and storage. The interior footprint is designed to increase efficiency and technician safety. For instance, their tire inventory is at the center of the bay area to minimize walking. And the exterior is designed to set Northtown apart.

"When I think back 20 years ago when this building was built, our competitors at the time were other independents, but we also had a couple of new-car dealers that were strong," recalls Mark. "So we asked ourselves, why are people going to choose us? We needed to have a building that was visually appealing and invited them in. The exterior architecture with the split-face block – no buildings are made of split-faced block in our business. It also has metal architectural roof. We wanted

a building with limited maintenance that would be here in the years to come."

Kristin adds, "Visually, we wanted to create an appealing, comfortable place for a customer to come. And when you think about what things were like 20 years ago and having a place that a person would want to go to and sit down and wait while they had their car fixed, well, it was a risky proposition for anyone who wanted to sit in a clean chair, so to speak. So, along with the service ideas we had in mind, it was also about making us different in that sense as well. The building is pretty – yes. It's a comfortable place for people to come – yes. Our bathrooms are spotless – yes. It started with the most basic of things and then we built upon that."

Kristin said they learned a lot by



Natural light, clean design and high ceilings make for a comfortable customer area. The corporate offices are located on the second level, accessible by the open green stairs.

OPEN COMMUNICATION

A key component to supporting a culture of service is communication – both to the customer and within the organization.

“I think we’ve learned that every good thing that happens, and every bad thing that happens, comes down to communication,” says Kristin. “Whether the lack of or if it’s good or bad, every aspect of our lives boils down to communication, so I don’t think you can have enough of it.”

Anchietta agrees, noting that the organization has ground rules so the conversations remain productive and solution oriented.

“You’re allowed to voice any concerns, any issues, any ideas, but we provide the platform for how it needs to be presented so we can be better and more effective without it turning into a complaint session,” he explains.

“The way we communicate, everyone understands that if you have a concern or an idea, please express it. If it’s a problem that needs to be resolved, please provide some sort of solution so we can provide that as a focal point on where to begin, a fixing process. That helps tremendously keeping the flow open because you essentially learn from each other. We have a good team. Learning from each other is ongoing, and it gets fine-tuned as time goes by.”

Internal communication takes place on a scheduled basis. The team meets daily to discuss immediate needs and the to-do list; weekly to talk about performance, training, metrics, customer feedback and to offer praise for things done well. Each month is a larger meeting to discuss performance goals, benchmarks and training.

For customers, Kristin says the business has always gone the extra mile with its communication and follow-up, which has evolved over time. “We’ve learned that you have to focus and tailor everything on each individual customer and give them what they want – how they want it, when they want it. So, you have to communicate with them the way they like to be communicated to – not the way we want to communicate.

“What we do differently is learning

visiting other shops, collecting ideas of what they wanted to do and what they wanted to avoid. Even today she makes it a point to see things as if through the eyes of a customer – what a person might expect versus the experience they actually get with each interaction. It’s this attention to the customer experience that drives the culture at Northtown.

CUSTOMER COMPASSION

While many shops claim to be focused on the customer, the team at Northtown is tasked to take things to the next level with each and every interaction. According to Business Development Director Jose Anchietta, it’s part of the culture – and it’s what makes Northtown so unique.

“Part of the philosophy at Northtown is that all customers expect a wonderful experience and we try to deliver that every time,” says Anchietta. “What sets us apart is the fact that we do our best to anticipate their needs before they actually have that need – giving them a pleasant surprise or beating them to the

answer to their question before they ask. Or giving something that you know the customer will appreciate. It’s something that helps us really have an edge over any other shop around here as far as customer relationships and service.”

A perfect example of this is when the company serviced a customer from out of town. The person mentioned that they heard good things about a barbecue place nearby. During that casual conversation, the service writer quietly printed out the menu for the restaurant so the customer could make a decision on what to eat for lunch by the time his vehicle was ready to go.

Also, when repairs are required to pass the state emissions test, not only will the Northtown team make the repairs, they also take the vehicle to the emissions center and have it tested and passed, providing the customer with complete paperwork, much to their delight.

“It’s part of our culture here, so going the extra mile for the customer happens so often that we don’t even really think about it being anything else other than being Northtown,” says Anchietta.

Q: How do you keep your bathrooms spotless?

A: “We clean them. Every day. And weekly they get a complete sanitization (from an outside cleaning crew). Every employee is responsible for them. It’s actually mentioned in Google reviews plenty of times. It sounds silly but it’s important to people.”

- Kristin Hartmann

more about the customer, making a connection and catering the experience to them individually, whether it be man, woman, senior, new driver, it doesn't matter. It's a different experience for every customer," Kristin adds.

The shop has used R.O. Writer by Progressive Automotive Systems since 2004. The system connects the customer communications, retention, follow-up, work history, repair recommendations and accounting. R.O. Writer is further enhanced by a system called MechanicNet.

"At the time, we let them know by verbally communicating to the customer what was found and what's needed, of course," explains Kristin. "We're also sensitive to the fact that people aren't always in a position to absorb repair costs so we help prioritize for them. Then after that person leaves, we have an excellent follow up system that is tailored to each individual customer. The communication methods are individualized because everybody is different. Whatever their preference is we will communicate with them in that way."

Even with the attention to detail delivered to customers of Northtown, not every job goes smoothly. But the



Employee tenure at Northtown averages 12 years. Taking care of its team is a priority.

ready for them."

Mark is at the business on a full-time basis. Part of his role is to monitor the overall tone of the shop and its discussions, but without micromanaging. One thing he watches for are how mistakes are handled and how problems are dealt with.

"We have excellent general

happy when things do go awry. "They don't have to go to Mark to say they ordered the wrong part and now they have to rent a car. They are completely empowered to do that because the expectation is the customer and the customer experience. They have full authority to take care of those things, to take care of the customer."

"We do everything we can for the customer, minimizing the disruption to their life."

- Kristin Hartmann

team sees that as an opportunity.

"That is when a business shines, when they mess up," shares Kristin. "Bad things are going to happen, so what is the company going to do to make things right when that happens. An example would be – we promised you your car by the end of the day. You're counting on getting your car but the parts don't come. Not our fault, but it doesn't matter who or how it happened, she still wants her car. We could say it's not my fault – it's the parts people's fault. But that doesn't matter to the customer – they have to get to work tomorrow. So how are we going to do to minimize any disruption to the customer? In this example, we would have a rental car

technicians here, journeyman technicians who do an excellent job of repairing the mechanics of your vehicle," says Mark. "I tell our people that if there's a problem, identify it. Admit to it. Discuss it. Solve it. It's going to happen, so do something about it. The key is transparency, admitting to and apologizing for, rectifying – those are all parts of the process. If you hide it you lose trust – trust of the customer, the trust of your manager and, ultimately, you could lose your job. The key is identifying it and preventing it from ever happening again."

Kristen adds that managers have total leeway to make decisions and fix any situations to keep the customer

EMPLOYEE EMPATHY

The focus on care extends beyond the customer and to the staff itself. Average employee tenure is 12 years. The Hartmanns take a personal interest in the work, the lives and the development of each individual on their team.

"We truly value our employees," says Kristin. "We understand that there is a huge shortage of good qualified automotive technicians and we have really, really good ones. I'm sure they could be hired anywhere, I know that. But we try to do everything we can to make this a place they want to come to every single day. Part of that is we upgrade our equipment – they're using state-of-the-art equipment. They work in a beautiful, clean, safe shop. It's a positive environment. You can say all those things, but it comes down to the fact that they are truly valued. We invest ourselves in their lives and we care about them – not just about how many hours booked this week and what's your



Spacious bays, updated equipment, efficient shop design, an emphasis on safety and a great team all contribute to making Northtown a great place to work.



comeback ratio – we care so much more about them than that.”

Mark adds that the business pays above average wages with a compensation structure of base pay salary plus commission. They also offer health insurance, dental, a wellness program, retirement plan, uniforms, and paid training.

“Training is huge here,” Mark shares. “I think our employees appreciate that we’re investing in their improvement too. We find continuing education and make sure they take full advantage of that. The industry is constantly changing and they have to change with it and they want to. These are smart people; it’s not an easy job.”

After working with Northtown as a consultant, business development guru Anchietta was hired full time about three years ago. Today he is responsible for finding new ways to grow the business and retain the strong foothold that exists. That includes managing their online presence and reviews, marketing, advertising, customer communications, use of data and redeveloping the website.

In a career that has spanned many different environments, he says

Northtown is something special.

“Working for Mark and Kristin as owners, it’s a gift,” Anchietta explains. “Their genuine interest in employees, their willingness to help develop their vision and how they want to incorporate people as part of their vision is something you don’t see often.”

Kristin says that their level of commitment to their employees feeds their culture of complete customer care.

“I mean, Mark and I may ‘own’ the business but I think everyone here is invested in the business,” she explains. “I think that personally, most of them are as invested in the success of this business as we are. I believe that, especially when you see the extra things people do to go above and beyond what they have to do for their job. And the interesting thing is that sometimes we don’t even know about it – we’ll find out later. It’s the extra stuff that they do on their own to take care of the customer, to go above and beyond. It comes naturally to them.”

Anchietta confirms, sharing that the people who work at Northtown definitely feel a sense of ownership in the business and look out for its well-being.

“That involves going the extra mile, doing silent favors for people. Shame on us for not capitalizing on it more often,” he laughs.

REVIEWS AND REWARDS

An area that Anchietta has capitalized on is taking the shop’s exceptional above-and-beyond reputation in the community to build out marketing and messaging to further reinforce it.

“I noticed when I looked at [Northtown’s online] reviews the list was endless, like 1,800 reviews and they were like an average of 4.86 out of 5, or something ridiculous like that. So we shifted to using customer testimonials as part of our marketing to the point that it’s now part of our slogan, ‘The Most Recommended and Reviewed Auto Center in McHenry County.’ Capitalizing on the fact that Northtown has such a good reputation, then incorporating that into our marketing strategy, is what we’ve seen really works,” he says.

The business doesn’t have a formal strategy in place to collect reviews from its customers – they simply ask. If people had a good experience or verbalize appreciation, they invite them

Providing the best tire service and auto care in the area with respect, kindness and appreciation is part of what makes Northtown unique. Continuing education for technicians is a priority to keep the level of service high.



to leave a review online, preferably on Google as they admittedly struggle with Yelp. To support those unfamiliar with online reviews, they include an informational step-by-step sheet with each receipt that explains how to review them. If they would like to review their experience with Northtown, the sheet explains how to do so – good and bad.

"When you tag the casual request to do it, and when you do what we do to anticipate someone's needs, that match makes it very easy for a customer to take a couple minutes of their day to share their experiences," shares Anchieta. "A lot of the best reviews we get are new customers, so you can see what kind of experience they're used to and may have been expecting, and how we were different."

The reviews highlight many examples of how customer care, compassion and commitment consistently set Northtown apart.

"Our commitment is hugely important," says Mark. "Our commitment to our community, to customer service... The people in this room and the remaining employees in this building have a huge commitment to the product we're producing. We're all on board with that."

Kristin adds, "We made a huge commitment, a significant investment in this community. I guess we could've open up in a strip mall or something, but to make this investment in McHenry is

about our commitment here. We're here to stay. It certainly wasn't a 'Let's try it to see what happens' sort of thing."

When asked about advice share with other tire dealers, Kristin says there's no real secret to their success beyond doing things right for the people they do business with.

"We provide the best auto care and tire service in the area with respect, with kindness, with appreciation, and we're lucky enough to make a living at it," she shares. "I grew up in this town; my children went to school here. I go to church in this town, go to restaurants and out shopping where we see our customers all the time and I have to tell you, we have an excellent reputation and it feels good. We love what we do and we're lucky enough to make a living at it."

Mark agrees, adding, "We've developed a culture, for sure. I appreciate everybody here. You have to show that you appreciate them and let them know what they did well, not just what they did wrong. My advice for other owners? Put the customer's needs first and I can guarantee you will always win as a business. Hands down, the first thing I say is to put the customer's needs first."

"People realize that they have choices so we have to be different," says Kristin. "There are many choices out there but we want them to choose us every time." ■

CUSTOMER PERKS FOR TIRE SALES

- Lifetime tire rotation
- 12-month free tire repairs
- Free air
("It's silly but it brings people in.")
- Lifetime balancing
- TPMS service
- Total pricing
("When we quote a price, it's a complete price – no extras, no disposal fee or hidden costs.")

TIP: FREE AIR

Having a sign on the curb for "free air" gets people in the shop more often. Usually it's the quick lube team at Northtown that handles the air pressure needs. They are trained to invite prospects to consider tire service or replacement if they see an issue that needs addressed with the air fill.

Budget Tire Co.

Founded on Honesty

By Kristen Criswell - Managing Editor, *Tire Review*

Located in the shadow of the Motor City is Lincoln Park, Mich. The Downriver community is home to two stars: musician Bob Seger and one of this year's Mr. Tire/Big 3 Top Shop Finalists, Budget Tire Co.

After several years working as a district manager for Uniroyal Tire, Pete Shrake Sr. decided to go into business for himself. In 1972, he founded Budget Tire Co. with his wife, Maria. The business started as a tire and auto repair facility but over the years evolved, cutting its auto repair services and adding wholesale tire sales.

Today, Budget Tire is a two-store tire dealership owned and operated by Pete Shrake, Jr. The dealership is 99% focused on tire sales with 40% retail to 60% wholesale split. If it runs on tires, Budget Tire has the product to shoe it – the dealership carries lawn and garden tires, motorcycle tires, trailer tires and passenger tires.

Shrake Jr. caught the tire bug in high school when he started working at Budget Tire and found he enjoyed coming to work each day and dealing with the public. He learned a lot of the business from his father.

"(My father) was successful in business for being honest, not selling a customer something they didn't need and giving everyone a fair price for what they needed done," Shrake shares. "He took pride in his work and was always helpful to his employees."

Shrake, who has owned Budget Tire for the past decade, is continuing his father's legacy of honesty while growing a successful business of his own.

"We strive to be honest with (customers) on their tire needs," he says. "I've had people come in for tires when they don't need them, and we are honest



Budget Tire was founded in 1972 by Pete and Maria Shrake. Initially the dealership focused on tires and service, but today the company focuses just on wholesale and retail tire sales.

and won't sell the tires. We tell them to come back after they wear them out. Honesty is the best policy."

Since taking over the dealership, Shrake has added more national accounts and car dealer deliveries as well as a retail and wholesale website. He has also adopted a new POS system for Budget Tire and has plans of remodeling the dealership's showrooms in the future.

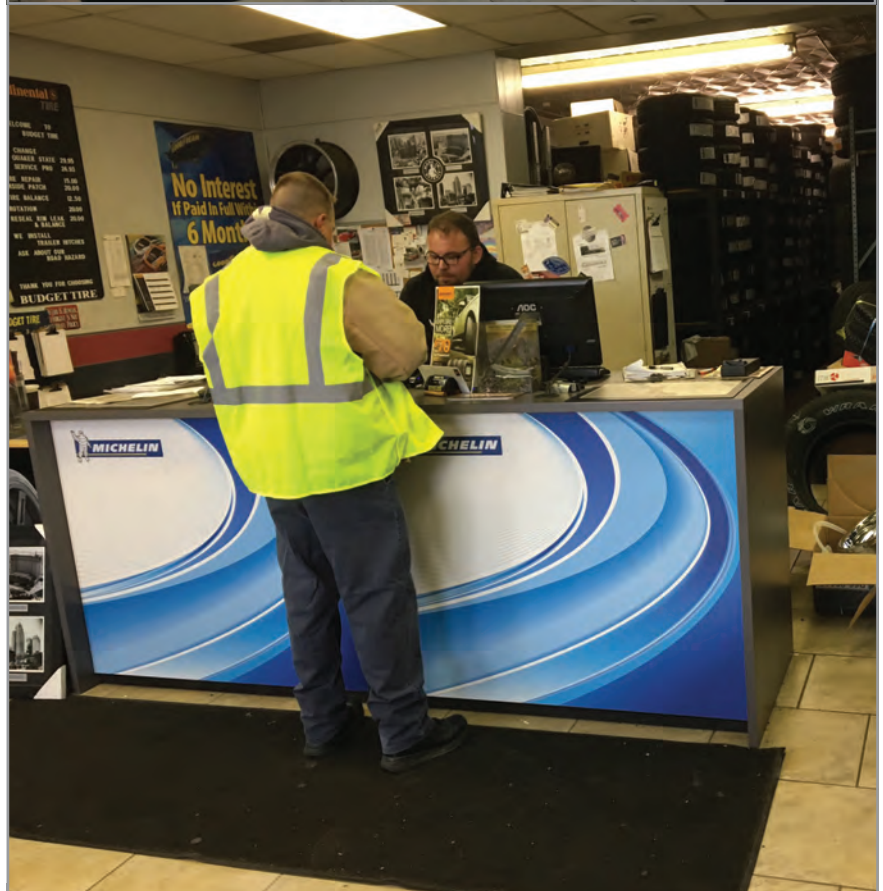
TREATING CUSTOMERS LIKE FAMILY

When it comes to customer service, Budget Tire believes in honesty and building the customer relationship. The dealership's website sums up this philosophy simply: "We never promise more than we can deliver, and we always give the customer more than they expect. People know customer service is not enough. And we do, too; that's why we strive for customer loyalty – every day."

"My mission is to make everyone feel that they are welcome," says Shrake. "To joke around with them and make them feel like they have a home at our store. I want people to come see us when they have a tire issue and not dread it."

Budget Tire achieves this level of customer service by treating its customers like family.

"Customer service is what we strive for. I tell my guys to treat every customer that comes in like it's their mom, and to work on that vehicle like it's their mom's," Shrake explains. "I'm a perfectionist when it comes to this. Don't be lazy; do every job to a T. I love it when the customers watch and point out things that we do that other shops don't. A job done right the first time doesn't come back with a problem."



Budget Tire was built on honesty. The tire dealership won't sell anything to a customer that they don't need for their vehicle.



Budget Tire strives to treat its customers like family and building a relationship of trust. This includes going the extra mile to help a customer in need.

To deliver such a high level of customer service some times requires Budget Tire to go the extra mile. The dealership has visited customer homes to install wheels and tires after they've been stolen, developed manageable payment plans for customers and deferred payments as well as changed flat tires for the area elderly who don't

have help or roadside assistance.

"Today, I had a lady come in and ask how much to fix a tire. When I told her \$15 she was going to leave. I asked why and she said she only had \$10 until the end of the week and couldn't afford it right now," Shrake shares.

"I had my guys pull the car in and fix the tire and I didn't charge her. I didn't

want her to be broke for the rest of the week and I can afford to do that once in a while."

Like many other tire dealers, Budget Tire's biggest challenge is battling the competition.

"There are big companies out there today that are fierce competitors. We have been attacked by them as far as head hunting our employees, and by them trying to go after our accounts," Shrake notes. "The problem we have is we can't stock everything, so we do our best and work with some of the bigger wholesalers and share commissions."

While, Budget Tire can't stock every tire, the dealership strives to have a better tire available to customers than its competition, even in the value tier. Shrake emphasizes, however, it's not about price but quality of the product.

In spite of business challenges, Budget Tire strives to be better each day.

"Our approach is to be the best in our market. I want people to share the great experience they had here and to refer customers to us," Shrake notes.

"Our reputation and service is where we strive," he adds.

On the wholesale side of the business, Budget Tire keeps it local to help deliver the best service. The dealership doesn't make deliveries more than 30 miles away from its shops and



focuses on servicing smaller used tire shops, repair shops and car dealers. Budget Tire also delivers tires all day, so it can deliver tires faster than most, Shrake shares.

"In five years I hope to build on to what we have built up, to keep growing with the times and the way of the future," he says.

EMPLOYEES AS LIFELOOD

Without its employees Budget Tire wouldn't be as successful as it is.

"Employees are your lifeblood. You are what they are. They make the difference in everything, so having motivated, happy employees is super important," Shrake shares.

To make sure Budget Tire is taking care of its employees, Shrake tries to be flexible and make the job work well for his team.

"We keep it family oriented. We always work with the guys and their schedules. We help them as much as we can, sometimes too much," he says.

The dealership pays its employees both on commission and hourly and is working on a new monthly sales incentive bonus for its team.

"It'll keep them motivated to get cars done faster with respect for the customer," Shrake says.

Budget Tire finds its new employees both via Indeed.com and a local community Facebook page. Once hired, Shrake or another manager trains each employee personally. Additionally, the dealership has its employees participate in Goodyear, Michelin and Continental online training, as well as attend ride and drives to learn more about tires and performance.

"We need to be prepared and know more than the customers do when they come in," Shrake says of keeping up on training. "With today's resources some customers study what they want, and they like it when you are informed."

And while the dealership doesn't do service work, it does employ a couple of ASE-certified technicians in both brakes and front suspension.

"We don't do automotive work, but it's nice to have them around for the customer questions on their vehicles," Shrake says.



Budget Tire is 99% focused on tire sales, with a 40% retail to 60% wholesale split. The dealership focuses on a local 30-mile radius to help deliver the best service possible.

SUCCESS BUILT ON CUSTOMER REFERRALS

Budget Tire is successful in its community because of people, the way it treats its employees, and the way it treats its customers.

"I measure success on our relationship with our customers and a healthy bottom line," Shrake says.

It's this relationship with customers that is the basis of Budget Tire's marketing. Much of the dealership's advertising is word of mouth.

"Word of mouth is the strongest advertising you can have and we do great at it. I have so many customers that have helped me grow our business to where it is today and for that I'm grateful," Shrake says. "We aren't out to take advantage of anyone. We strive on service first. Take care of the customer and they will take care of you."

In addition to word or mouth advertising, Budget Tire also advertises in the Yellow Pages, in the newspaper and digitally through its Facebook page and website. The tire dealership also runs television ads and sends out direct mailers.

"I think I've pretty much tried all the advertising out there except a billboard," Shrake notes.

While Budget Tire outsources its website and some Facebook postings to ARI, the dealership also likes to post its own messages on Facebook, too.

In addition to traditional marketing, Budget Tire gives back to the community as a way to get its name out there.

The dealership sponsors a couple of racecars and is always giving back to the local community. Budget Tire will also place ads in high school yearbooks, in programs for ice skating shows, as well as help local baseball, soccer and rowing teams.

"I feel better at the end of the day when I stay local and I help high school kids sell their ads, help the local skating program moms who are busting their humps to fill a program, help local teams with their expenses so they can go to a tournament," Shrake shares. "In the end I know and believe that the word of mouth generated from that is the best advertising I can get for my money."

The tire dealership also donates to local veterans charities, helps with the Shriners Hospital and sponsors a cruise for Special Olympics kids. ■



MR★TIRE

BIG 3 TIRE

- Monthly specials and promotions specific to the Professional
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Kirtlan Automotive Determination Sparks Fast Growth

By Denise Koeth - Senior Contributing Editor, *Tire Review*

Since opening Kirtlan Automotive Machine and Repair back in 1993, owner Steve Kirtlan has known exactly what his business should be: a one-stop shop for all customers.

That's why, in addition to total vehicle repair and maintenance – including the only complete machine shop in the Wabash, Ind., area – Kirtlan Automotive

added tires to its service offering several years ago. With that move, Kirtlan officially became a tire dealer and today is a 2017 Mr. Tire/Big 3 Tire Top Shop Finalist.

"That was the one area we didn't take care of and we were having to send customers to our competitors for tires," says Kirtlan.

Founded on April Fools' Day in 1993, Kirtlan Automotive has transformed into a one-stop shop for the Wabash, Ind., area.

His goal for the new year, first and foremost, is to continue to strengthen the tire side of the business. To accomplish this, he plans to increase his marketing activities to further promote and grow tire sales.

"We're a smaller community of about 13,000 people within the city limits, and there's a local tire shop that probably sells about 80% to 85% of the tires in town. It's been a challenge cutting into that market, but we're starting to make headway."

The single location dealership, operated by Kirtlan and six full-time employees, saw gross sales of \$900,000 in 2015, 80% from retail sales and 20% from commercial sales. Of its retail sales, 15% came from tire sales and 85% was from vehicle service.

While the business has seen success under Kirtlan's leadership, recently recognized as the Wabash County Business of the Year in 2015, its humble beginnings are a testament to hard work and determination. After working in a local automotive dealership for several years, Kirtlan decided he wanted to start



Kirtlan added tires sales only a few years ago, including Mastercraft and Hankook tires.



Kirtlan Automotive believes its business is only as good as its people, and takes the time to invest in its employees through training and career development. The result has been a team that works well together in a positive work culture with little employee turnover.

his own business.

"Having already had four children at the age of 28, the biggest challenge I was to face was going to be securing financing to start my business," he recalls. "I had found and signed a contract to purchase the property where we are currently located; the challenge was to find someone to loan money to an upstart 28-year-old like me for equipment needed to operate."

After meeting with several financial institutions and being told repeatedly that his business plan would not work, Kirtlan became more determined than ever to prove them wrong. He acquired financing from a family member and during his first year in business, Kirtlan Automotive reached the monthly sales level that he had initially set as a five-year goal.

Though Kirtlan Automotive saw quick success and has indeed become a true one-stop shop, there's much more that makes the dealership worthy of being named a K&M Tire Top Shop Finalist.

MAINTAINING THE BEST EMPLOYEES

Holding true to the idea that a tire business is only as good as its techs, Kirtlan invests in its people. Technicians at Kirtlan Automotive are all ASE certified, including three that have obtained Master Technician status. Each tech also is enrolled in a continual training program,



Unique Training Solutions, in nearby Fort Wayne, Ind.

Kirtlan says he and some of his staff also attend the K&M dealer conference and take advantage of educational resources offered there, in addition to monthly training topics offered through the Fort Wayne NAPA Business Development Group.

Providing numerous opportunities for career development in addition to treating employees fairly and compensating them well results in very little turnover at Kirtlan Automotive – a

fact that adds to the shop's impeccable customer service record.

"I've been on the technician side; I know what they deal with on a day-to-day basis and I try to make sure they have what they need to do their job, whether that's tools and equipment or training," Kirtlan explains. "I treat them like I'd want to be treated if I were in that position. Our wages are probably 20% to 25% higher than the average in our area, but we pay more for ASE-certified techs knowing we will get very few customer complaints."

In addition, Kirtlan considers the dynamics of the entire staff when interviewing potential new hires, ensuring a team that works well together.

"When I interview a prospective employee, the one thing that's probably more important than anything else is looking at their personality and whether or not they will fit in with the existing staff," he says. "I want everyone to work together and get along really well; that's important to me.

"I also let them know what I expect," Kirtlan continues. "I tell them that when a customer leaves, they should never have an excuse to go anywhere else. Our integrity with our customers is second to none and we always put our relationship with our customers above money."

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS BEYOND SERVICE

Along those lines, Kirtlan's goal is for his staff to always give customers more than they expect.

"We do this in many ways, (starting) from the way we greet customers and let them know we are genuinely concerned about their problems," he says. "We know them on a personal level. When they come in, we don't just talk about their car. We ask about what's going on in their lives and try to get to know them better than a standard customer and service center relationship."

From a waiting area that offers all the comforts of a living room – complete with complimentary snacks and drinks, comfortable seating and children's entertainment to vehicle delivery, rentals and a passenger shuttle – Kirtlan Automotive strives for convenience and that personal touch.

Clear and open lines of communication include digital inspection results that are sent to customers by text, and an in-shop conversation or a phone call informing customers of exactly what is needed and of the estimated cost.

Current customers also are offered free vehicle inspections for a potential new/used car purchase if they are in the market for a new vehicle, Kirtlan adds.

"When a customer picks up their car and walks out of our door, we want them



Employees at Kirtlan Automotive strive to give customers more than they expect at the counter and in the bays. This includes sending digital inspection results via-text and resolving the rare customer complaint through open communication.

smiling; if they're not, we fell short of our goal," he says.

Regarding the rare customer complaint, Kirtlan says, "Most times, it comes down to a misunderstanding. Once we hear what they have to say, we ask what we can do to fix it. Many times what they ask of us is less than what we're willing to do to fix it. We always make sure the issue is resolved by the time they leave."

WIDESPREAD MARKETING MIX

Existing customers keep Kirtlan Automotive top of mind and potential new customers learn about the business through a mix of traditional advertising and digital marketing.

Monthly radio spots can be heard on the two local stations, with many being tagged with a don't-text-and-drive slogan at the end of the ad copy. Other advertising includes sponsoring a

locally produced web-TV sports "game of the week," plus sponsoring major talent each year when acts perform at the Honeywell Center, an arts and entertainment complex in Wabash.

On the digital side, the shop strives to operate a very active Facebook page and an interactive website at kirtlanauto.com. Kirtlan Automotive uses professionally produced video to further differentiate itself from the competition while giving customers a deeper look.

"Video is a nice addition to our Facebook page and to the website, one that draws people's attention a little bit better," Kirtlan notes. "They can learn a lot about us in a short period of time."

The shop's merchandising efforts include: collaborating to create a shirt that highlights local businesses and is given away to qualified customers; serving as a major sponsor of a car cruise-in that raises money



Always looking out for its customers, Kirtlan Automotive offers its current customers free vehicle inspections on potential new/used vehicle purchases.

for ALS research, and being the exclusive automotive sponsor of a commemorative "baby plate" that is mailed to families soon after the birth of a child.

"Merchandising is a way to promote our repair shop without saying a word. By using a mass-merchandising approach, we believe that the most potential customers are reached and current customers are reminded that they have Kirtlan Automotive as their one-stop auto repair shop," Kirtlan says.

Part of the dealership's marketing mix overlaps its charitable efforts: providing free oil change gift certificates for fundraisers; working with a regional automotive business development group the past two Christmas seasons to provide car repairs at no cost to a deserving family; and serving as a participating member of the annual appreciation night at White's Residential Service for troubled youth, among other initiatives.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Kirtlan Automotive carries its customer relationships and marketing even further with deep community ties. Kirtlan

currently serves on the Wabash County Chamber of Commerce's executive board, Noble Township Advisory Board, Youth for Christ Advisory Board for Wabash County, is a past president of the Wabash Optimist Club, and also is involved in the Bachelor Creek Church of Christ, North Central Officials Association and the Kids Hope Mentors Program.

The list of charitable organizations and community groups in which Kirtlan Automotive is involved is extensive, particularly when it comes to organizations that benefit area youth.

"We've got a great community and a lot of what we do is involved with youth because they're the future of our community," Kirtlan says. "The more we can pour into that group, the better off we'll be down the road. We support the organizations in town that make the biggest impact in that area."

Among the causes most near and dear to his heart is Youth for Christ of Wabash County, which helps local students address the problems in their lives by providing mentors and teaching. "It reaches out to kids who don't have a whole lot going for them," Kirtlan says. "They see what these kids' needs are,

builds relationships with them and helps them along life's path."

Also a high priority is The Life Center, a crisis pregnancy center that provides services to young mothers, many of whom are teenagers, by offering pregnancy testing, prenatal care, counseling, clothing, food and everyday baby needs.

Other charitable organizations supported by Kirtlan Automotive include the Kunkle Cruise In, which raises money for ALS research; the Wabash County Sheriff's Department; Wabash County 4-H; Living Well in Wabash County, a local senior center; and Blessings in a Backpack, which sends food home with low-income elementary students on the weekends.

STRIVING FOR MORE

While it's hard to hit a moving target, Kirtlan Automotive has done just that over the course of its nearly 24 years in business.

"As I look to the future, I know we must constantly be willing to change to stay relevant in an ever-changing society," Kirtlan says. "We are dealing with a new generation that is not going to be reached with the methods of the past. They will do their research on the Internet and on social media and we must be prepared."

Through research, ongoing training and the trust Kirtlan places in the shop's younger generation, Kirtlan Automotive is poised to continue its growth in the digital realm.

"Understanding – and keeping up with – the marketing side of things is the biggest ongoing challenge," he says. "Being able to successfully communicate as technology changes, to change the way we market to our customers is key."

By increasing its share of the local tire market, in addition to increasing sales to fleet customers, Kirtlan says another goal is to reach \$1.25 million in annual sales within the next five years.

But above all, he adds, "We want to continue serving our customers by giving them more than they expect. We look to a bright future, not just for Kirtlan Automotive, but also for our community." ■



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Trail Tire

Faithful Service and Success

By Carley Hull - Associate Editor, *Tire Review*

A trusted expert in tire and service repair located in the heart of Ohio's Amish Country, one would expect Trail Tire LLC has always served the Dundee, Ohio, area. In reality, the tire dealership has earned that reputation in just three short years since opening in 2013 – the result of honest work, helping the community and striving to exceed customer expectations.

Focusing its tire business on 98% retail, with about 5% of that consisting of commercial tires, and 2% wholesale, Trail Tire prides itself as the go-to location for any customer's tire needs, be it the local farmer who needs a flat repaired or the family that needs a new set of tires.

This drive to please all customers along with its community-driven roots

has helped Trail Tire gross \$2.5 million in sales in 2015, but more importantly created a business that is fueled by integrity, which is why Trail Tire is a Mr. Tire/Big 3 Tire Top Shop Finalist.

ROOTED IN THE COMMUNITY

A veteran to the tire business, Trail Tire owner Dirk Visser, Jr. relocated with his wife, Hannah, and their seven children from New York to the little town of Dundee in Dec. 2012 not to start a business, but to help a church in need.

Visser had previously run a tire dealership in New York for about 10 years after leaving a life as a milk farmer to pursue a trade he could teach his four sons.

"I wanted to have something that I

could do at home working with my boys and teach them a trade so I thought [the tire business] would work well," Visser recalls. "I used to milk cows, I used to be a farmer, but with the milk price being so poor I went and got into the tire business."

A humble man who is devoted to his family, community and church, Visser doesn't seek community service to gain customers and boost sales; he does it because he feels it's the right thing to do.

The majority of the long list of community and fundraising efforts by Trail Tire goes to support the Visser's church, Faith Christian Fellowship Church, located conveniently down the road from the tire business.

No fundraiser or request for help is



Trail Tire owner Dirk Visser, Jr. and his employees strive to exceed customer expectations for all tire, alignment and brake service needs.



Opening its doors in 2013, Trail Tire's sole location in Dundee, Ohio, also services customers in surrounding areas, such as Dover and Millersburg.

The new building provides a clean and professional atmosphere to do business and plenty of space to service vehicles, both large and small. In the back of the service area, you'll find an extensive warehouse of tire products for any tire consumer.

turned down by Trail Tire, which has led the business to become heavily involved with local schools and the community. However, you won't find the Trail Tire name flashed on every good deed done.

Trail Tire supports the local Safety Town program, contributes to farm safety programs throughout the county, and donates and installs tires on all the transportation wagons at the local Holmes County Fair each year.

"It gives people a respect for the fact that we care about them and the community that we're living together in. It's not just about money and sales numbers, and they appreciate that," Visser says.

EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

Visser and his 11 full-time and two part-time employees also bring the same

amount of care to Trail Tire customers. The tire dealer's customer service philosophy is simple: a customer's experience should exceed their expectations and leave them with the best experience possible.

"People like honesty and integrity, and that does make a big difference on what we do here," Visser says. "But they also like our facility. It's a new facility and it's very clean and organized with a well-kept atmosphere and a comfortable atmosphere for people to wait in."

Generating 90% of its sales from tires, Trail Tire makes sure to stock anything and everything its customers will need, including an assortment of wheels. The business currently services and stocks tires for everything from passenger cars, light trucks and lawnmowers to farm equipment,

industrial vehicles and commercial vehicles and trailers.

"The reason this shop took off so well was that I wasn't new to the business when I started this one," Visser shares. "I had a lot of experience with it, but also we have a full product coverage... If people call they can expect to get whatever they need fixed when it comes to tires."

The tire dealer invests a lot of money into a strong inventory that boasts only quality products. Taking a closer look at Trail Tire's inventory, you'll find about 80% of what its customers need, again, not just for the everyday driver but also the farmer. If Trail Tire doesn't have what the customer is looking for, the tire dealer gets it in from one of their 30 suppliers.

To make the other 20% of products

sold appear, Trail Tire has an employee who spends 15 to 20 hours a week on the road picking up products to make sure the customer has what they need for same-day service. Plus, Trail Tire offers a quick turnaround time. Customers normally never wait more than an hour for their vehicle to be serviced.

"We do just about everything and we know about everything, too," Visser notes. "There are a lot of shops that aren't very informed on all those different segments of the tire business or they aren't equipped to handle it. We do have a service truck, too, which separates us.

"If you don't offer a full tire service, a lot of times it kind of isolates your business to one thing or the other, maybe car and pickup, but that's not what we do; we do everything. People like that – and they like the fact that we know what we're looking at. They can come in with anything and we'll fix it."

Even in the event the customer needs a helping hand and can't come into the location, Trail Tire is there. When a customer once had a tractor out of service while in the hospital, Trail Tire came out, changed his tire, and helped



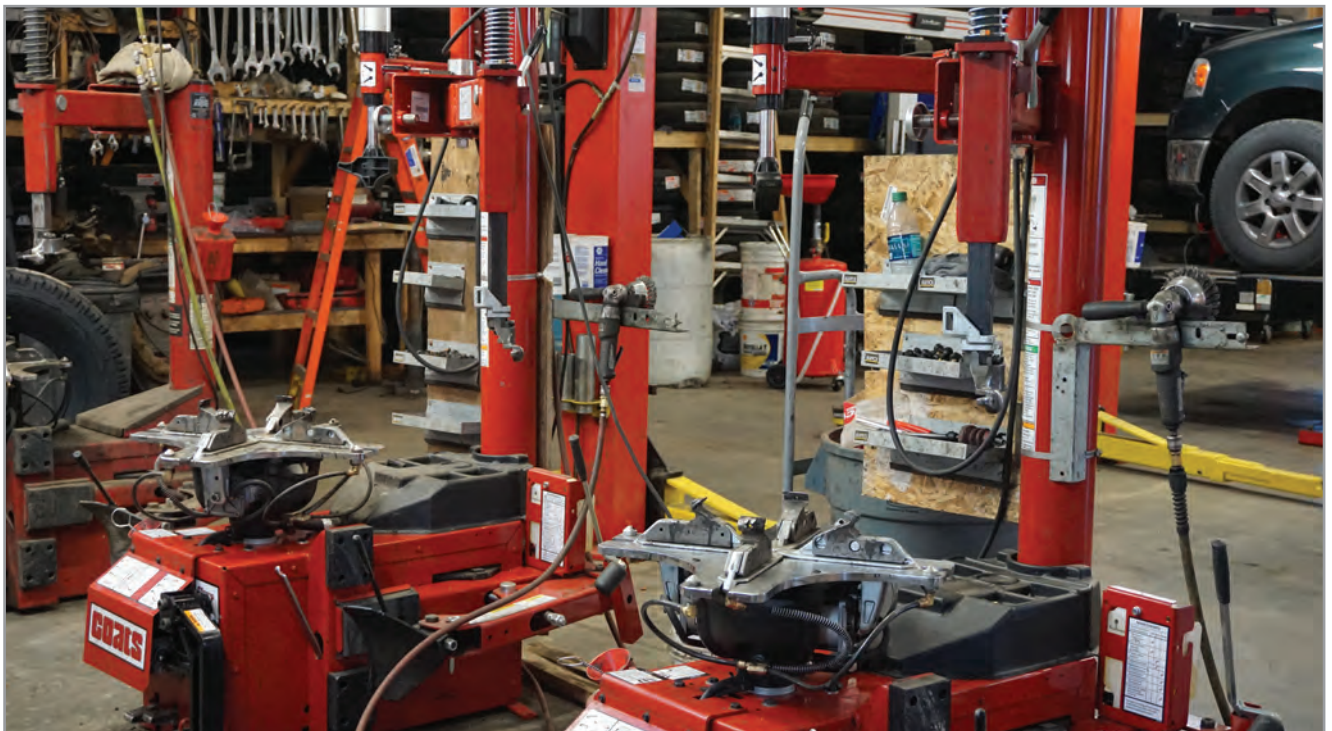
Trail Tire will service any tire need from lawnmower to OTR tires.

develop a payment plan to help him manage the repair expense all while he was still recovering.

On the service side of the business, Trail Tire focuses on alignments, brakes and front-end repairs, offering service jobs that often go hand-in-hand with tire

repair – and not working on jobs under the hood.

To get the job done, Trail Tire has three bays, with Hunter Engineering and John Bean alignment equipment, plus a slew of Coats tire changers and balancers.



Ready to tackle tire jobs fast, Trail Tire has two rows of tire changing and balancing equipment.

To make sure employees are well trained in both service and tire repair, Trail Tire is constantly training its employees on everything from safe tire repairs to ASE certification.

"It's something that we're always pursuing, whether it's informational seminars or things going on about product knowledge," Visser explains. "We get the reps in here and do product training and sales training throughout the year. It's not a one-and-done deal; it's ongoing year-to-year work."

SERVICE BEFORE SALES

Trail Tire prides itself on only selling customers what they need for the best performance possible.

When a customer stops in or makes a call, they can expect the counterperson to ask a number of questions about their current tires to make sure the customer already has the proper tires for their vehicle and application.

Trail Tire employees will also inspect each customer's vehicle and tires to make sure they can give the customer what they currently have that works well or determine what tires the customer needs for improved performance.

"We like to sell people what they need based on what they have to say and not so much on what's on sale... A lot of people really like when you have knowledgeable sales staff that can either match or exceed their expectations mileage wise and handling wise," Visser adds.

On the alignment and brake side of the business, Trail Tire employees always inspect each vehicle before they give estimates – going as far as showing the customer the problem in person.

"People do appreciate our integrity," Visser says. "We're Christian people here and if we say something is bad, it's bad. We'll show them even the part that's bad. We don't just tell them something that can't be verified."

Because of the high level of trust Trail Tire has built with its customers, price isn't much of a factor to returning customers because they know they are getting quality service and tires.

Trail Tire is a member of multiple marketing groups in addition to K&M and Big 3 Tire. The dealership is a



A comfortable waiting area allows customers to relax while the Trail Tire team services their vehicle within the hour.

BARNN Dealer, Firestone Certified Ag Dealer, Trelleborg Ag Dealer, Goodyear G3X Dealer, Cooper Medallion Dealer and Mastercraft Century Dealer. The tire dealer also never puts consumer rebates or tire manufacturer incentives before the customer.

REACHING NEW CUSTOMERS

Trail Tire's advertising and marketing efforts mix the old with the new, relying heavily on newspaper and phonebook advertising and working with Optimize Social Media to strategize its online and social media marketing efforts.

The town of Dundee isn't your typical consumer market. The town is very small and largely an Amish community, so Visser knew traditional radio and television advertisements wouldn't work well to market his shop. But, he also knew that he needed to attract the consumer looking on their smartphone for tires and the consumer reading the paper.

Visser actually tested his theory about the effectiveness of newspaper and phonebook advertising. When Trail Tire opened Visser tried just about every form of advertising to reach customers, offering them different coupons through every different advertising medium. When the customers came to the shop, Visser kept track of the different coupons coming in and was able to

pinpoint which types of advertising brought in more customers. He found that print advertising in the local newspaper was bringing in the majority of their customers.

To attract the customer's who are on their smartphones and online, Trail Tire updates its Facebook and Twitter regularly with special offers and information. It also has a Net Driven website with all the features savvy consumers need, including a searchable tire catalog, in-depth descriptions of all services and car-care educational articles.

THE FUTURE

Trail Tire is proof that a humble, small-town tire dealership can run its business honestly and still come out on top. But you won't find Visser or his employees telling you they strive to be the best – or that being a Mr. Tire/Big 3 Top Shop Finalist is a game-changing recognition.

Instead, Visser and his employees are simply there for their community and for their customers. And as long as they're happy, Visser believes his business will continue to do well.

"We're just glad to be here and help people out," he says. "We strive to keep a high level of customer satisfaction every day and that's what keeps things going, I believe." ■

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