

What is a marketing tool or strategy that shops can focus on right now?

Make sure they know you're open.

Automotive service facilities are fortunate to be included in the essential services category of businesses that can remain open during the coronavirus shutdowns. But information is changing so rapidly that many people remain confused. The first and most important thing you can do is communicate to your customers that you are open for business.

Be consistent across all platforms.

Eliminate Confusion. For example, if you need to change your hours, make sure that your voicemail message, Google, Facebook, your website, the hours posted on your door, and anywhere your customers normally go to find you, all say the same thing.

Make people feel safe.

Communicate to your customers all of the steps you are taking to ensure their safety. Are you using a drop box or pay-by-phone? Using best practices to sanitize vehicle before and after (steering wheel, door handles, etc.)? Let them know via all of the communication channels open to you.

Is it easier or tougher to reach customers right now?

This is an unprecedented time, but access to social media channels allows small businesses to pivot quickly in response to changing conditions. Looking at this disruption to normal business as an opportunity to serve your customers may yield creative ideas for open-minded oil change shops. There may be opportunities for your business that you had not considered before, because customers need things they never needed before. Listen to your customers. They'll tell you what they need.

“Work From Home” and “Shelter in Place” orders mean that fewer people are on the road driving, so they won't be stopping by to get an oil change. It also means that people have time to take care of vehicle maintenance without having to manage other time pressures.

One idea: Let's say you're in a state that has “Stay at Home” rules. Parents are working from home but the kids are home from school, too. If customers can't easily bring their cars to you for vehicle maintenance, maybe offer pick-up and delivery.

What can you tell shops about maintaining the right marketing voice during a time like this?

People everywhere have been inundated with coronavirus emails. Make sure your communication sounds like it comes from a real person. The CDC talking points have been repeated on the news and in dozens of emails they've received the past week. Messages should be short, straightforward and directly relevant to the customer's needs.

Show the human side of your business.

Let your customers know that your business is made up of real people. Share posts with photos of actual employees on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. Examples:

- Post a photo of an employee cleaning the steering wheel before returning the car to the customer
- Photo of employee retrieving keys from drop box.
- Photos of real customers if they agree to be featured.

Messaging should focus on keeping the connection to your customers strong.

Inform, Reassure and Serve:

- Inform: We are open.
 - Let them know if adjusted hours of operation
 - Video from owner or manager reassuring customers that you're open.
- Reassure: We are taking necessary precautions.
 - Post photo of real employee wiping down steering wheel, or counter
 - Video of owner/manager explaining sanitation procedures
 - Email about options for limiting contact (night drop off/pay by phone/curbside pickup)
- Serve: We can help you.
 - Which services are you providing right now?
 - Are there special accommodations? (Vehicle Delivery, Pay By Phone, etc.)

If you are sincere in your efforts during this crisis, it is a chance to strengthen that relationship and turn a client into a loyal customer.