

Auto Centre Dufferin County Inc. Points The Way To The Future

SSGM, December 2008

By Tom Venetis, Editor

Steve Bowles and his team's focus on service, investment in management and technical training puts him first amongst his customers

Before he even broke ground on his new facility located along Industrial Road in Shelburne, Ont., Steve Bowles already had definite ideas as to what kind of shop he wanted to have built.

It not only had to be a modern facility, but one that could accommodate future growth and help improve workflow and communications between his technicians and the front counter staff interacting with customers. It would have to showcase everything that independents could offer to today's vehicle owners. Simply, the shop had to point the way to the future of the Canadian independent service provider.

"Everyone knows how much cars have changed in this industry," says Bruce Eccles, owner of the Dundas, Ont.- based Bruce Eccles Auto Service Inc., recipient of the Garage of the Year in 2001 and presenter for this year's Garage of the Year award. "Not only have cars changed, but our whole industry has changed. Evidenced right here, with Steven Bowles and his team and facility, is how different things are today. This is not your father's garage ... this is the way of the future."

Bowles is justifiably proud of his facility. He spent four years carefully thinking about and planning it as he waited for the permits and paperwork to go through so he could begin work on the building. He also kept a log-book, listing things that he needed for his new facility and what things had to be avoided. It amounted to some 40 pages which Bowles used when sitting down with contractors and designers.

For example, his bays are all open concept, without any supporting beams to block or limit the workspace needed for his technicians to do their jobs. The bays are also pull-through and have 12x12 doors in order to make it easier to move any sized vehicle in and out of the shop without impeding efficiency. There is even central heating so that bays are evenly warmed during winter months. Extra lighting was added and Bowles insisted on having a greater distance between the lifts so his technicians could have more room to work, as well as to

move tool boxes and other equipment more easily to where they were needed it. The open concept also reduces clutter.

"I even went so far as to insist that my drain clean-outs have a greater width, because I saw how much my team could benefit from something as seemingly small as that," Bowles says. "All these things, from the small to the large, were made to make everyone's work more comfortable, and if you are comfortable you are more efficient."

That care and comfort is evident in the front waiting area which is inviting with lots of natural light for his customers.

Bowles says he got his idea for the shop when he was working as an outside sales agent with Gord Davenport Automotive, named Jobber of the Year by Jobber News in 1994. Bowles says he learned a lot about the independent automotive service industry while working for Gord Davenport, of what worked and what did not, and what he believed was needed in the independent industry for today's vehicle owners. He adds Gord Davenport himself supported his decision, helped find his first location before he opened this new one, and acted as sounding-board for his many business questions. The warmth in Bowles's voice is evidence of the deep respect he held for his late mentor and how much he helped him with the business.

Putting The Customer And Training First

What Bowles learned over many years, first working on the jobber side of the industry and then moving to the independent side later, was the importance in putting the customer first in the business process. What exactly does that mean? Does it mean just being friendly and greeting them when they first walk in; doing the job right the first time? Yes, it certainly does. However, Bowles' greatest strength as the owner of Auto Centre Dufferin County Inc. is realizing that putting the customer first requires two core things: a dedicated team and the necessary management tools to make it happen.

This is why Bowles and all of his staff attend regular training programs on business and customer management, having attended programs with Bob Greenwood of E. K. Williams and Dave Meunier's NAPA-ProShop Manager course with TACT Total Automotive, for example.

"What I wanted was a staff that knew how to get the client in the first time and to maintain that business by keeping them coming back," Bowles says. "So all of us here have taken customer skills training and

we have put into place a set of business processes that help in customer communications and in communications with the front staff and the technicians in the bays."

This means that the two service writers know how to listen to a customer's concerns and issues, find out what is wrong with vehicles and communicate that information accurately back to the technician who can also effectively communicate what has to be done back to the service writer and customer. The customer is effectively kept in the loop from the beginning, and they know exactly what is happening with their vehicle, have an accurate estimate and clearly understood invoice. Nothing comes as a shock to them. All the work that needs to be done is clearly spelled out and we explain everything to them."

That same communications strategy is evident on the work board behind the service counter. A quick glance reveals where in the business process a vehicle is in terms of its repair or maintenance, from the moment when a work order is first created, to which technician is assigned the vehicle, to the estimate, parts ordered and finally when the bill is paid.

This transparent communications is evident in the bays. Each technician is assigned a clear plastic bin with their name on it. When a work order is created for a vehicle and a technician assigned for that vehicle's repair, the parts are ordered from one of two jobbers, Gord Davenport or the NAPA-affiliated Ideal Supply. And here is a crucial difference from many shops. The jobber knows which technician is to get the ordered parts and when the person making the delivery arrives in the morning to drop the parts off, they know which bin the parts have to go in. This process makes sure when the technician comes into work that day, they will know what they have to do and that the parts are waiting for them. If something is missing, the technician can see right away if that is the case. This reduces mistakes and keeps operations running smoothly, while improving the communications between the front desk and the bays and technicians.

"We have also moved to a maintenance model and we pre-schedule appointments," Bowles says. "We are planning our work days three months from now and we find people are very receptive to this kind of process. It is very similar to going to the dentist. The dentist books your next appointment right after you present one is finished."

He even has in place a phone-back system where he does a customer follow-up to make sure the customer is satisfied with the work done on

their vehicle and the service. He even goes so far as to have his technicians back each person's car in the parking space so they don't have to back out when leaving. It seems like a small gesture, but it is one he and his staff find builds loyalty and trust, as well as simple touches as having fresh coffee and supplying toys to children to keep them happy when with mom or dad in the reception.

As well as management training, Bowles insists on having his technicians attend regular technical and automotive training programs offered by NAPA, Lindertech and others. He says training is not something to be seen as a business expense; instead it is an investment and he gladly pays for the cost of training and the day if the training is held in the mornings; if it an evening class, he will pay for any expenses incurred and for the course. Bowles also invests regularly in new equipment to makes sure his technicians have what they need to do their jobs and to work on the newest vehicles. His goal is for his team to work on vehicles not just when they come off their dealer warranties, but even during their warranty period.

Russ Gougeon, NAPA AutoPro coordinator for Ontario for NAPA Auto Parts in Cambridge, Ont. says Bowles and his team's regular investment in ongoing management and technician training are examples that should be followed by any shop looking for long-term success.

"We are proud to be part of his success and in helping him reach that next level. He really is an example of what can be achieved and of what everyone should be aiming for," he says. SSGM