

messaging overnight and continue to adjust what they put out. When the virus first hit, they released videos explaining their hygiene and safety protocols.

“Everything we can do to make them [customers] feel comfortable and calm,” Judy says. “We’re trying to be leaders and put the message out there that we’re here to serve the community.”

Not only did the message need to change, but the frequency did as well. Instead of sending out its newsletter every two weeks, they increased to weekly.

Sun Automotive’s homepage has a message to its customers about COVID-19. The message clearly outlines the company’s focus (the health and safety of the community) and measures (pick-up and drop-off and delivery services). Smaller adjustments that could easily be forgotten, like getting the new hours on the website, also need to be done, Judy says.

SEEING THE LIGHT

During the Great Recession, Noel was working as a technician and a service advisor. In 2007, his son passed away. While he was dealing with a profound loss, he was also experiencing an extremely stressful time in the economy—much like what is going on right now.

“I felt that, He doesn’t give you any more than you can handle. How much worse could it be?” Noel says.

During a time when many were losing their jobs, Noel decided to go after what he always wanted—a position in management. During this time, Noel actually took a pay cut to train as a service advisor so he could get the experience and knowledge that he needed. While doing this, he was introduced to the former owner of Sun Automotive. If it wasn’t for all of that he went through during that time, Noel says he wouldn’t be in the position that he is today.

Every experience is a lesson, and Noel has a wealth of knowledge when it comes to overcoming adversity.

“We have to remember that, just because they turn the light switch back on, things will not return to normal,” Noel says. “There are people that have been displaced. What I’m preparing for is people

not having a job and they’ll make decisions similar to the 2008 financial crisis.”

Luckily for the independent shop owner, that bodes well. Since there won’t be the money to purchase new vehicles, many will need to maintain the cars they already have and may actually bring more business than normal.

PREPARE FOR AN UPTICK.

“For those that survive, it will be a really good summer,” Bird says. “I think it could be one of the best summers ever for auto repair.”

He’s not alone in that sentiment. Lang says that this pandemic will impact the average age of vehicles on the road and that new car sales will go down. Bird has started to see this, as he reports April was his best month yet, with a car count of 80 and an ARO of \$445 for his two-person shop.

When life returns to whatever the new normal will be, businesses need to be prepared for an immediate uptick.

“It will turn around—it’s just a question of how long it will take,” Jenner says. “I have a feeling that when it turns around, it’ll come around pretty quickly and we need to capitalize right away.”

Maintain business as usual, even during slower times, Matt says.

DELIVER AN EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCE.

“I have a philosophy in regard to business today and how it will be critical that we return to an old style of doing things,” Noel says.

In 2008, he learned that, in order to survive, he needed to increase his business’ value and change the industry’s stereotype. Little touches, like dressing professionally, helped secure his job and kept customers coming back. In the time of COVID-19, it will be the same.

“At the end of the day, people make decisions based on person-to-person contact. It will be your experience, how you are dealt with—I don’t think it will be all of the white noise that will affect that,” Noel says.

Referred businesses will be the ones that thrive, he believes. Go that extra mile by offering to pick up medication and groceries or filling up a kid’s bike with air may keep you in business for years to come.

IDENTIFY AN OPPORTUNITY.

One positive outcome? The talent suddenly available. This gives shop owners the opportunity to make new hires.

“I’m excited about the future of the talent pool,” Judy says. “It’s been difficult the last year because everyone was happily employed. Now, this will all change because there are so many people that have been laid off. It’s an opportunity to entice high caliber, talented people to come on board with us.”

ADJUST TO NEW TRENDS.

This pandemic has changed the trajectory of the automotive industry. Two major trends that will be impacted are rideshare and EVs, Lang says.

Consumers don’t want to use ride share at the moment, leading the formerly buzzy mode of transportation at a standstill. At the end of April, GM shut down its Maven ride-sharing program.

Before the pandemic, OEMs announced new EV models with increasing frequency. Now, with gas prices so low and the likelihood of rebates checks slim, that’s on hold, Lang projects.

MOVE FORWARD.

While the situation will have economic repercussions, the fact remains that drivers will need vehicle repairs. That leaves independent automotive repair shops well positioned, Lang says, but the urgency may not be there. Shops have to be prepared for customers with less disposable income. That’s why they need to highlight value now more than ever. A customer will pay more to ensure his or her safety and go to a repair shop he or she trusts.

A crisis slows many things down, Lang says, but can also be an accelerator. Platforms to schedule online appointments will be used more frequently and companies like Amazon that can deliver parts and cut down on interaction will be a threat.

From getting to the grocery store during the stay-at-home order to keeping ambulances up and running, this situation has opened Lowe’s eyes to the importance of the transportation industry. Those that have made a name for themselves in the community and shown their dedication to their customers and their communities will leave a lasting impression. ✦