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New auto shop in Gainesville adapts to changing business climate

Local
By [Dan Roem](#)

Source: Gainesville Times
THURSDAY, MARCH 19 2009

Free candy, bottled drinks and magazines can be classy touches for a business trying to make its customers feel at home, but they're still trivial.

A Playstation 2 for kids to play while their parents wait in the lobby: also not bad, but, again, it's a small thing.

What makes the service at Curry's Auto Service in Gainesville unique is not that those features are up front and center in the lobby, which they are. Rather, it's the employees chatting there with smiles that light up brighter than the yellow walls that's the real surprise.

Listen to Damon Humenik speak behind the front counter for all of one minute and the need for an early-morning caffinated buzz quickly dies. Last Friday morning, the salesman's infectious laugh and prepetual smile grew with every sentence he spoke.

It didn't have to be about cars either. Within a couple minutes, he was already discussing visits to Europe. When asked about his Scottish heritage - the blue and white saltire cross on his belt buckle coupled with his short, red beard was a dead giveaway - he threw his head back and triumphantly responded "Aye!" in the midst of talking about the Scottish capital of Edinburgh.

"He greets everybody at the door," said Curry's mechanic Dan Howell, who lives in the Saybrooke subdivision just minutes down the street. "He knows, he'll remember you, he'll remember your car. If you can build a personal relationship with a customer and trust, that's the biggest thing."

Curry's Auto Service opened up shop in Gainesville back in December after moving out of Dulles. When it came time to expand his business about three years ago, co-owner Matt Curry received a lot of positive feedback about the area..

"Gainesville is the new Tyson's Corner," he said a Realtor told him.

Fellow co-owner Chris Coulter recalled how Howell kept trying to encourage his bosses to set up shop closer to where he lived as the market in Gainesville continued to expand.

"You've got to look in Gainesville," Howell repeatedly told him, according to Coulter.

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So the businessmen checked out the corridor and found that unlike Matt Curry's home area of Chantilly, there was not too much competition for their type of auto service store in that part of western Prince William County.

"What they don't have here is a real high-quality repair shop," said Curry.

Taking a moment to field questions next to a sleek black luxury car with Maryland license plates, Howell elaborated.

"This area here, there's so many people here now, there's such a wide variety of cars, that you don't have that shop that can handle, you know, working on an Audi like this where you've got to disassemble three quarters of the car to replace the turbos and then do a brake job on your every-day Chevy," he said. "Other shops are just going to do the easy stuff, the quick in-and-out jobs. We can do more than that."

Matt Curry explained that some of Curry's competitors pay their mechanics \$15-18 an hours work on cars while his top guys are making around \$35 per hour.

"Anyone here can... buy cool tools," said Coulter. "We know how to use them."

Curry's specializes in fixing European and Asian cars, though the mechanics work on American ones too. Three of those mechanics come from the western Prince William and Manassas area and used to work at the shop's former location in Dulles.

In the earlier part of the decade there, Coulter said some customers who worked at near-by technology companies like America Online and MCI Worldcom would come by with a request to enhance just about any feature of their vehicles.

Coulter said some customers would tell him, "Do whatever you want," and if the project exceeded, say, \$5,000, just call so the carowner could simply transfer money into a different bank account to pay for it.

"The early 2000s were phenominal," he said, whistfully.

Times are different now.

"Hey, can I pay you tomorrow for my oil change?" has become a more common request from some of those old clients, Coulter said.

Companies such as the auto supplies and service chain NAPA are able to expand their business into places like Gainesville because, their executives said, carowners are opting to replace or fix parts on old cars rather than spend more money buying new ones.

For Curry's, that means their mechanics may be focusing less on luxury items like "tricking out" rims, but still performing plenty of basic repairs, like brake work and transmission fixes.

Howell said the average car in Gainesville as well as most of Northern Virginia is about 4 years old.

"You just don't have a lot of the older vehicles driving around" here, he said.

So while the shift from buying-new to repairing-old may be new for local drivers, just-opened shops like Curry's in Gainesville may stand to benefit. The western end of the county is still growing in population, meaning more potential new customers are still moving into the area.

"We do things here that most shops an't even fathom

doing," said Howell.



Went to Curry's auto shop for the first time yesterday to get a free inspection and oil change. Damon had me an appointment within an hour of calling him. Great service and good coffee. Damon I feel is a great service rep and seems to really want to make your visit enjoyable.

Posted by **petercarruthers**

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