



North America's Top Shop Finalist Curry's Auto Service



By Denise Koeth, Managing Editor

When Matt and Judy Curry opened Curry's Auto Service in 1998, the couple knew they were taking a risk. With one child at home and another on the way, the Currys opened their shop in Chantilly, Va., with 13 credit cards and \$103,000 worth of debt.

"Every last penny to our name was in this business," Matt says. "In the beginning, our main challenge was just surviving and getting customers."

And they did much more than just survive. By using top-of-the-line equipment, a phenomenal marketing campaign, expertly trained technicians and a solid approach to customer service, Curry's Auto Service quickly grew into the five-location business it is today.

It's those decisions, plus many more, that make Curry's, with locations covering the entire northern Virginia area and 2008 gross sales of \$7.8 million, a

worthy 2009 TIRE REVIEW Top Shop Finalist.

Looking Back

Matt started in the automotive industry at age 15 as a tire changer for Market Tire Co., and quickly moved up to become a retail sales manager for Goodyear at age 17, and a store manager for Craven Tire Co. at age 19.

When he and Judy opened their own shop 11 years ago, leasing the best equipment money could buy, a chance encounter helped them in their journey to the top. "A man who happened to be the president of the local BMW club was trying to get his M3 tires and wheels mounted and couldn't find anyone that could do it, including the dealership," Matt says. "He called Hunter, who told him that Curry's was the only shop in the nation that had the proper equipment."

After Curry's mounted and balanced

the man's tires, he wrote an article about the shop in the local BMW club magazine, which went out to roughly 5,000 BMW owners. "That's what set us up for success," says Matt. "It really launched our reputation as a premier tire and repair facility."

Curry's is still deeply involved with local auto groups, including BMW, Porsche, Mercedes and Audi clubs. "We go out to the track with them, inspect their cars and advertise in all their club magazines," he notes. "We usually have two events a year at one of our locations for each club."

Aside from Matt and Judy, who started out doing accounting and later moved into her current role as vice president of marketing and advertising, Curry's is also lead by Chris Coulter, who became a partner after Curry's opened its second location in 2002.

Today, the five retail locations are still operated under the basic premise of offering customers “the best equipment, technicians and management team in the industry,” Matt says. This year alone, Curry’s has invested over \$200,000 in updating and acquiring new diagnostic tools, as well as purchasing Virginia state emissions machines as a value-added service to customers.

Unlike its competition, Curry’s performs any job needed, including diagnostics, programming body modules and electrical work. “We have dealerships that bring cars to us when they can’t fix them,” Matt says. “We have the equipment and tools to service all the technologically-advanced vehicles today.”

While Curry’s sales are currently 90% vehicle service and 10% tires, the company’s goal is to double its tire business in 2010. Curry’s regularly stocks Michelin, BFGoodrich and Uniroyal tires.

Spreading the Word

In order to keep its name fresh in area residents’ minds, Curry’s relies on a mix of print, radio and direct mail advertising, in addition to its sterling Web site. In 2010, the business will send 1.5 million pieces of direct mail that will be supplemented by a \$100,000 radio campaign, car club magazine ads and community publication ads, a strategy Curry’s uses each year.

“The radio ads help our print and mail campaign by keeping our name out there,” Matt says. “It makes our print advertising more effective.”

The shop’s Web site – currysauto.com – features online appointments, coupons, testimonials, surveys and polls, and encourages customer interaction. Customers who submit testimonials or referrals online are eligible to receive a “Curry Reward,” a monthly drawing that offers prizes such as gift certificates, gas cards, Curry’s logo items and seasonal gifts. Curry’s also keeps in touch with customers through its CurryLink, an e-newsletter sent to



roughly 6,000 people each month.

This year, the shop has also become active on social media sites Facebook, Vimeo, Flickr and Twitter. Curry’s uses these sites to promote specials, as well as communicate important industry news. “This is another outlet for us to share ideas and have fun with customers on a more personal level,” Judy says. “It’s a part of developing a long-term commitment to our customers and our community.”

A large part of Curry’s advertising comes in the form of grassroots marketing. The company regularly hosts car care maintenance clinics, women’s driving clinics and Boy and Girl Scouts clinics, in addition to sponsoring the “Sir Isaac Newton’s Totally Awesome Teen Driving School.” The event, for new teen drivers and their parents, teaches accident avoidance, vehicle dynamics and threshold braking, among other topics. Before major driving holidays, Curry’s holds “Open Shop” events, which feature free car checks for participants. The dealership also hosts several “Do It Yourself” clinics each year for local car clubs.

One of the most well-known customer events is the Curry Clash, a “people’s choice” car show with vehicles from local car clubs, Matt says. The event – which includes free food, logo items, vendor exhibits, car care clinics and a dynamometer contest – attracts over 1,500 attendees. “In celebration of our 10-year anniversary, last year’s

event included treating many of our customers and associates to a day at the track,” he says. “We rented out a circuit at Summit Point Raceway for a day and invited family and friends to come out and drive.”

A Winning Team

Matt and Judy recognize that Curry’s wouldn’t be where it is today without an exceptional staff. “We have a couple employees who have been here since day one,” he says. “We don’t have a lot of turnover because we pay them well and treat them well. We treat everyone like family, with the respect they deserve.”

Curry’s offers its 64 employees benefits including 401(k) matching, personal and vacation days, and health insurance. Technicians’ pay plans are tied to their certifications and training accomplishments, which encourages them to seek additional training opportunities.

“We have some of the best and most well-trained ASE Certified Master Technicians in the country,” Matt says. “Many of our technicians have other certifications including BMW, SEMA and Lexus Elite Repair.”

In addition, each Curry’s location has a designated “white coat” technical expert with extensive certifications and diagnostic experience. This person provides on-site training and consults with techs to ensure all diagnoses are accurate and the repair work is completed properly.



Curry's pays for technicians and managers to attend an ongoing training program that includes weekly in-house training as well as many outside sources: SEMA Installer Certification, Bosch, Euro-diagnostics, Hunter, Northern Virginia Community College, ATI, Mobil Oil, Twenty Group, and vendor training opportunities.

Extended Family

Curry's also treats customers like family, or as Matt says, "We don't just fix cars, we build relationships."

Of course, there's the sparkling clean customer waiting area, complete with complimentary snacks and beverages, workstations with desks, free WiFi and the "Curry's Kids Club" with toys, video games and activities. But Curry's customer service goes far beyond the expected.

Curry's is the first and only AskPatty.com Certified Female Friendly Tire Dealer facility in the northern Virginia/Washington, D.C. area, an achievement that was spearheaded by Judy. "As a female and one of the owners, I really wanted our business to be a comfortable, safe environment for my friends," she says. "I've always done little things – like making the showrooms comfortable, having snacks for moms



with their kids, and making sure the bathrooms are spotless – but the AskPatty program has taken that whole concept and just blown it out. It teaches you how to provide extra services like education and letting female customers interact with other women, as well as making more technical information available to them.

"To have an actual training process set up was a validation to what I was trying to do all along," Judy continues. "It's all in one neat little package, and it gives each and every one of our employees a way to improve themselves and be consistent throughout each of our locations."

This year, Curry's conducted a qualitative customer research survey, which enabled the shop to measure customer opinions and make necessary changes. As a result, Curry's expanded its hours to include Saturdays, added services, offered more discount coupons and revamped customer



convenience options, including investing in a fleet of courtesy Toyota Prius hybrid loaner cars.

Three years ago, the dealership began its highly successful Curry Reward Card program. Under the program, each customer receives a free Curry Reward Card during his or her visit. The cards have a magnetic strip that is scanned into Curry's credit card machines to check balances and to add/redeem points. With each service, points are added on the cards and can be redeemed at different levels for savings from \$10 to \$60. Each card is pre-loaded with a random number of points, so each customer begins with a balance.

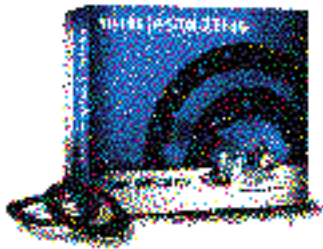
Curry's employees offer "show and tell service," taking a customer out to their vehicle to show them what's wrong as opposed to just telling them. And to ensure each location is consistent with Curry's policies, Matt and Chris continually rotate among the stores to spend time talking with employees and customers. "We personally complete a store checklist, judging each location on its adherence to customer service policies and procedures, cleanliness and safety," Matt says.

"We create a safe, comfortable atmosphere where our customers are at ease and can openly discuss their concerns with any of our associates," he notes. "All of our repair advice is provided based on our customers' needs and driving habits. Any required repairs are discussed with these in mind and are scheduled only as they are needed."

A Key Player

Curry's approach to community involvement is equally as extensive as its customer service policy. The shop donates to numerous charities, schools, churches and community organizations, as well as selecting a couple charities each year to provide key support. This year, Judy and Matt selected Jill's House, a respite home for children with disabilities, and Food for Others, a year-round food pantry serving northern Virginia. The shop supports Jill's House through Open Shop days and raffles, where Curry's collects donations and offers a company match. Pantry donations and funds have also been collected at each location during various events to support Food for Others.

Curry's also supplies car care gift buckets to any organiza-

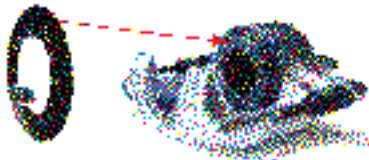


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tion in need of donor prizes or silent auction items, as well as an auto repair coupon book that school or sports groups can sell and keep 100% of the profits.

The Currys are so ingrained in their community that in 2006, Matt took the year off from working in the shop to found Dulles South Youth Sports, since there had been no local sports organization previously. "Starting off, we got 350 football players and 120 cheerleaders; now we have six sports and over 1,000 kids," he says. "After three years I was able to walk away from it and leave it in the hands of a board and volunteers. It's kind of a legacy for me – hopefully 30 or 40 years from now these sports will still be doing well."

In all, Curry's has donated well over \$100,000 – as well as countless hours – to more than 60 organizations, churches, PTAs, athletic clubs, sports teams and charities. "Owning this company and getting involved with charities and the community has made me realize that I have a unique opportunity to make a difference in a lot of people's lives," Judy says.

"This business has certainly allowed us to give a lot back," Matt agrees. "If we weren't successful, or if we worked for someone else, we wouldn't have the opportunity to give financial backing and support for the community."

Looking Ahead

Moving forward, Curry's plans to open its sixth location by the end of the year, as well as two additional stores in

2010. The business expects a 32% increase in revenues with sales of more than \$17 million next year. Down the line, Matt and Judy plan to expand to between 15 and 20 locations by 2014.

"We plan to leverage our Ask-Patty.com certification to attract more women customers and solidify our reputation as the place women prefer to bring their cars," Matt says. "We're also committed to becoming a leader in servicing vehicles with alternative fuel technologies, and are already having planning sessions with manufacturers of electric cars so we can be leaders in the service of these vehicles as they come to market."

Matt recognizes that Curry's success hasn't come without obstacles.

"Keeping a sharp eye on profit levels as we expanded was a key obstacle to overcome," he notes. "Restructuring staff incentives helped get the full team looking out for new ways to improve the bottom line. And of course, with more extended car warranties and recessionary pressures, driving customer retention and bundling services to attract more repeat business has been an important challenge to address. We've realigned our processes and policies, integrated training for all of our associates into our normal operations, and focused on consistency to become better at customer retention."

It's that ability to adapt the business to changes that will keep Curry's among the top dealers in the nation in coming years. **TR**