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Car wash business offers second career for many

The challenges are the same across the country – weather and customers.

by Karen Dalton

DOUG ACTON

Three years ago, two couples decided to get into the car wash business. David and Diane Demyen and Doug and Sherlyn Acton, equal partners in Paws 'N' Wheel Wash in Calgary, AB, are very pleased with their purchase.

After 30 years of farming, Doug is now responsible for day-to-day operations of six enclosed wand car wash bays, a double RV bay and two dog washes. "We have a terrific location in a residential area next to the largest off-leash park in Calgary and close proximity to commercial accounts," said Acton.

"In a high traffic location like ours, cleanliness and maintenance are very important to customer satisfaction. We're open seven days a week, 15 hours per day, and our staff spend a lot of time sweeping and cleaning up the bays to ensure that our customers feel comfortable coming in. Our clients range from the dog walkers to businessmen and women to landscapers and home builders," Acton commented. "Our customers take as much pride in their clean vehicles and dogs as we take in the quality of the service provided."

Doug considers customer satisfaction to be the number one priority. "We have good repeat business and word of mouth can be a very powerful marketing tool," said Acton.



Satisfied customers leave Paws 'N' Wheel Wash in Calgary, AB.

"Keeping staff on task to maintain the level of customer service that we want is an important part of my responsibility." He also does maintenance when he can, but relies on equipment suppliers to keep everything working properly.

While he has a great staff of six, Doug can always call on his partners if needed. "Having four bosses available to work allows for flexibility to take vacations or a few days off, which many owner/operators don't have," remarked Doug.

TED HEWETT

According to Ted Hewett, owner/operator of Klassic Auto Wash in Barrie,

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Ontario, he has the worst location for a car wash. “Twelve years ago, we purchased a car wash with the worst location and the worst reputation in Barrie. Now, it’s still the worst location, but with a great reputation. It’s been voted best car wash in town for the past nine years,” said Hewett.

“We operate a full-service gas bar, small convenience store, a full-service tunnel car wash with auto detailing and an automotive accessories business from one location.” He employs up to 25 employees depending on time of year and business conditions. “I used to think my biggest challenge was employees, but I don’t necessarily think that anymore.” Hewett acknowledges that employees require a good part of his focus to ensure that he has the right people and to keep turnover low. However, he now considers customer expectations to be his biggest challenge.

“Customers today expect a \$90 level of service for seven dollars. My job is to achieve a level of customer service that is fair to both the customers and the company. To do this, Hewett has invested in hard work and equipment upgrades, but is never satisfied. He recently purchased a nearby Corrosion Free rust-proofing franchise to offer additional services to his detailing and auto accessory clients.

Hewett has been involved in the car wash business for over 30 years. He started out with his father, Geoff Hewett, who still owns a car wash operation in Orillia, Ontario. Ted has been involved with the CCA for many years and served as a Board member five years ago.

Hewett’s words of wisdom to employees? “The customers are not always right, but they pay the bills, so focus on keeping them satisfied.”



Paws 'N' Wheel Wash owner/operator Doug Acton enjoys a busy day.

ANDREW HALLETT

When the fish processing plant he was involved with was affected by the downturn in the fishery business on the East coast, Andrew Hallett looked for a new business and opened a multifunction facility with a car wash operation. After 10 years, he’s very satisfied with his decision. “We built a six-bay, self-service car wash with a touchless automatic tunnel, a 3,500 sq. ft. convenience store and a large Ultramar gas bar operation,” said Hallett.

Triple C Carwash, which stands for ‘car care centre’, opened in 1994 in Mount Pearl, Newfoundland and employs 15 staff. Hallett’s operation serves not only the local population, but also attracts business from the larger city of St. John’s.

With an operation this large, Hallett recently upgraded his security system which he can now access from anywhere. “Ten cameras, positioned throughout the business, capture video which I can access live from my home computer or my laptop wherever I am. A 320 GB hard drive also stores the video information for three weeks.” Logging through the Internet, with the Divar system from Bosch Security Systems, Hallett can watch his entire operation at any given time, even while he’s on vacation.

Competition from big national car wash operators has driven Hallett to offer great service and high quality products for his customers. While competition is a challenge, Hallett is proud of his accomplishments.

“Being in a profitable business for 10

years has been rewarding. The number of fine days to wash cars in Newfoundland is very minimal,” jokes Hallett, “so there is only so much car wash business available.”

KATHY DEFRAIN-BARTLETT

Veteran car wash operator Kathy Defrain-Bartlett has a great attitude when it comes to customers: keep smiling, be flexible and be able to change. In partnership with Shell Canada, Defrain-Bartlett expanded her 24-hour gas bar operations to include an automated tunnel car wash and full-size convenience store eight years ago. Defrain Shell has been operating in Kitchener, Ontario for the past 13 years.

“Customers today want fast service and high value. They want in and out as soon as possible,” Defrain-Bartlett commented. Weather, gas prices and competition are her biggest challenges. Poor weather has had an impact on her car wash business, and she believes that customers unhappy with high gas prices take their business to car washes not affiliated with the fuel suppliers. Finally, large retailers, who have recently opened car wash operations, are offering discounts, cross-promotions and other incentives to enhance their car wash operations.

While she concedes she can’t do anything about the weather and gas prices, Defrain-Bartlett does have plans to develop a marketing program with nearby car dealerships and other local businesses. As a member of CCA for the past eight years, she’s learned to manage change. **OCTANE**