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STRATEGIES & INSPIRATION FOR AUTO CARE SUCCESS

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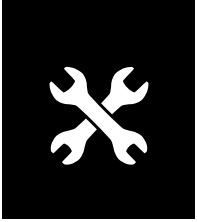
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MAY 2017



BRAND AWARENESS

All in the Family
Brooke (left) and Alan (right) Pilibosian have turned their shop's marketing efforts into a family affair, even involving their two children.



REFINED MARKETING
PROVED PIVOTAL TO
ONE TEXAS SHOP'S
REBRANDING

BY
KELLY BEATON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JASON JONES

Brooke Pilibosian had seemingly read every business book in existence, and every marketing publication she could get her hands on.

Nevertheless, in 2015, sales began to lag at Treadworks Tire & Auto. Pilibosian found it exasperating.

Customer after customer seemed to file through the 6-year-old repair shop in Cottonwood Shores, Texas, asking for clarification on the services offered. The shop inspired painfully little brand awareness among nearby residents. That fact drove Brooke and the facility's owner and manager, Alan Pilibosian (her husband), to consider their options.

"Most people just associated us with tires, and nothing else," Alan says. "And we were trying to change that mindset. We had tried, you know, to advertise in local papers for years."

In those days, Brooke "lived in fear," as the old marketing tactics she tried were met with roadblock after roadblock. Her shop was missing a major tenet of marketing: It simply wasn't connecting with consumers, due to its largely unclear moniker.

"We had come to a plateau," Brooke recalls. "And, we were not growing. And anybody in business knows that if you don't grow, you die."

UNDER PRESSURE

Brooke Pilibosian didn't initially choose



a marketing role at her husband's shop. It chose her.

"When we first opened our doors eight years ago, I was just a stay-at-home mom," she says. "And, when Alan told me he wanted to open a shop, I knew that we would have to do it together, because literally everything we had was going into it."

"And so we spent years growing our team, and learning, and fighting a *lot*," she says, lightheartedly.

While her husband worked 80 hours per week to get Treadworks established, Brooke brought her young toddler to the shop—where they often ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner—and tried every marketing tactic anyone passed along. She tried mass mailings, a monthly calendar that noted daily discounts, and even gave away oil changes and tire rotations.

But those moves barely registered with customers.

"I was always grasping at straws in the beginning, as far as advertising goes," Brooke notes. "And I always thought the idea was to look bigger than you truly were. You know, look like the giant chains."

"It just didn't work."

Eventually, Brooke learned to tune out suggestions from third parties and largely trust her gut. After all, by 2015—after poring over countless marketing tomes—she had become a scholar on the subject in her own right.

"When it comes to marketing, it literally is a series of a bunch of small things done well," she says. "It all starts with, 'How do I create a relationship?'"

IDENTITY CRISIS

Eventually, after an endless stream of customers expressed confusion over whether or not Treadworks did mechanical work, Alan became consumed with one thought:

"We knew at some point we needed to change the name," he says of his shop.

Fear of the unknown, though, initially kept the Pilibosians' business stuck in neutral. The couple was concerned about losing a segment of its customer base due to rebranding.

"It wasn't until we saw our sales just go flat, or plateau, before we said, 'OK, the risk is worth it,'" Brooke says.



So, in 2015, Treadworks' operators launched a contest (which had been suggested by a shop coach) in which they sought name submissions from customers over the course of roughly six months. Whomever came up with the best name for the mechanical facility would win a tablet computer.

"We didn't have a name in mind, and we also worried about our customers not being open to change," Brooke explains. "When our coach suggested we do a contest, we immediately thought it was a good idea. ... Our customers would be fully involved from the beginning, which would take away their trepidation."

Over 100 submissions later, the central Texas shop had its new moniker to start 2016: Alan's Wrench.

While the Pilibosians loved the new name of their business, before sales could spike, Brooke needed to decipher what customers truly demanded of it.

As a result, Brooke—who typically works 20–30 hours per week (down from the 60 per week she worked in 2009)—spent the better part of two months working in the facility's waiting room, embark-

ing upon a sociology experiment of sorts. She wanted to zero in on whom, precisely, the shop's customers were.

Namely, Brooke asked customers what came to mind when they thought of the 5,000-square-foot facility in Cottonwood Shores, Texas. With each question she fired at customers, Brooke was attempting to pinpoint how her shop could improve its relationship with its client base.

"People want to tell their story. They want to be heard," Brooke notes. "So, sitting down and asking those questions and being respectful, everybody was receptive."

PLAY TO YOUR AUDIENCE

Once she began thoroughly studying her customer base, Brooke says each bit of demographical information seemed to plot a course to improved revenue.

Brooke pored over the business' database to determine exactly what percentage of the shop's customers were male versus female. She studied how far customers lived from the facility, and further examined just how old their vehicles tended to be. Then, she scanned the state of Texas' database to examine median income figures.

Turns out, Cottonwood Shores—a retirement destination that's home to roughly 1,100 residents—was supplying Alan's Wrench with a clientele that was nearly 65 percent female. There were also a significant number of grandparents who filed through the facility.

Feedback suggested that customers appreciated the familial culture at the Pilibosians' shop, which features G-rated touches like a strict no-cursing policy throughout.

Customers said, "You guys are happy, and we know you're going to treat us fair. We trust you."

Naturally, Brooke's marketing tactics began playing to the crowd like never before. She began mining social media sites like Instagram and Pinterest for campaign ideas, studying what types of posts got the best responses from customers. The Pilibosians spent nine months marketing their shop's name change, with advertising that directed customers to a website video in which Brooke explained the reason behind the rebranding (mainly, the fact that the original moniker made it sound like it was largely a tire shop, though tires accounted for only 20 percent of business).

Market to Customers

Brooke Pilibosian (left) utilizes technology and social media to market to her shop's customer base.



Brooke and Alan also began featuring their two young sons in their marketing endeavors, which resonated with customers. One such example is a “business card” for their 10-year-old son, Kade, which states his job title as “Future Owner” of the shop. Alan says the idea came about because customers frequently came in and asked about their kids.

Among Alan Wrench’s other marketing home runs:

WEEKLY RADIO SEGMENTS. In what might be Brooke’s crowning marketing achievement, she talked a nearby country music radio station, KBey 103.9 FM, into having her husband appear for what amounts to a roughly 15-minute Q&A segment about auto repair each Friday. The kicker: The weekly radio segments cost Alan’s Wrench nothing, other than time. Vendors loved the idea, and a NAPA parts store in nearby Marble Falls, Texas, currently sponsors the segment.

“My vendors are lined up to pay for that show for us,” Brooke notes.

CALL-BACKS. Alan’s Wrench’s service advisor is instructed to check in with recent customers when their repair orders reasonably call for it. The advisor takes personalized customer notations, typically in the shop’s management system. The call can be as simple as following up on a customer’s weekend roadtrip, Brooke says.

“It’s 10 minutes of my advisor’s time,” she says. “We don’t have to spend nearly as much on our outside marketing if our inside marketing is working well, you know?”

THANK YOU CARDS. The Texas shop’s service advisor sends thank you notes to every single referral. The advisor’s typical script includes phrasing along the lines of, “You’re our hero, thanks for choosing us. Thank you for putting your trust in us.”

A NEW YEAR’S CARD. “We do a New

Year’s card, so it doesn’t get jumbled in with all the 25 other Christmas cards,” Alan explains.

AMPLE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT. When there’s a fundraiser near Alan’s Wrench, a representative from the business is often involved.

“We do a lot of community involvement. A lot,” Brooke says. “We can always give something, even if it’s just a free oil change, and a hat.”

SELF-WRITTEN ARTICLES. Brooke pens repair-related articles quarterly for the local newspaper, The Horseshoe Bay Beacon, which she later posts on her business’s blog. And, on that blog, she often embeds a repair-related video element. It’s all in an effort to reach customers in the ways they prefer.

MEASURED GROWTH

The refined marketing strategies have served the Pilibosians’ growing business well. The couple says their net profit for 2016 was around 22.5 percent, up from 14.88 percent in 2015.

Brooke says a prime reason the shop’s net profit increased is the fact that she found out who the area’s ideal clients were, and began marketing to them. That, in turn, allowed her to stop wasting money on marketing tactics that produced unpredictable results.

“We are a lot more consistent,” says Brooke, who has also witnessed her shop’s average repair order increase by \$150. “Last

year was our most stable. In our sales, we were really consistent, month to month.”

Brooke has studied even more marketing books in recent years. Now, in 2017, she could teach a seminar on the subject. Her main lesson learned:

“Marketing is about creating a good relationship with people,” Brooke notes. “Really, it’s figuring out who you are, and who your customers think you are, and then giving them more of that.” +



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