

The need for speed

From Volume 34, Issue 2 - February 2010

Feature

How the express exterior carwash service is making money and keeping its customers.

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The heyday of the express exterior may have been a half-decade ago when new locations were popping up all over the country at an alarming rate, but the economic recession hasn't entirely dampened this market segment. Instead, it is has strengthened its appeal.

The need for an inexpensive, faster service is more obvious than ever. Similar to the appeal and growth of fast food drive-thrus in economic downturns, express carwashes are maintaining and sometimes growing volumes as the country weathers its recovery.

The right price for convenience

"The consumer in today's society is used to obtaining things very quickly, from movies on their phones to cappuccino in seconds. The express wash typically delivers a clean car in three to five minutes," said Robert Andre, president of CarWash College. "I also believe that the express wash, with its low price, is particularly appealing to customers during this time of economic distress."

Andre added that in 2008, a Data Monitor survey found that 82 percent of consumers considered time saving products and services to be important.

But Andre insisted that he would never tell anyone that an express wash is a "guaranteed money maker." He would instead point out that the express wash is the operator's most likely source of increasing revenue.

"I also believe that it is easier to deliver consistent results to the customer, which in turn builds repeat business and enhances the company's reputation," he continued. "It has been my experience that most of the express wash operators I work with are typically very successful."

Who are these express customers?

People looking for a quick and easy wash experience are the likely express wash customers. The point is to offer a service that can be finished in less than five minutes and offered at a low price-point (\$3 to \$5).

According to Andre, it's hard to pinpoint an exact demographic beyond those who generally wish for speed and affordability. "One of the things I find most interesting about express washes," he said, "is that its customer base is so broad. It is quite interesting to visit a busy carwash and see a man in a business suit, a young driver, as well as elderly people all vacuuming their own cars. However, the largest percent of purchasing customers is still going to be female."

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Tom Tucker Jr., president and founder of Vacutech, a manufacturer of vacuum technologies to the carwash industry, agreed with Andre and said that he typically cites the female proportion of customers at 70 percent of the businesses total volume. He added, "Customers will frequent an express carwash more than the others ... because of the price point, convenience, quality, choices and free vacuum."

Defining an express wash

It would be easy to lump express washes into the same category as in-bay automatics, but there are some key differences. For starters, the express exterior carwash typically offers a free vacuum service at the end of the wash.

But the primary difference between an express wash and an in-bay automatic is the "express" component, according to Andre. "A typical in-bay can only produce 10 to 15 clean cars in an hour. A mini-express wash that takes up about the same space as an in-bay (50') can produce 50 to 60 clean cars in an hour." Also, he added, the express will typically have limited hours of operation, while an in-bay would be open 24 hours.

Tucker said a successful express exterior will use an automated point-of-sale system as well as an attendant to help guide vehicles onto the tunnel conveyor. The attendant will be responsible for instructing the driver to roll up the windows, put the vehicle in neutral, and to take the foot off the brake. Usually the car then either leaves the premises or can visit a vacuum plaza parking area.

How to reel them in

If an express wash can clean a car quickly for a low price, some customers may think it's too good to be true. "It is believed that for the low price and the speed that is offered, people expect the wash to be 'low' quality," according to Andre. He suggests offering a clean car guarantee to offset this belief. "And," he said, "when they visit an express wash and they receive a clean, dry and shiny car, they are quite pleasantly surprised. As a result, they become even bigger fans."

Free vacuum stations are also a good way to bring in and keep customers. Tucker said that based on information he has obtained by speaking to successful express exterior carwash operators from all over the country, when it comes to the vacuuming of their vehicles, customers want power.

"And," he added, "if you don't provide it, they will seek out an express wash that has it. We are all customers and we all want the best; free vacuums with a carwash means the customer has the fate of a clean interior in their hands."

Make your vacuums a selling point

Because the typical express wash customer is looking for a speedy experience, the operator needs to make sure the vacuums are on par. "Customers love vacuuming their own vehicles; after all it is their own space and most do not like their space invaded by someone else," Tucker explained. "Most customers want to vacuum quickly and thoroughly that is why a powerful vacuum system is so important."

Tucker said that the vacuum system must be able to provide enough air flow and pressure [suction] to enable all customers parked in vacuum spaces provided.

The vacuum plaza areas, according to Tucker, can have from 10 to 48 vacuum hoses and more. "The maintenance and serving of the central vacuum systems is more important today than ever before. Daily, weekly, monthly and semi-annual maintenance is required to keep a central vacuum system operating at its peak performance," he said.

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The vacuum system, according to Tucker, has accessories that are used every day and must be replaced as they wear out, such as the vacuum nozzles, nozzle hanger seals, hose adaptors, vacuum inlet valves, vacuum hoses, hose cuffs, etc. "Maintenance, as every one knows is a very important necessity in a carwash and the central vacuum system is no exception," Tucker stated.

"Many carwash owners purchase new vacuum equipment thinking theirs is bad or worn out, when all that was required was a thorough cleaning and replacement of vacuum piping and some accessories."

The express: Then and now

According to Robert Andre of CarWash College, the format for the express wash has remained much the same since its inception. "However," he noted, "some of the changes I have witnessed are the ability to use the computer system and the pay stations to better market and produce, as well as run promotions for your customers."

Andre added that there are now more services that operators can offer online to raise the ticket averages. "Advancements in equipment have allowed the wash process to become faster and more efficient, all while minimizing operational costs. Another trend being seen more frequently is operators adding flex-serve options and other wash options such as touch-free automatics and self-service bays."