

Denver Business Journal - February 9, 2009  
<http://denver.bizjournals.com/denver/stories/2009/02/09/story6.html>

## DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

Friday, February 6, 2009

# Lake Arbor Automotive benefits as people keep cars

Denver Business Journal - by [Bruce Goldberg](#)

Dana TePoel had an epiphany about customer service in 2001, and it led to major changes in how the founder and owner of Westminster-based **Lake Arbor Automotive and Truck** ran the business.

He took on the difficult challenge of changing the mind-set of his employees. From then on, they were to think about service first, not sales. He wanted them to explain what they were doing when repairing a vehicle, "and what it means to you, the customer, how it helps you. Teach them to spend money now to save money later," said TePoel, whose family is of Dutch origin.

"The straw that finally broke my back was the stress and anxiety caused by bad choices made by my employees," said TePoel, 51. "They would say, 'I thought it was the right choice, considering the circumstances.' The whole process was so convoluted. We had too many people going in too many directions. ... It's difficult to create a system where everyone advocates for the customer.

"I thought, if this is what success looks like, I don't want to be successful."

So TePoel initiated a couple of steps:

- He had his employees sign the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence eight-point code of ethics. "And we check their alignment with it regularly and often," TePoel said.
- TePoel wrote a paper that outlined his philosophy about Lake Arbor's approach to such factors as trust, responsibility, attitude, growth, commitment, integrity and respect. Employees signed that one, too.
- And he pushed his staff to adopt such practices.

The result? Lake Arbor suffered no drop in business during the recession that took place earlier this decade, TePoel said.

Fast forward to today, when these new ways of doing business have become standard. Combine that with the fact that in the current recession, many people choose to keep their old clunkers running rather than spend lots of money for a new vehicle.

It's meant a big jump in business for Lake Arbor since September, including a monthly revenue record of \$122,000 in October.

September brought in \$114,200, which was 65 percent more than September 2007. October's total was 30 percent higher than October 2007. November (\$108,200; up 20 percent) and December (\$109,200, up 37 percent) also were growth months. The company generated \$180,000 its first year, 1992; in 2007, revenue was \$1.3 million.

Nationwide, the vehicle repair industry's revenue rose 16 percent in 2008. Lake Arbor stayed ahead of that at 19 percent through August — then more than doubled the national average in the last four months, hitting 38 percent.

"In the same month that the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell off a cliff, everyone began to worry about what they were going to do, how are they going to budget this kind of thing [repairs]," said TePoel, recently named Small Business Person of the Year for 2008 by the **Metro North Chamber of Commerce**. "They came to us and asked, 'should we keep this car?'"

Halliburton employee Dave Wilson has been bringing his vehicles to Lake Arbor since the mid-1990s. Now, his family takes all five of its cars to the shop. "Dana is very honest," he said. "When you go there, you're going to get a straight-up answer."

Wilson credits TePoel for finding — after much searching — service managers with the right attitude.

"I know he's fired people that he found out were doing work that wasn't necessary, or for making customers re-pay for doing work that wasn't necessary in the first place," Wilson said. (TePoel's service managers make about 20 percent of their salary on commission and are rewarded for creating long-term customers.)

Wilson, an account representative for the Baroid IDP (industrial drilling products) arm of Halliburton, has been a mechanic — thus he brings a more educated eye to repair estimates.

"What happens at a lot of places is that the desk guys are paid on commission, especially at dealerships," he said. "The current guys have been there five, six, seven years. But he had a lot of turnover before; it was hard to find guys who wouldn't pad the bill."

TePoel summarizes his feelings about customer relations with a before-and-after scenario. "We make a mistake on a car," he said. "The



Kathleen Lavine | Business Journal

Dana TePoel says his business is booming because the recession has more motorists paying for repairs instead of for new cars.

[View Larger](#)

customer is visibly upset and probably won't be back. My service manager, or someone who works for me, might decide he's not coming back anyway, so why give him his money back.

"But if you change that and look at it from a right-and-wrong perspective, then refund his money. Do the right thing for the customer. Slowly, word gets out on the street. This guy ... he'll tell 100 people, even if he was disappointed, 'maybe I won't go back there, but they did the right thing. They made it right.'"

**At a glance**

Company: Lake Arbor Automotive and Truck

Address: 9146 Marshall Place, Westminster

Phone: 303-429-7700

Website: [www.lakearborauto.com](http://www.lakearborauto.com)

Owner: Dana TePoel

Number of employees: 10

*All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.*