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Owner trades in Tums for ethics



Dana TePoel, founder and owner of Lake Arbor Automotive & Truck in Westminster, talks about how he insists employees are ethical with customers. He won the Small Business Person of the Year 2008 award from the Metro North Chamber of Commerce. Photo by Jon Brodhacker

By Nissa LaPoint | Staff Writer | February 19, 2009 11:57

Repair shop owner Dana TePoel once kept his car stocked with Pepto-Bismol and his desk drawer with Tums to fight off the stresses of running his business.

"I wasn't really enjoying my job anymore ... I was just tense," TePoel said Monday afternoon, as he sat behind his desk inside Lake Arbor Automotive & Truck in Westminster.

Despite the comforts gained from his success, such as his expensive Broomfield home with wood floors and French doors, he decided he wanted to run his business differently - with honesty and ethics.

"If this is success, I don't want to be successful," he said of his former employee's practice of putting sales before the customer.

His office and repair shop is now flanked with his philosophy outlining Lake Arbor's approach to business - trust, responsibility, attitude, growth, commitment, integrity and respect.

He asks all employees to sign his philosophy along with the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence eight-point code of ethics.

It's paid off, he said.

Over time, his customers came to trust employees and last year business was double the vehicle repair industry's national average.

Nationally the industry rose 16 percent in 2008. Lake Arbor was ahead by 3 percent until August 2007. Then in September through December, the business rose 38 percent.

The company generated \$1.3 million in 2007, up from \$180,000 when it first opened in 1992.

The Metro North Chamber of Commerce awarded TePoel with the "Small Business Person of the Year 2008" award in February.

"I was totally blown away," he said.

A key part to his recent success is the trust established with customers.

After an analysis of a vehicle's problems, customers are told what parts need prompt repair and what part repairs can be put off, he said.

Service managers explain a prioritized list and customers choose what to fix.

"We have a philosophy that you have to do the right thing," said service manager Gary Kingsbury. "I know if I make a decision, even if it costs the company money, that (Dana) will back me up."

Susan McLean of Westminster felt she received that excellent customer service when she brought her car in for repairs at the shop near 91st Avenue and Marshall Place.

An unusual rattle convinced her to bring it in, but it turned out to be a simple problem and the repair shop did not charge her for the repair, she said.

She brought her car back in Monday to receive an oil change.

"I'm so impressed at how courteous they are and it's immaculate here," McLean said.

She feels right at home in the waiting room, she said, as she leaned back in a blue chair.

The Girl Scout cookies, the living room chairs, coffee table and warm yellow walls make her want to come back.

"You feel like you're sitting in my family room except my chairs aren't that nice," McLean said.

TePoel ensures his employees focus on the customer's needs by having yearly evaluations and monthly meetings.

At a recent meeting, employees listed their thoughts on what values they thought the company represents. One employee wrote "morals - treating customers like my grandma."

If a complaint arises, employees must fill out a form that requires explanation of the situation, the task, the action and the result to determine the source of the problem.

Employees say the meetings are helpful.

"He empowers me to make decisions and it helps me grow," Kingsbury said. "He's like a father figure in a corny sort of way."

With that trust, customers begin to come in voluntarily to receive repairs previously recommended, TePoel said.

"What you build is hundreds of customers that trust your advice and come to us as a trusted adviser," he said.

Janell Brooks said she and her husband have been loyal customers for more than seven years.

"He's just been very pleased with the service," Brooks said of her husband. "It's not your typical place."