

Relieving customer stress

Doing the right thing carries shop forward from humble beginnings

JAMES E. GUYETTE // Contributing Editor

Someone could be watching you at any moment if you're one of the Marshall's Auto Body Experts. And that's a good thing.

Employees at the 7,200 sq. ft. shop in Billerica, Mass. aspire to win a "caught in the act of correctness" award.

Bestowed by management three to five times each month, the surprise prize is a \$10 to \$15 gift card redeemable at a local coffee shop or sandwich emporium. "They can receive that for something as simple as rolling up an extension cord left on the floor," says owner Jim Marshall. "It lets everyone know that doing the right thing is always the right thing — even if you think no one is watching you."

Although the gift card giveaway may seem to be a rather modest honor, sponsored at minimum cost to the shop, it is nonetheless valued for the acknowledgement it brings to a staff steeped in a longstanding tradition of standout service.

"We care about people — our customers, our staff and our communities. Our integrity and commitment to excellence is reflected in the auto repairs we perform and how we treat people," Marshall explains.

"When a customer walks through our door, they may have just been through one of the most traumatic experiences of their life. We treat them like a guest and do whatever we need to do to help relieve their stress and make them feel at ease," he says.

"We take time to ask questions and understand their needs and their expectations. Knowing what their expectations are is critical to making sure that when we deliver their vehicle back to them they leave a satisfied customer."

With 17 workers and 16 bays, the business ranks in the top 5 percent of collision repair training achievements as recognized by the State of Massachusetts.

"Our technicians are highly trained and educated in all repair processes. We do not use aftermarket parts as a practice," Marshall reports. "We are 96 percent OE parts." Manufacturer guidelines are followed, with certification through General Motors, Honda, Acura, Nissan, Hyundai, Fiat Chrysler and Kia.

Other credentials include I-CAR Gold Certified, Assured Performance Certified and Profirst Certified. "We make sure that we are current on all the latest repair procedures, as the



MARSHALL'S AUTO BODY EXPERTS

Billerica, Mass. // marshallsautobody.com

Jim Marshall
Owner

BASF
Paint Supplier

1
No. of shops

16
No. of bays

42
Years in business

\$3,691
Average repair order

17
No. of employees

20
No. of customer vehicles per week

7,200
Total square footage of shop

\$3.7 million
Annual gross revenue

safety and satisfaction of our customers is our No. 1 priority."

The quality-conscious company was established more than 42 years ago by Mal Marshall, Jim's late father who additionally served the community as a firefighter.

A car dealership is also a part of the family business. Currently housed in a facility two miles away, it is in the process of relocating to the collision center's property to form a single entity. "I can give more personal service at the body shop," says Marshall, where most of the auto store's routine fix-ups and detailing duties are already conducted.

Sometimes the staff is so busy doing collision work that certain repairs on the for-sale vehicles are subbed out to other shops in the area.

Courtesy and respect

"We have lean processes, and we're always challenging our

selves to get leaner,” Marshall says. DFR, dismantle for repair, is among the strategies.

“When dealing with vendors, we use technology to keep the process lean, improve accuracy and reduce returns. We order parts through CCC One, Collision Link and Opstrax to procure the correct parts as much as possible. This reduces returns and reduces costs on both sides.”

Having a cooperative attitude makes for a more pleasant work atmosphere while also benefiting the business. “Respect is an important factor for us. We believe in treating everyone with respect, and we view all our suppliers as a part of our team. My paint supplier is Don Kennett Inc., and they have been our partner for 15-plus years.”

He points out that “all relationships are based on courtesy and respect. We let our providers know that we follow manufacturer repair guidelines, I-CAR standard procedures and ALLDATA. Our insurance providers have come to know that we demand excellence on each and every repair and will settle for nothing less than perfection.”

Recruiting and retaining employees is assisted by Marshall’s consistent involvement with educational programs. He has been the advisory chairperson for Shawsheen Technical Vocational High School over the past 20 years. He was inducted into its alumni Hall of Fame in 2012.

“I have hired at least 15 students and have helped place many more within the industry, whether it is in other repair shops or with paint suppliers,” he notes, lauding Shawsheen’s admirable 89 percent employment placement rate.

“I also serve as a judge on the Massachusetts state Skills USA competition, where our local students compete in collision repair and the opportunity to advance to the national competition,” Marshall adds.

“As far as onboarding new hires,” he elaborates, “I have developed an apprentice program within our shop.” A senior technician is paired with two lower level staffers.

“They learn structural curriculum and are trained and continually measured. We have always focused on being the facility of choice for young talent,” Marshall reports. “We provide a tool box and tools to new technicians. If they stay for two years, they are able to keep the tools and toolbox.”

Giving back

Marketing efforts tend to go hand-in-hand with the shop’s civic endeavors, including numerous referral initiatives.

“We partner with local schools on a program called ‘Donate to Educate.’ For every referral we receive from one of the local schools, we donate \$50 for every repair to their Parent Teacher Organization.

“We have another where we will give \$40 to the person making the referral, and \$40 off the repair for the car owner. We also give both parties the opportunity to donate that money to the local Police & Firefighters Fund,” he says.

“We have kiosks in many of the local businesses around town with our business cards and the referral offer. That has proven to be a successful marketing strategy for us,” according to Marshall.

“We also believe in giving back to our community,” he continues. “My wife Dawn and I are both members of the Billerica Rotary Club, and we are both members of three separate Chambers of Commerce.”

Dawn, the shop’s accountant, is a board member at the Burlington Chamber of Commerce and supports the Council on Aging along with organizing charitable luncheons. And in their spare time, the couple is additionally involved with the Division of Children and Families, putting to-



gether duffle bags filled with clothes for when children are removed from their homes at any time of the day or night.

They also volunteer with Big Brother/Big Sister, the School Council, the Sheriff’s Department, the Billerica Library Foundation and various veterans’ organizations.

“Raising funds for veterans is near and dear to my heart,” says Marshall. “We have participated in a program called ‘iPods for Wounded Vets’ that provides iPods and free music and audio book downloads for veterans at Walter Reed Hospital and Fort Belvoir so that they can listen while they are

getting therapy for their injuries. We are proud to say we have helped raise \$40,000 for that cause.”

Active duty

“The original Marshall’s Auto Body had very humble beginnings,” he says, recalling how “my father, Mal Marshall — who was also a 20-year fulltime fire-fighter — began doing collision repair at our home in a two-bay garage.”

In 1978, Mal decided to grow the business, opening the building that still houses the shop. The structure initially consisted of four bays. “In 1980 we added four more bays, in 1983 we added four more bays, and in 1986 we added four more,” he recounts.

Jim bought the business from his father in 1996. “I added a second building with spray booths and prep stations in 2004, and in 2019 we added a parts building.”

Looking back, “I began prepping and sanding vehicles when I was 15 years old at our ‘home’ body shop. I would come home from school and work until dinner time. My father would paint a car at night and I would unmask it before I went to school.”

Marshall took auto shop courses at Shawsheen Valley Technical High School, the same institution where he now serves as the advisory chairperson.

“My father and his foreman, Bill Magnan, taught me auto body repairs at the new shop in 1978.” Upon graduating from high school in 1980 Marshall joined the U.S. Air Force, serving for four years.

“When I returned from active duty, I also became a fireman, but eventually returned to working in the shop. When it came time for my father to retire, I bought the business.”



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