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Increase in diagnostic work helps Morris Automotive attain double-digit growth

by Dick DeLoach

Santa Monica, Calif.—Dave Morris, owner of Morris Automotive, which he opened in 1987, said his business has grown close to 15 percent in the past two years, thanks in part to a considerable increase in diagnostic work.

“We have positioned ourselves as a dealer-alternative shop and we are an AAA Approved Auto Repair (AAR) shop, so we inspect our customers’ vehicles at least two or three times a year,” he said. “A courtesy inspection normally reveals any preventive maintenance that needs to be done.”

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Scheduled and preventive maintenance has always done well for the shop, Morris said. “But I would say that 35 to 45 percent of our work now is diagnostics, including a lot of check engine light problems, which we charge to diagnose.”

If customers want to know why the shop charges a diagnostic fee, Morris said he educates them mostly on the cost of doing business, including tools, training, and paying techs.

“If they want to see more, we refer them to our website where they can view videos that explain everything in detail,” he said.

Morris, an ASE master technician with L1 certification, who attended Santa Monica College’s automotive program and graduated from Automotive Training Institute (ATI), has invested in a variety of scan tools to perform diagnostics.

“We have a Snap-on Solus Pro and Vantage Pro, a Vertronix Mastertech, a Mastertech MTS 5100 VCI, a GM Tech 2, and a wireless Autel Maxisys, which I love because I can stand outside the vehicle and run the diagnostics.”

Morris said when buying new tools or equipment, he asks other shop owners what’s worked for them.

“We are members of ASCCA, which has a forum called TeamTalk where we can ask questions and get feedback on any topic,” he said. “One thing to remember when buying any tool – especially a diagnostic tool – is to ask about the cost of updates and support.”



The ASE-certified office team at Morris Automotive, including from l., Sal Saucedo, manager; Dave Morris, owner; and Roderick Prasad, manager, educates customers on the cost and value of diagnostics, including referring them to videos on the shop’s website.

Having easy access to accurate information when performing diagnostics is critical and time-consuming, which is important to remember when considering a scan tool purchase, Morris said.

“We also give the customer written information to show them the research we did on their car, including any recalls, technical service bulletins, and possible

air bag defects,” he said.

Because his shop focuses on Asian imports and American cars, Morris said he has limited need for European diagnostic tools.

“We can diagnose most problems in-house, but of course there are times when we have to refer a vehicle to a dealer, mostly for programming issues like

ECM and keys,” he said. “And we are getting more serious about learning computer programming and key programming.”

Diagnostics isn’t only about scan tools, Morris said. “We also use old-school strategies. We ask detailed questions about the symptom so we can focus on the complaint. We also use iATN and Identifix. We used Mitchell for many years but with

recent changes its more of a waste of time.”

The right tools are important, but having a trained staff of ASE-certified technicians is paramount, Morris said.

“I have a great crew that works hard all day and takes a lot of classes after work, which they are still required to attend,” he said. “So daytime classes are better. We pay them for the day off and cover the cost of the school, travel, and meals.”



Melvin Barrientos, Morris Automotive technician, tops off the fluids in a customer’s Toyota pickup.

Morris Automotive is an ACDelco Professional Service Center so technicians receive training at the ACDelco Training Center, plus classes from Denso, Motorcraft, Dorman, Standard Motor Products, and NAPA.

“We always recommend OE or better parts, which we buy from Santa Monica Ford, Santa Monica Lexus, and Martin Cadillac,” Morris said. “We also buy a lot of parts from WORLDPAK, Warren Distributing, O’Reilly, Undercar Plus, Completes Plus, AutoZone, JEGS, Summit Racing, and Engler Brothers.”

In addition to an increase in diagnostic work, Morris attributes the shop’s business growth to a combination of time management, efficiency, and having a crew that works together as a team.

“We have eight employees, including myself, and shop space is limited — about 2,800 square feet inside, with five bays, four stationary Benwil, BendPak, and Rotary lifts, one portable Bishamon lift,” he said. “And the lot has room for only seven cars. Shuffling cars in and out can be a challenge and takes teamwork.”

Morris said though he outgrew the shop years ago, it’s in a desirable location – especially now that the Metro Expo Line has extended to Santa Monica.

“The Metro runs down Colorado Avenue to Santa Monica Pier, and we are right on the corner of Colorado and 14th, and only a couple of blocks from Santa Monica College. I get a lot of business from the college, both staff and students.”

The shop has been an AAA member for about 10 years, which Morris said has helped bring in new customers and give the shop more exposure through their advertising.

Morris has been an ASCCA member for about 15 years, which he said has many benefits, including free legal information, discounts on insurance, uniforms, oil, and office supplies. And being able to network with other top shops and join together as a group to help support independent shops and fight unfair legislation.

“There are great opportunities for diagnostic work, but proper diagnosis is a skill not many people have. It takes dedication, hard work, and a lot of schooling,” he said. ■



Dave Morris, owner of Morris Automotive, says he likes the shop’s wireless Autel Maxisys because he can stand outside the vehicle and perform diagnostics.