

TAKE THE WHEEL

A shop's car care class created goodwill and reached a bigger-than-expected audience. n Steve Relyea

COMMUNITY SERVICE

When Downing Street Garage was organizing a free car care class for the community, they didn't know that the guests would include two TV news crews. But those crews did attend and the shop received several minutes of positive coverage on the news.

The full service auto repair facility in Denver, Colorado has been holding classes on and off for some 25 years. They began when co-owner Douglass Kirchdorfer was approached by a local continuing education school with the idea of offering a class on how to properly maintain a vehicle.

"I got quite a few customers out of it," he says. "People were going to the class to learn about how to maintain their car, but then they ended up bringing their car to me, so it was almost like advertising without really advertising."

The most recent classes, held in April, were promoted as classes for women, but men were invited too. In total, 30 people attended. One class was held on a Wednesday evening and the other, on a Saturday morning. Each lasted 1-1/2 hours — long enough to deliver a good amount of information, but short enough to hold everyone's attention.

The information presented was general, applicable to any vehicle, and included not only why maintenance is so important, but also how to better communicate with a service advisor. Show-and-tell was included wherever possible — showing a dirty cabin air filter, for example, and actually jump-starting a vehicle. Questions were welcomed throughout the class; the presentation itself could be completed in 60 minutes, so the 90-minute class allowed plenty of time for questions.

"One of the things you have to try

to pick up on is the technical level of your audience — are you talking over them or are you talking under them? — and you have to be able to switch gears based upon the feedback you're getting from them," says Chris Lechman, general manager.

To promote the class, the shop used many different media. These included websites, social media sites, e-mail, postcards, flyers, messages on hold, and a press release sent out to all Denver media. The shop also promoted that an educational brochure they'd produced themselves — *Top Ten Tips to Extend the Life of Your Vehicle* — would be given to all who attended. To help promote future classes, Downing Street Garage is considering partnering with other organizations; for example, inviting a AAA rep to speak during the class and asking AAA to promote the class to its members.

Educating people helps fulfill the shop's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), says co-owner Rebecca Kirchdorfer. "CSR works, because we've had customers tell us that they really appreciate how we give back to the community," she says.

And then there were those two TV news crews: "One of them put together a 10-minute spot on us on the 10 o'clock news and the other did a shorter spot on the 5 o'clock news," Rebecca Kirchdorfer says. "You can't buy that kind of publicity!"

If you have questions about how to organize a car care class, Rebecca Kirchdorfer invites you to contact her at r@downingstreetgarage.com. She also recommends the professional services of Shelly St. John, a marketing consultant who helps the shop with promoting the classes and with other marketing strategies. St. John, the owner of Primary Objective, LLC, can be reached at (303) 860-0384 and shelly@primaryobjective.com. **IAPA**

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