

Repair chain puts faith under the hood

by Scott Prater | Published: April 10, 2010

Christian Bros. Automotive, a Houston-based car-repair business, hopes to open two locations in the Colorado Springs area within the next year.

And if its owners' prayers are answered, its registers will be filled with the dollars of customers who believe in Jesus.

The idea is to draw people who want the peace of mind of dealing with a business that, because it is run by folks who share their religious belief, will treat them with integrity and honesty.

So, along with hardwood floors, leather sofas and smiling greeters, should customers expect to recite Matthews with the mechanic who's about to swap out their spark plugs?

Not quite, but Christian Bros. is one of a growing number of businesses nationwide putting its faith in, well, faith.

Christian Bros. has been growing, so there's some evidence its approach is working. But some experts in religion believe that even in Colorado Springs, home of Focus on the Family and New Life Church, the approach could backfire.

"For some people, having that Christian moniker will be a draw, and for some it won't," said Barb Van Hoy, executive director for Citizens Project, a Colorado Springs nonprofit organization that supports equality and religious freedom.

"I view people who stick with their own and choose not to interact with people who are different from them as a negative trend. I don't know if this example necessarily means that, but I see it as helping create a larger trend of an us-vs.-them mentality."

A good sign

Christian Bros. was founded in 1982 by Mark Carr, a budding entrepreneur who decided to try to capitalize on the poor image that afflicted the automotive industry. His vision has helped the company grow into a franchise with 66 repair shops in nine states, though most are in the Bible Belt.

Josh Wall, Christian Bros.' vice president of franchise development, tosses aside assertions that the company is using religion as a tool to promote itself.

"Those types of charges against us are unfortunate," Wall said. "If you look at the way we present ourselves in the marketplace, we take careful approaches to not use religious artwork or slogans. I would just say that if those critics brought their car through a Christian Bros. Automotive, I feel confident that they wouldn't be critical of what we're doing. I tend to think they would become enthusiastic supporters."

Of course, with Christian Bros. in its name, there's hardly any need for religious icons in the customer waiting area.

Wall did confirm that Christian Bros. researched the Colorado Springs market and based its location decisions on the religious demographics on the region.

Proclaiming a name

Businesses that promote themselves as Christian are hardly a new phenomenon.

The Shepherd's Guide, a leading Yellow Pages-type of operation, distributes Christian business directories in more than 100 cities and offers a Web site featuring listings for local Christian schools, beauty salons, tailoring and ostensibly trustworthy mechanics, among others.

But few have gone so far as to incorporate the word "Christian" into their business name.

And while marketing to a targeted demographic has proven to be a successful practice for some, it has its drawbacks.

"Being a Christian doesn't make you a better plumber, but it does serve to send a message," said Rev. Dr. Nori J. Rost, minister of All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church. "In our divided community, it actually sends two: Christians might be more inclined to patronize the service, and non-Christians, weary of rhetoric from conservative Christians, might be more inclined to avoid it."

Business owners are, of course, perfectly within their rights to proclaim their faith as part of their public promotion.

"Religious freedom and the right to freedom of speech are protected by the First Amendment," said Mark Silverstein of the Colorado American Civil Liberties Union.

So Christian Bros. and the myriad of other businesses that promote themselves as Christian aren't violating any laws through their marketing strategies.

But how does their overt Christian promotion affect people who practice a different faith or lifestyle?

Jay Patel, co-chair of the Colorado Springs Diversity Forum, and a practicing Hindu, doesn't have a problem with Christian Bros. promoting itself as a Christian business; he just doesn't believe it's a wise marketing decision.

"It's a silly marketing tactic," he said. "One of the ways you stay in business is you deal with as many people as you can. I know if I was marketing my business to just Hindus, I'd be out of business in a day."

Richard Skorman, a downtown business owner who is Jewish, prefers to separate his business activities from his religion.

"I would hope people wouldn't choose a business based on religion, but by who they think would do the best job repairing their car," he said. "I wouldn't feel comfortable going to an auto mechanic that promoted itself as Jewish either."

David Gardiner, a practicing Buddhist, co-founder of Bodhi Mind Center in the downtown area, and chairman of the Religion department at Colorado College, said he would be suspicious of any business that advertises its religious leanings.

"I feel it's not relevant to the business services you offer," he said. "I suspect they are not resting on the business skills, but instead trying to attract people based on some other perceived quality."

Others, meanwhile, see a big difference between what Christian Bros. is doing vs. the marketing approach taken by some businesses that serve minority communities.

"The difference is that the goal of the Pink Pages (which advertise businesses friendly to the gay community) is to showcase businesses with whom people who identify themselves as GLBoT can feel comfortable using the

business,” said Dr. (Rev.) Rost. “That way, they don’t have to worry about bias against them if the business discovers their sexual orientation or gender identity.”

A mistaken identity?

David Weddle, professor of Religion at Colorado College, argues that Christian Bros. is simply trying to promote its business to people who would be predisposed to conduct business with it.

“It’s no different than the Masons, who informally visited each other’s businesses, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints that tends to make loans for its members at below-market rates,” Weddle said.

Christian Bros. is counting on that sentiment. The company is in the midst of an expansion in other parts of the country and Wall said that Colorado Springs seems like the right fit for its business model.

Van Hoy, however, points to a statistic that may be surprising to some: the people of Colorado Springs aren’t nearly as faithful as they’re reputed to be.

“It’s no secret that our city is viewed by others around the country as a mecca for evangelists, but in reality the state of Colorado has a lower church-attendance figure than the national average,” she said.

The state, according to a Pew Forum study last year, was 41st in that regard.

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