

Star-Telegram

Christian Brothers Automotive is a hit among families, franchisees

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After 30 years as an information technology manager at Corning, Alan Crawford knew just what he wanted to do next when the company offered an early-retirement package two years ago.

Go into the auto repair business.

When he retired, Crawford was already working to secure a franchise from Christian Brothers Automotive Corp. In early October, Crawford opened the company's ninth Tarrant County repair shop at 7333 Oakmont Blvd. in southwest Fort Worth.



STAR-TELEGRAM/RON JENKINS
Alan Crawford opened a Christian Brothers Automotive shop last month in southwest Fort Worth, the company's ninth in Tarrant County. He said he likes Christian Brothers' emphasis on clean and attractive facilities, including comfortable waiting rooms.

The privately owned, Houston-based company now has 25 shops in Dallas-Fort Worth, with seven more scheduled to open in the next 18 months. Locations in Lake Worth and Granbury will open by early next year.

"Dallas-Fort Worth is our largest market both in terms of the number of stores and in revenue," said Josh Wall of Keller, who is vice president of franchising and development for the \$110 million-a-year business.

The Christian Brothers shops offer full-service auto repair, from oil changes to engine overhauls, but not body work.

It's an unusual business in a number of ways, not the least of which is its "faith-based" focus.

Christian Brothers was founded in Houston in 1982 by Mark Carr, who is chairman, CEO and principal owner. The first franchise wasn't awarded until 1997.

Franchises are granted only to professed Christians. The franchisees are carefully screened to make sure that both parties are comfortable with the relationship and that the franchisees have

complete buy-in with the company's core principles, which it says are to provide high-quality work and observe honest and ethical business practices.

But beyond its name and professing its faith-based roots on its website, the company doesn't market or advertise itself based on religion.

"If someone asks, we'll tell them we're a faith-based business," said Crawford.

The company doesn't necessarily look for franchisees with experience in automotive repair business or even auto enthusiasts.

"A business like Christian Brothers becomes highly attractive to people who want to have a hands-on experience, build a team and serve customers at a high level of quality and integrity," Wall said. "Many of them are first-time business owners. We are looking for people who like people."

That approach appealed to Crawford, who was a customer of the Christian Brothers store in North Richland Hills and a friend of Kevin Simmons, a franchisee who has since opened shops in Roanoke and the Alliance area.

"I was very impressed with the honesty and ethical approach to auto repair," Crawford said.

He also liked the company's emphasis on clean and attractive facilities, with comfortable waiting rooms designed to appeal to women and families.

"We were sitting around here yesterday and I said it feels like my den," Crawford said, motioning to the waiting room in his new store, complete with leather furniture, a flat-screen television and children's area. "That's what we want it to be like."

Stores have a shuttle to get customers where they need to go while their vehicles are being serviced. The stores are open only on weekdays, so employees can have weekends off with their families.

Christian Brothers has 90 stores in 11 states, and at least 10 more are due to open in the first quarter of 2012. In the last couple of years, it has added locations at about 20 percent a year.

"We were starting to hit our stride as an organization just as the recession hit," Wall said. As a result, a number of recent franchisees are people who "were being downsized or just were tired of what was going on in corporate America."

The parent company, like many franchisers, locates, buys and builds the facilities to its standards. The franchisee pays a fee and buys equipment and supplies, with a required upfront investment of about \$325,000. Christian Brothers helps arrange financing.

Once the business is running, the parent company gets 50 percent of the net profit -- after the franchisee has paid all expenses, including a \$70,000 salary and benefits package -- rather than a percentage of top-line revenue.

"We don't want them to feel like there's this enormous financial pressure on them," Wall said. "We want them to invest in their business, in their community. We don't want them to worry about how they're going to feed their family."

Christian Brothers worked closely with Crawford over the last two years to educate, train and otherwise prepare him to run the business. The company assigned its own franchise assistant, Mark Trulock -- a coach as Crawford calls him.

For Crawford, 57, it's his first venture into business on his own. He has no experience in the auto repair business. Trulock helped locate and hire an experienced auto service manager and employees, train them in the Christian Brothers ways, and will continue working with Crawford for the next couple of years to help ensure his success.

Read more: <http://www.star-telegram.com/2011/11/09/3513772/christian-brothers-automotive.html#ixzz1dRFw0zPL>