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sad shape of auto fix-it
shops, he vowed to do better**

Carr repair

with Christian Brothers



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CARR REPAIR

WITH CHRISTIAN BROTHERS

BY DENNIS SEEDS | DSEEDS@SBNONLINE.COM

Mark Carr was operating Christian Brothers Automotive in Houston when a Chevy Suburban driven by a woman from Michigan gasped its way in to the repair shop. It was giving off the telltale knock, knock, knock that even novice mechanics know means the engine is dying.

But what infuriated Carr was not the sad shape of the rusted-out vehicle but the fact that the woman had just paid \$750 for repairs at another shop, and the engine was still clunking. He smelled a fresh rip-off for the unlucky victim.

"Her husband was disabled, and she was on disability," Carr says. "She was trying to take care of her husband and was crying. She said, 'I just paid \$750 to get my transmission fixed and the car's making the same noise that it did before.' So I patted her on the hand and said, 'Come on; let me take a look at it.'"

His diagnosis was on target. She needed a new engine.

"But this guy took \$750 that this poor woman didn't have to fix a transmission instead," Carr says. "I got in the car and I drove down to the guy and I said, 'You know what? The guy who sticks a gun in your ribs in an alley is more honest than you are because at least you know he is stealing from you. I don't know how you get up in the morning and look yourself in the eye in the mirror. You disgust me. I am going to tell everyone that I know not to come here. I don't know what you are going to do for this woman because I can't control that, but you should refund her money.'"

The man just stood there, not knowing what to do with Carr.



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—MARK CARR, PRESIDENT AND CEO, CHRISTIAN BROTHERS AUTOMOTIVE CORP.

“And I left,” he says. “But that is how I stuck up for her. That’s not the only time that I have done that for my customers.”

Did she get her money back?

“I don’t know if he gave it to her or not,” he says. “But I hope he did; I hope I shamed him enough to give the money back. How would you like somebody doing that to your mother, and there was nobody to stand up for her?”

The incident is a reflection of the simple but powerful mission Carr has for his company — love your neighbor as yourself. With Christian Brothers Automotive, Carr’s goal is to distinguish his company in a field in which a number of lesser shops have often taken their lumps for poor customer service.

“A lot of times, you get a customer who walks in the door, and he thinks that you are a crook,” he says. “He may even say it before you even touch his car. It was a challenge for me to change that person’s mind, to show that that wasn’t true.”

In 1997, the company began selling franchises that promoted family values. Today, there are 750 employees and 109 franchises in 14 states, and 25 more are in the planning stages.

“I did start out with a partner, and I bought him out about two years into it, so that is where the ‘Christian Brothers’ came in, using my Bible study,” he says about one of the most frequently asked questions.

Here’s how Carr, president and CEO, set Christian Brothers apart from other companies in a field that is often viewed suspiciously and how he generated \$160 million in revenue in 2012.

Walk in another’s shoes

Not every company is founded upon what you might call a divine “nudge,” but no matter where the inspiration comes from, if that nudge becomes the heart of your company — and if you believe the company will only continue

through a strong connection to that inspiration, superior customer service and a spirit dedicated to strengthening the community — you will be successful, Carr says.

He founded Christian Brothers Automotive in 1982 with the help of fellow church members, after he spent months praying about how he should change his life. One of the first steps he took to stand out above the rest was to take inventory of market perceptions of the industry.

“I sat down and I made a list of 20 reasons why people hate to get their car repaired,” he says. “I went through every one, checked off all 20 on that list and said I can solve every one of those.

His first goal was to be a light in the community. To do that, establish your operation as fair and reliable, he says. When you make honesty and integrity the foundation of your business, word gets around. Word-of-mouth is

everything, and it spreads rapidly, be it positive or negative.

“People are talking about us, which makes me proud in a good way,” Carr says. “It’s all about, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ That is our motto. Whatever race, color, creed, country — no matter where you’re from, everybody wants that.”

Another “image lifter” was a new design scheme. Carr created a positive culture shock when he installed an upscale home-charm décor that includes hardwood floors, leather couches, artwork and decorative lighting in the waiting rooms. The scheme was a hit among women, who had a negative perception of dingy auto shops and the possibility of questionable practices.

Don't skimp on training

Training is a large part of jobs today, and few organizations can afford to skimp on educating their carefully selected employees. In service-related businesses such as car repair, a business often comes out ahead if it starts with a manager or executive who doesn't have skills in the service field but instead is strong in business operations, Carr says.

“We do not want any of our franchisees knowing anything about cars,” he says. “If they know about cars, they can be in the running, but 90 percent of the time, we turn them down. We turn down by probably a 2-1 ratio.”

Instead, for his company's franchises, Carr looks for businesspeople who know how to manage people and manage money. To get around their lack of knowledge of the industry, Christian Brothers hires all the employees for the new franchisee because that person doesn't know what to look for. Then, after about a year, that person will have a better understanding of what to look for, says Carr.

Because no amount of training can address every possible task or situation for a new manager or executive, the education process has to be as thorough as possible.

“We go through extensive training with these people,” Carr says. “I actually have an exact replica of what my store looks like inside my office. It's got the lobby and



THE CARR FILE

NAME: MARK CARR

TITLE: PRESIDENT AND CEO

COMPANY: CHRISTIAN BROTHERS AUTOMOTIVE CORP.

Born: Syracuse, N.Y.

Education: I barely made it out of high school. There were 32 kids in my class and I graduated in the top 30. I skinned out, although I did get accepted at three of the top art schools in the Northeast.

What was your first job?

I had a paper route when I was about 10. I used to clean toilets in a bar before I went to school in the morning, and I was a garbage collector on the back of a truck because I refused to collect unemployment. I also delivered fuel oil in upstate New York in 20 degrees below zero weather.

Whom do you admire in business?

Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines is one of the smartest businesspeople that I read about. The guy is so smart. All his planes are the same. The maintenance is low. He treats people well. It's not flying first class, but they treat you well. The customer service, everybody's got a smile. Nobody likes to fly anyway, but I just think that his whole philosophy, his whole concept of business and his making it so practical in the industry — he's the only one out there that's profitable. I also admire Lee Iacocca. He took something that was a mess and turned it into something that was good. I think that is why I like what I do. I'm trying to take something that is really crummy and make it into something decent. And it works so far.

What is the best business advice you have ever received?

My dad said to me, 'Mark, credit is everything. Pay your bills, pay your employees and pay yourself last.' I think that's been really good advice. The credit has gotten us where we are — never defaulting on any loans. He was right. I have paid myself last and not very much. There wasn't much left. But I took care of the employees.

What is your definition of business success?

It's not size. It's getting to a point where you don't have to worry about paying your bills, you don't have to look over your shoulder to worry that something is going to come up that you did dishonestly. You really enjoy getting up in the morning and going to the office. And if it is one employee or 1,000, it doesn't really matter. Just because you are bigger doesn't mean you are more profitable — if you make \$1 million a year and your expenses are \$999,999, you didn't make any money.

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Takeaways >>

Have empathy for the customer's situation.

Don't underinvest in training.

Give back cheerfully to the community.



all the point-of-sale software so they are in the environment that they're going to walk into. It is exactly the same — the waiting room, the counters, the whole thing.”

Carr has employees play the roles of customers during training sessions, both good customers as well as mean ones.

“We banter with the trainees to see how they are going to handle that particular situation,” he says. “We are in a lousy business. People are already walking in thinking we are crooks if they are a first-time customer. You just try to deal with it the best you can. If we screw up the car,

you say that you were wrong, you take it back in, you fix it.”

Build an image of a cheerful giver

Companies that have become a better corporate citizen in the community are not likely to abandon those efforts, as the good will they achieve can't

be bought at any price. That good will can be especially beneficial in an industry segment that has taken its licks over the years.

And while Carr says a company can offer any number of promotions, those that have staying power in a consumer's mind are optimal.

“I have a tremendous heart for single moms,” he says. “We hold a nationwide day for free oil changes for single moms. We served over 1,000 people last year. We hope to make it double what it was last year.”

Such events build the image and the brand of your company, but it can't just be the event. Your core values of honesty and integrity have to be woven into the event or it may come across the wrong way and damage your image more than it will help it.

“It is not to get business,” Carr says. “It's just to show who we are as a company and who I am as the leader of this company.”

Hosting philanthropic events making contributions and donations to the community result in positive feelings about the company, not just from the community but from the employees, as well. Carr says Christian Brothers gives away 10 percent of what it grosses across the entire company, donating to charities and other organizations.

“On the 30th of the month, when I call the controller and ask how much money do we have in the account to give, that's the day I am the happiest,” Carr says. “I love it. I just love it.

“If you give from your heart, He blesses you 100-fold, and that's what He has done with me.” ●

How to reach: Christian Brothers Automotive Corp., (281) 870-8900 or www.cbac.com



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