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Take care of your customers by caring about their safety

June is National Safety Month: are you prepared?

One summer, I worked in a small metal stamping factory between semesters in college. I was young, reckless and knew no fear ... until I got my finger caught in a punch press.

It was a terrifying experience, but it turned out fine. After a few stitches and several months with a numb fingertip, I was back to my old self—except more cautious. Safety became a priority.

June is National Safety Month. It's a good time to make a priority of selling personal safety gear and other safety-related items. Many of your customers are like the "younger me" seeing carelessness as bravery and assuming accidents only happen to the other guy. So how do you sell them on safety?

Here are some thoughts on keeping your customers safer and boosting safety sales.

Q. **How much should I expect customers to spend on safety gear?**

A. Safety isn't sexy. No one dreams about new safety goggles and work boots.

That said, you won't be surprised that safety gear accounts for only 1 or 2 percent of the average dealer's annual sales. So even doubling your safety sales isn't going to make you rich.

But I'm not focused on the bottom line this month. I'm focused on taking care of your customer. I think you'll agree, if you look out for your customer they'll look out for you. Looking out for your customer's safety is about more than the value of the sale.

I'm not saying make safety your only focus in June. That would be like putting a plate full of brussels sprouts in front of a three-year-old and expecting them to eat it like ice cream. It may be good for them, but it will never play as the main event.

Anyway, the bigger question isn't how much your customers are spending, but how much they *should* be spending on safety-related products. What is your customer missing?

Q. **Aren't today's repair shops much safer than years ago?**

A. Yes. I agree repair shops today are safer and accident rates are lower than a decade ago. A big part of that is that technicians and shop owners are more safety conscious, in part thanks to professional education, safety initiatives and government and association programs.

But there are still accidents. On average, 66 serious accidents will happen in U.S. shops today.

More than 24,000 *reported* workplace injuries took place in automotive repair shops, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014 data (the most current statistics as I write this). These are only the reported injuries—usually those who went to an emergency room or urgent care center. How many smaller injuries went unreported?

How many injuries could have been avoided with proper safety gear and safer tools? That is, how many might have been avoided by a dealer "selling safety?"

Safety Item Checklist

A list of safety items to promote for National Safety Month.

Here are a few safety items to promote for National Safety Month. Just ask customers or look around the shop to see what may be missing.

Personal

- Work Gloves
- Disposable Gloves (latex / nitrile)
- Durable Work Boots (steel toe / ankle protection)
- Eye Protection (glasses / goggles)
- Hearing Protection (earplugs / earmuffs)
- Breathing Protection (disposable / durable)
- Face Shields

Shop

- First Aid Kits
- Eye Wash Stations
- Fire Extinguishers
- Spill Cleanup Kits

Specialty

- Welding Helmets
- Welding Apron
- Welding Gloves
- Safety Pneumatic Couplers
- Hose Reels

Online Exclusive

Get a handle on different features to look for in cloth and disposable gloves to stock on the truck.

VehicleServicePros.com/12197186



And beyond injuries, what about the long-term health effects of workplace activities and chemicals that might be prevented with masks, gloves or other safety gear?

Q. How do I “sell safety” as you say?

A. Like any sale, just making your customer aware of safety can make a difference. Handing out a safety product flyer and toting and promoting a few safety products in June can make a difference. The more your customers think about safety, the more likely they are to buy.

Q. What is safety gear?

A. The obvious things are work gloves (disposable and durable), work boots, eye protection, hearing protection and specialty gear (like welding aprons and helmets). Also think about emergency response items like first aid kits, eyewash stations, fire extinguishers and clean-up kits. You don't have to inventory all these, just let the shop owner know you can special order them.

But think outside of the box, too. Encourage customers to replace broken tools. And be sure they have the right tool for the job. Many accidents are caused by using the wrong tool, like using a screwdriver as a chisel, according to the Hand Tools Institute website (www.hti.org).

Also, check that your customers are replacing cutting blades as needed. Dull tools can cause a lot of avoidable injuries that regular replacement can avoid.

Also, when selling tool and equipment, focus on protective guards and safety features. Point out why some safety features are worth a few extra dollars to protect the technician and/or vehicle.

Q. My flag doesn't do a safety promo flyer for June. Is it worth my time to make one?

A. As I said, safety gear will account for only 1 or 2 percent of your sales. So, it may not be worth the time or cost of creating a flyer. Perhaps an alternative is to hand out a safety tip sheet (see below) and mention the safety products you sell.

Several associations offer flyers to encourage workplace safety. Below are a few useful resources I found online. Some are free, some more costly. You might print free PDFs and/or buy cheap handouts and give the shop owner links to the training programs and posters:

- **Power Tool Institute** – www.powertoolinstitute.com/pti-pages/ed-tool-specific.asp. There are several free, downloadable PDFs on impact wrench, grinder and cordless tool safety.
- **Hand Tools Institute** – <http://orders.hti.org/order.htm>. I found inexpensive flyers/brochures about hand tool safety that you can buy in groups of 100.
- **National Safety Council** – www.nsc.org/learn/pages/safety-at-work.aspx?var=mnd. Resources are mostly for shop owners. NSC has led the safety charge for more than a century.

Q. Are there times other than June to promote safety?

A. People are more safety-conscious after an accident. There was a fire at a tire shop a couple blocks from my home last year. The black clouds of smoke were visible for miles and the next morning, firefighters were still spraying water on the embers. Over the next few days, I checked my smoke alarms and fire extinguisher both at home and a work. And I'm sure that smoke alarm and fire extinguisher sales



Making a concerted effort to "sell safety" can improve sales and help your customers avoid workplace injuries. Photo courtesy of Mechanix Wear

in my neighborhood increased, too.

You don't want to prey on someone's misfortune – that seems a little creepy. Just be aware of what's happening on your route and don't be afraid to mention your offerings.

There are some times when OSHA calls on a shop and they need more safety equipment. If you can jump in and help out, do it. If you feel it's outside of your comfort zone, let the safety specialists do it. But let the shop owner know you stock or can special order safety equipment.

Any time is a good time to promote safety. It's something we rarely think about on our own.

Q. Is there a way to sell safety gear, other than scare tactics?

A. Like buying insurance, buying safety gear is all about avoiding risks. That doesn't mean you need to use fear to sell it, but the core reason people buy it is to avoid negative consequences. Put a positive spin on things.

Few people buy safety gear for fun. But that doesn't mean buying it can't be fun. There are some great-looking and specialty-branded safety work gloves, work boots, eye protection, welding helmets and other products on the market today. This allows you to focus on the cool factor: “As long as you are going to be wearing safety gear, you might as well look great doing it!” ^{PD}