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The “New Normal”

Be prepared for the unexpected all the time

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Almost two years ago now, most of us had barely heard of the Coronavirus before it was upon us in full force, and at that time the government intervened with drastic measures to try and prevent its spread. Then a year later, just when we thought the pandemic might be subsiding, new variants appeared and the number of cases surged again, and that cycle has continued.

COVID-19 may have dominated the headlines for the past two years, but it was just one of many events that came seemingly out of nowhere, disrupting the economy, our businesses, and our daily lives. During this same timeframe, we saw record-breaking climate events, from hurricanes in the east to wildfires in the west, and even in the south—a deep freeze in Texas. The pandemic brought the biggest spike in unemployment claims in decades—only to be followed by a labor shortage just as businesses began opening back up. That, in turn, led to a logjam in the global supply chain and a depletion of goods on store shelves. Car dealers have months-long waiting lists for new cars, and even started buying more used cars to make up for the lack of inventory. With demand for nearly everything exceeding supply, inflation has returned in ways not seen for 30 years, with gas prices soaring over \$4.00 a gallon or even \$5.00 a gallon in some places.

The lesson in all this? Unpredictability has become the norm. Uncertainty is the only certainty. We need to be prepared for the unexpected and avoid complacency. Even when times seem relatively calm, disruption can occur at any moment.

Amid all this uncertainty, however, there are signs of good news. The fast lube industry appears to be one of the bright spots in the recovery. After the initial shock of COVID in 2020, shops proved remarkably resilient in working through its impact. Car counts, daily oil changes and average tickets all saw modest but measurable gains in 2021 compared to the previous year. Operators are busy again. Many are experiencing the challenge of hiring and retaining good people to keep up with the renewed demand, but that is a far cry from spring of 2020 when business ground to a halt.

The experience of the past two years provides many lessons in how to deal with the unexpected. It starts with taking care of your most valuable

assets: your employees and customers. Talk with employees about the potential impact of an unplanned event. Make sure your team is prioritizing customer service above all else, so that even if things slow down for a while, you can be confident those customers will return.

Manage your reputation. Dedicate someone to monitor and respond to customer reviews on Google Reviews, Yelp and Facebook. Research shows that most people rely on checking a business' reviews nowadays before deciding to visit and/or spend money with them. The more stars and positive reviews your business has, all the better.

Advertise. The time to advertise your business to acquire new customers is when your competition might be pulling in the belt. Off-site advertising can ensure that you have more new customers coming in the door to offset those that move out of the area or leave because they are not loyal to the site.

Continue to communicate with your suppliers so they understand what you need, and you know what they can deliver. As Butch Hammett, owner of the Automotive Operations Group, can attest, “Our suppliers are key partners in the success of our business and the services that we can offer our customers. Periodically I make a point to have discussions with our suppliers on inventory and logistics so that I’m able to act appropriately and adjust if needed.”

Finally, we have learned that it is important to look after your own well-being, including mental health. In times of crisis, it can be easy for business owners to fall into a trap of thinking they have to spend every waking moment on their business. In reality, the more challenging the circumstances, the more important it is to maintain a healthy work/life balance. The first step in confronting the unexpected is having the confidence that you can get through it.

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