



Faith and Franchising

By BRIAN DIGGELMANN

If you pay attention to the media and advertising, you've probably noticed a trend of people and companies talking about their values. After witnessing the devastating effects of greed and malpractice from the likes of the banking industry and BP, it makes sense that organizations would try to highlight their honesty and integrity in the eyes of consumers.

Some companies may be hopping on the bandwagon, but Christian Brothers Automotive has put faith and values before all else since day one.

"Our founder Mark Carr had an entrepreneurial bug, and one night while praying asked God to provide a business opportunity," said Josh Wall, Vice President of Franchise Development and Strategy of the full-service automotive repair concept.

The next day, Carr, a graphic designer by trade, was approached by a mechanic during a Sunday school class who asked him to help start a garage. Recognizing the answer to his prayer, Carr agreed and the two started Christian Brothers Automotive.

Despite not having a background in the automotive industry, Carr knew what it felt like to be a customer and drew upon those encounters to build a brand that would let customers feel good about the people taking care of their car. The business soon began drawing interest from fellow entrepreneurs.

“The concept was very successful just with customer referrals,” says Wall. “People saw what Mark was able to do with the business and started asking him to help them do it as well.”

Christian Brothers’ focus on fair treatment was even applied to its franchise model in a unique way.

“Mark didn’t like the idea of paying a royalty first—he’d rather be paid last,” explains Wall. “Starting in 1996 with our first franchise, the royalty fee we receive comes after everything else is paid out of the business, including a modest salary to our franchisee.”

The model has proved incredibly strong over the past 16 years as it blossomed to 107 locations without closing a single store.

In addition to the highest priority on customer service, Christian Brothers’ has enjoyed a strong market for automotive repairs. Wall says the average age of vehicles on the road was 10.7 years in 2011 and is continuing to rise, which helped same-store sales grow between 3 and 8 percent even in the depths of the recession.

Christian Brothers’ also employs a careful franchisee-selection process. As a faith-based company, congruency with the established culture of Christian Brothers is more important than a background in the auto repair business.

“For a long time, we didn’t award franchises to anyone if they had automotive experience,” Wall says. “What we look for is someone who has experience leading a team and will have an impact on the community.”

One of the most exciting aspects of the growing brand is that its size still allows franchisees to be involved in the decision-making process.

“Franchise owners in our system are able to have a very large voice in the direction of the brand,” Wall says. “It’s attractive to candidates with a strong entrepreneurial drive and a trailblazer intuition.”

The next time you hear about an executive embezzling funds or defrauding their investors, think about Christian Brothers and remember that there are still folks making an honest living by doing the right thing.