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Ladies Night

Educational workshops for women make them feel comfortable with your shop, and can drive more business to your door.

ANDREW JOHNSON



Courtesy Evansville Courier & Press, Photo by Daniel R. Patmore

Audra Fordin, owner of Great Bear Auto Repair and Auto Body Shop in Flushing, N.Y., saw the poor economy hit her market hard in recent years.

“People were really down and struggling; my neighbors were unemployed,” Fordin says. She noticed that a number of single women who were struggling to make ends meet needed repairs on their vehicles. “I wanted to help them.”

But what can a body shop owner do to help women who are financially tight? Fordin decided to educate those women, and show them some basic auto repairs they could do themselves to save a buck.

“I changed my business motto,” Fordin says. “I no longer sell. I tell.”

In November 2009, she started offering free monthly workshops for women on Saturday afternoons. The workshops, dubbed “What Women Auto Know,” educate women on basic mechanical, collision and body issues—like

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how to change tires and windshield wipers, how to jump-start cars, and how to buff and polish paint.

“I know we’ve received many jobs and customer referrals as a result. We’ve seen payback within the first 30 days after every class.”
— Jimmy Lefler, CEO, Lefler Collision & Glass Centers

Fordin also provides a basic automotive education on vehicle engines, transmissions, electronic sensors, brakes, post-accident frame damage and the difference between repairing and replacing parts.

The workshop has been a huge hit, Fordin says. She gets about 15 women each month, and the workshops are already booked to capacity for the next four months.

Fordin says her intentions were simply to educate the women in her market, but some increased business—and revenue—has certainly been a solid byproduct of her goodwill. She says her shop has become top-of-mind for many workshop attendees when they encounter a repair they can’t do themselves.

“Part of marketing involves educating consumers,” says Jody DeVere, CEO of AskPatty.com. Educating women like Fordin does builds relationships with them and makes them feel safe and comfortable in coming to your business, which is a huge factor in getting them to come back. This allows shops to not only grow, but to become a standout company in the local market as well.

Why Women?

You can certainly offer educational workshops for both men and women, but believe it or not, women are the ones who want it the most. And they make up the largest segment of automotive consumers today.

Rhonda Hiltbrand, chief operating officer of NWZ WORX, an automotive marketing company in Cincinnati, says 65 percent of collision shop customers are women.

And DeVere adds that 51 percent of women in the U.S. over the age of 18 are single and responsible for repairs on their vehicle. From an economic perspective, shops have to find a way to appeal to that huge market, she says.

Many people stereotype women as being most concerned about mirrors and cup holders when it comes to cars, Hiltbrand says. But that’s not true at all. Women care about safety.

“When women break down on the road, they become much more anxious than men do,” Hiltbrand says. “So they’re more willing to take time out of their day to learn about their vehicle and learn about safety.”

Ladies Night

You might feel skeptical about whether offering workshops like this really works. Well, Jimmy Lefler isn’t. The CEO of Evansville, Ind.-based Lefler Collision & Glass Centers has actually had to beef up his “Ladies Night” workshop offering and cut off registration because it’s become so popular.

Lefler’s Ladies Night, a free, semi-monthly 3.5-hour workshop on Tuesday nights, educates women on basic mechanical and collision-related topics. Lefler teaches women what to do after an accident, walks through their vehicle owner’s manual, discusses maintenance issues, shows how to change tires, and demonstrates airbag deployment.

Lefler has also partnered with Ford, which brings in a new vehicle, and shows the women various safety features that are included in today’s cars.

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The women love it, Lefler says. His first workshop in November 2009 brought in 35 women. And it's since grown to a regular attendance of nearly 140.

The women come to the workshop for the information, Lefler says. But it's not just about the education. It's about doing it in a memorable way so you can build a relationship with them—and keep them coming back for more. “You have to engage people by making it fun.”

Here's how Lefler makes his show a hit:

- **Provide food and beverages to the participants.** Lefler offers a light dinner buffet at the start of the evening. This gives him time to walk around and chat with the women one-on-one to start establishing relationships with them.

- **Invite your vendors.** Some of Lefler's vendors set up display booths during the workshop. Each vendor is required to give prizes away that value at least \$150.

- **Provide giveaways.** Lefler gives out six vouchers for complete car details, and \$1,000 worth of gift cards and car washes.

- **Send attendees home with company-branded items.** You want attendees to go home with something that has your name on it, Lefler says. He gives every woman an accident kit, which includes a disposable camera, instructions on what to do after a wreck and contact information for the shop.

“They can put those in their glove box. It's a great place for them to store their vehicle registrations and they will immediately see my shop name when they look at the information after an accident,” Lefler says.

- **Do it with enthusiasm.** Lefler says he never would have dreamed he could get so many women to come listen to him talk cars for an evening. “But we do it with such energy and enthusiasm that it becomes a fun event,” he says, and people want to keep coming back for the party.

- **Don't do it for the bottom line.** If you're only doing this as a revenue generator, there is no payoff, Fordin says. People will suspect you're only looking out for your own interests, and they'll likely go elsewhere when they need repairs.

Lefler agrees: “If you're doing this in order to gain business rather than to offer a valuable service to women who need it, your intentions are obvious and they won't come.”

It does take some time to plan and carry out the workshops. If you don't have enough hours left in the day to take on additional tasks, there is a third party who might be able to help you.

Lori Johnson, a female technician with more than 20 years experience in the automotive industry, launched Ladies Start Your Engines in 2006, a business that specializes in leading educational workshops in many different settings, including body shops.

Johnson puts these workshops on for a fee of \$500 plus travel expenses. You get the women to attend; Johnson takes care of the rest. Visit ladiesstartyourengines.com for more information.

The Payback

Your bottom line shouldn't be your primary goal. But make no mistake about it, your shop will see the benefit through increased customer loyalty, job referrals, community perception, and ultimately, revenue.

That's because with this offering you come across as a caring organization, Hiltbrand says, which is really important in the eyes of your female customers.

“I know we've received many jobs and customer referrals as a result,” Lefler says, although he hasn't yet quantified the numbers. “We've seen payback within the first 30 days after every class.”

And Lefler has received recognition for the workshops beyond the women who attend. He's gotten publicity with a full-page article on the front page of the business section in his local newspaper. The local radio stations have even received on-air calls from women who call in and talk about how great it is.

Marketing for Your Marketing

You have to let people know about your offering. All of Lefler's usual marketing efforts include information about the workshops for the month leading up to the event, he says. Here are some good resources and tools to start with:

- **Flyers and brochures.** Post promotional materials in places women frequently visit—like the grocery store, library or coffee shops, Johnson says. Many of those places will allow you to post information for free.

- **Girl Scouts of America.** Scouts can earn car care badges, and in some markets they can earn safe driving badges, Johnson says. Attend their meetings and announce what you're doing to get troops involved.

"Working with the Girl Scout troops in your area is a great way not only to educate young girls, but to get connected with their leaders and mothers as well," Johnson says. That creates great word-of-mouth.

- **iPhone technology.** Fordin launched an iPhone application, "What Women Auto Know," in December 2010 that's an electronic version of the workshop she puts on. The \$1.99 application gives step-by-step directions about what to do after an accident, has storage for maintenance and repair history of your vehicle, and how-to information for basic repairs.

- **Your own customers.** Fordin says women often have questions about what she's talking about when she writes estimates for their vehicle repair. She mentions that they could really benefit from attending the workshop, and asks if she can sign them up for the next session. She also has plenty of information about the sessions on the website she created: womenautoknow.com.

Create A Relationship

Trust, comfort and relationships: That's what women look for in business interactions. Building trust is what brings in the business, Fordin says.

"Women want to feel like they have a relationship with you, as opposed to men who are much more transaction-oriented," DeVere says, noting that relationships lead to a sense of trust and comfort on behalf of women.

That's exactly why Lefler started his Ladies Night program. "When you've built that trust, it's obvious where they're going to go for automotive repairs," he says, noting that women make up about 70 percent of his customer base.

A woman recently moved into Lefler's market, noticed Ladies Night was happening, and decided to attend since she had nothing else to do. She bonded with the women working in the front office, Lefler says.

That same woman hit a deer just a few days after the workshop. Guess who she called: That's right, Lefler Collision & Glass.

"Women really want a place where they can feel comfortable," Johnson says. Once a woman gets a sense of that, she'll recommend the business to others, and you'll have a customer for life.

*This article appears in the [March 2011](#) issue of *FenderBender*
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