

A Winning Hand

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People enjoy being appreciated, being cared about and given the freedom to do their work without interference. That's the way it is at Garrett Tire in the busy northwest corner of Arkansas in a town called Springdale. It's near Fayetteville, the home of the famed Arkansas Razorbacks.

While most tire dealers worry about location, location, location, Les Garrett says "Nope, it's about customer service. Because of our nearly hidden away location we almost don't have a right to be in business." But his customers say otherwise. They do business at Garrett Tire because they trust Garrett and his four employees who generate more than \$1 million yearly.

"People still seem amazed that I have the same employees I had years ago," he says. "It's about them not only being happy, but about the professional image they project to this dealership and to our loyal customers."

Those who take a close look at Garrett know in a heartbeat that he is a spiritual man. Although he doesn't carry a Bible around his dealership, it is his primary training manual. Instead of quoting chapter and verse, Garrett applies what he learns from the "good book" into every day situations. Word of mouth is what makes Les Garrett a good boss and a good businessman. Even if he may not agree with either description, it's true. Here's an example.

Call Garrett Tire at lunchtime and you'll probably get Les on the line, and he will tell you that his dealership is closed for lunch. Incredible. How can anyone in the 21st century be closed for lunch? Aren't we supposed to be using every millisecond of our time to make money? Again, Garrett says no.

"There is plenty of time during the remainder of the day and many evenings to educate our customers about tires and automotive services. While others put undue stress on their employees, we sit down for an hour from noon to 1 p.m., give or take, and play Hearts and eat lunch." Who sits in? Garrett, his four employees and often a customer, that's who.

Garrett and his longtime employees understand that they must do extraordinary things to remain competitive. "One of my customers came in the other day with a brand new pickup truck with a fresh dimple on the tailgate. He had hit a pole in a restaurant parking lot, and was dropping off the pickup for our normal service routine.

"A few minutes later I heard some crazy noises coming out of the service bays. I know we aren't a body shop, so why am I hearing such a loud, metal-to-metal clanging? I went to investigate and what I found could not have made me happier.

"The man I call the 'Creator,' Gene (Geno) Bullard, had a 2x4, a suction cup and a hammer, all of which he used to remove the dimple. I was thrilled and so was our customer. I didn't ask Geno to do that, he just did it.

"While it's true that I own the dealership and am the boss, I don't wear it on my sleeve. Here's what I tell my four guys and they understand what I'm saying. I call them our 'team rules.'"

- You must be a person of integrity
- You will not cobble or patch anything. You will fix it right the first time using the best parts possible.
- You will make a profit or go get a paper route.
- If we compromise on profits, we will compromise on service and jeopardize our collective futures.

In the tire business since 1977, Garrett has decided to break more than a few business rules. "What I've learned

is that my employees create customer loyalty by creating meaningful memories. In short, they place their signature on the customer.

"The other day Sears called me and asked to speak to John Meredith who has been with me since 1989. They wanted to hire him and John turned them down. Later, at lunch, John said, 'I wonder if they play cards at Sears?'

"You can only wave money at a good employee so long," says Garrett. "After that it's all about enjoying each other's company, hard work, leading a quiet life, minding your own business, being happy and not being dependent on anyone else."

Does that sound like a hard way to conduct business? "Not if you keep the truth up front," says Garrett. "I work hard to create an atmosphere that allows my employees to be happy, creative and attentive to the customer. I don't put them in an environment that will allow them to fail.

"I want my employees to come to work with an attitude that comes from the heart. Great customer service comes from inside, it isn't something that can be mandated," he says. "The boss cannot threaten an employee to make this idea work and it's not a reward that can be used to coerce people to truly care. You either have it or you don't. You either have an ethical business attitude or you don't." Nothing else works as far as Garrett is concerned.

Old fashioned in the sense of doling out nicknames, Garrett refers to his manager Tyler Casteel as the "Perfectionist." John Meredith is the "Inspirer," while Geno (mentioned earlier) is the "Creator." Geno was putting chamfers on brake pads back in the 1970s, says Garrett. Karl Wright, who has been with Garrett's team since 1994, the rookie on the team, is also called the "Perfectionist." Paula, Garrett's wife, has been given the moniker, "The Appraiser."

But Garrett is far from being old-fashioned when it comes to technology and 21st century business sense. "I love my guys, I honor them, and I respect them and know I can only go as far as they take me. My future is their future." The feeling is mutual.

He can conduct an ultra-high-performance tire seminar with the best of them and doesn't allow any new technological knowledge to get away from his employees and customers.

He is literally buried in business, the direct benefit of happy customers and happy employees. Garrett says it's because he bases his business model on the team concept, not the individual. That's why there is always an undercurrent of good will, if not downright fun, at Garrett Tire.

"I'm not just some old guy who loves what he does. I give my guys what they need to do the job right the first time because I know if they can't get it right the first time, they probably won't get it right the second time and that is my responsibility. I've also discovered that when I'm traveling on business they do a better job than when I'm here."

A computer whiz, Garrett just completed a software seminar to help with his ads. "I can't do business without my computer system and if someone out there is delinquent in his homework, he does a disservice to everyone. So the easy answer is simple: We keep up."

Advice to Remember

A sage if there ever was one, Garrett doles out one-liners that stick in the mind. Here's what he says about customer service: "If you don't take care of your customer someone else is out there waiting to do it for you." About competitive price Garrett offers this: "It's not the price that counts it's how you treat your customer.

"And remember this," he says, "the competition cannot steal the relationship you've already established with your customer. At the core of all great customer service lies the heart of each employee. We can and should bring a working brain and our hearts to work with us everyday. It's as uncomplicated as that.

"Our job is to find a way to make the lives of our customers better. That's why friendship and respect plays such

a huge role at Garrett Tire. You can't work beside people for 40 or 50 hours a week if you don't enjoy being around them."

While the whole of the United States puzzles over the proper choice for the next president, many wonder why the candidate list is, uh, er, listless. All the good "feel" things that once attended political campaigns seem to be missing among the electorate.

Not so with Les Garrett, who possesses these talents and more. It's why he wants to offer his services to other tire dealers who might wish to avail themselves of his lessons.

He is remarkably candid and enjoys asking people if they want him to tell the truth or not. If that isn't thought provoking, what is?

Top Shop Specs:

Garrett Tire

Brands: Bridgestone, Firestone, Dayton and Fuzion

Tire Changers: Giuliano

Tire/Wheel Balancer: John Bean

Lifts: Globe and Forward

Alignment Racks: John Bean

Brake Lathes: Ammco

Compressors: Champion

Marketing/Buying Groups: Bridgestone/Firestone