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Charge up your battery sales

CONSISTENT TESTING, CUSTOMER EDUCATION CAN BOOST YOUR BOTTOM LINE AS SUMMER APPROACHES

By **Nancy Dunham**

Many of your customers likely don't realize that the batteries in their cars have little in common with auto batteries of years past. Offer them expertise and an assortment of products and your dealership could get a bigger slice of this large, lucrative market.

Although the recent COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted supply chains and automobile sales, many believe the demand for automotive batteries will only grow.

They predict shoppers eventually will take advantage of low-interest finance rates to buy cars. Many car owners will also find their auto batteries are dead due to lack of use during the quarantine.

"Interestingly enough, one of the things that we as manufacturers have in the back of our minds is when all these people who haven't driven in weeks go out to start their cars," says Alan Kohler, marketing manager, Odyssey Battery. "They will expect them to start, but many won't."

That jibes with a 2017 J.D. Power Report. During that year, without driving disruptions, 44% more auto battery failures were reported in 2017 than in 2016. Batteries are the most frequently replaced auto component, the report noted.

WIDE-OPEN OPPORTUNITY

Many auto owners don't realize that the electrical demand on car batteries has resulted in shorter service lives and no warning of battery failure.

"Batteries used today are completely different than those used 20 or 25 years ago," says Jim O'Hara, vice president of marketing, Clore Automotive. "You needed very little power off that battery, which was [primarily] used to start the vehicle and run the lights."

Although owners of late-model cars enjoy heated seats, sophisticated infotainment systems, lane departure control



COURTESY OF ODYSSEY BATTERY

Most car owners don't realize the electrical demand on car batteries. Make sure you consistently test every customer's battery, especially as summer approaches.

systems and other features, they don't connect this level of sophistication and technology with their vehicles' batteries. Even start-stop systems and hybrid vehicles may have negative impacts on batteries, he said.

Car owners also don't realize that only driving their vehicles occasionally or taking them on short trips are among the other actions that drain batteries.

EDUCATION IS KEY

The best way for tire dealers to educate customers is to offer free testing for every automobile they service. This allows technicians to explain battery life spans and develop customer loyalty, says O'Hara.

"I think that it's essential for tire dealers to test every battery to maximize the return for the customer," he explains.

"But when you get into the electrical side, so much goes into diagnosing and repairing complex systems, I think it's very important that [technicians] are well-trained on the basics, know the service information

and understand the wiring schematics." Offering a "good, better, best" array of batteries is a selling point, especially if options are customized for the environment and drivers' road habits.

And it's important to remind customers that there are many factors, including driving style and environment, that play into battery life, adds Odyssey's Kohler. That will often ease their concerns when you ask them multiple questions about their cars and driving habits.

"Most consumers tend to connect cold weather with battery replacement but it's important to educate them on the fact that batteries hate extremely hot temperatures, as well as extreme cold temperatures, just like people do," says Dave Hobbs, senior field technical training, Delphi Technologies. "So, as summer approaches, marketing that is aimed to educate motorists to that fact could be helpful."

"The three most common vehicle systems that fail in the summer — air conditioning, cooling systems and batteries

Battery sales



COURTESY OF DELPHI TECHNOLOGIES

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— are essential to keeping you comfortable and your vehicle reliable.”

Even when you explain the reasons for battery replacement, though, some customers will wave off recommendations.

“You will always find people who say they don’t want to spend for the best of something,” says Odyssey’s Kohler. “And they will ask, ‘What’s the next best option? What can I get away with?’

“Or they might say they’re selling their car in six months or, ‘I can get it cheaper somewhere else.’ That’s why education is so important.

“Some customers will (persist in saying) ‘I don’t care. I want the cheaper one.’ And it’s important to accept that.”

TRAINING YOUR TECHS

Delphi’s Hobbs says there are plentiful ways to help ensure that techs understand battery nuances.

“With hybrid vehicles becoming more popular over the past few years, the traditional symptoms that lead to battery testing and replacement can be quite different,” he explains.

“Typical hybrids today use a conventional lead acid 12-volt battery for lighting and ignition, referred to as L.I. batteries, compared to SLI (starting, lighting and ignition) with conventional vehicles.”

Add to that the possibility of servicing vehicles with dual batteries and other sophisticated engineering and it’s clear why training is essential.

Technicians should also consider customers’ driving styles and environments. For example, Kohler says that batteries built with pure lead last longer in desert environments.

“A recycled battery has dissimilar elements that make up the battery, the plates,” he adds. “So, they are always reacting with each other and literally discharge on their own.”

Anna Hung, product specialist for batteries, Robert Bosch GmbH, urges dealers to recommend high-quality absorbent glass matt (AGM) batteries, especially in frigid environments.

“AGM batteries are well-known for longer life than conventional flooded batteries under extreme weather, especially when it comes to starting a car in cold weather,” she says.

“When looking for an AGM battery, make sure it is 100% maintenance-free and offers constant power, even for short trips, stop-and-go traffic or high consumption in stationary mode.”

Although techs need the education to provide reliable recommendations, Hobbs notes that sophisticated battery testing equipment provides solid backups. It also increases customers’ confidence in the advice you provide.

“Many provide the result in printed form, for [customers] who may not be as technically savvy as others,” adds Jason Searl, vice president of product management, Clarios.

He says results also can be emailed to customers. “We’re also developing next-generation tools that can be adopted by different aftermarket and other channels so [technicians] ask the right questions to determine how people use their vehicles. Based on the algorithm, it helps find the right battery for that person, so the customer isn’t oversold or undersold.”

PUT THE PLAN IN PLACE

There are great opportunities for dealers with testers and educated techs, perhaps motivated by spiffs, to increase profits and customer loyalty. A solid plan to consistently test batteries is vital, though, to reap the benefits.

“We’ve seen a good amount of auto service retailers providing free battery check services and waiving installation charges if a consumer purchases a battery through their stores or online,” says Hung.

“This is a great strategy for dealers looking to attract battery work and to increase longer-term customer loyalty.

“The most effective thing tire dealers can do as we head into the summer months is to check the battery on every vehicle that comes in, regardless of the service the customer is there for.”

Unless your customers consistently seek oil changes and other routine maintenance, they might not see you on a regular basis unless their vehicles break down, according to Hobbs, who adds that this is an opportunity to display your dealership’s expertise and win loyal customers.

“Many fast lube places don’t add battery testing to their list of recommended services. This means that cold weather slow crank/no crank conditions are the most common prompts to get the vehicle owner into their repair shop for battery testing and replacement.

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Make sure you consistently market the service and test every customer’s battery, say experts.

“Offering free testing is basically saying to the consumer, ‘We are giving you a great thing for free. Now, I’ll give you my advice,’” notes Searl.

“That builds loyalty. You have earned their trust. You now have trusted adviser status. That’s what everyone strives to achieve.” ■