

By Jim Smith, Editor

North America's Top Shop



Atlantic Tire & Service

Ask any employee about the secret to Atlantic Tire & Service's success and their answer is quick and simple. "It's all about customer service," says Davis Morgan, one of Atlantic's store managers, echoing the universal opinion of his teammates. "We strive to make it a comfortable, confident experience."

But, according to Atlantic Tire founder and president Anthony Blackman, the secret lies in people like Morgan and the two-store dealer's 40 other employees. They are the ones, he says, that make Atlantic Tire & Service what it is today – and the winner of the 2008 TIRE REVIEW Top Shop Awards, sponsored by Ammco/Coats.

The real secret is somewhere in between: great people deliver great customer service. If you have one, the other will naturally follow. That means finding the right people, giving them the knowledge and tools neces-

sary, trusting them to perform, and rewarding their efforts.

The resulting higher level of customer service has driven Atlantic Tire since its first location – in Cary, N.C. – opened just 10 years ago. While Blackman insists that each customer is treated like family – and they are – the entire Atlantic Tire staff is just one big family.

Not that anyone forgets that it is a business or an important part of the community. Being 100% retail, though, places added pressure on all that is involved in "customer service" – the time and money spent on training, on employee retention and



advancement, on tools and equipment, on building driver confidence and comfort, on being an active partner in the community and on building brand awareness and preference for the stores.

And on all of these fronts, Atlantic Tire, a semi-finalist in the 2007 Top Shop Awards, clearly succeeds.

To best understand Atlantic Tire, one has to understand its founder. The dealership is the culmination of Blackman's 30-year dream of being able to give back. Dirt poor as a child, Blackman started in the tire business after putting himself through North

Carolina State, when a man he reverently refers to as "Mr. Perry" gave him a job at a Goodyear company store. In return, Blackman pledged to pay it forward, to someday take a young person under his wing and provide the same opportunity Mr. Perry afforded him.

"As a youngster, I watched my uncle operate a small two-bay gas station. I saw what he meant to that small community of only 900 people. He served the needs of that community and made a living doing it. But most of all, I learned that the commu-

nity was better because his business was in it."

That lesson was not lost on Blackman. Superior customer service, he saw, not only kept loyal customers, it brought in many, many more. Soon, everybody knows who you are, what you stand for, and wants to do business with you. That's the kind of sustainable advertising



that money just cannot buy.

After 10 years (time well spent, he says) earning and learning with Goodyear and at a BFGoodrich location, Blackman and a partner stepped out, opening Atlantic Avenue Tire in Raleigh, N.C., in 1988. Ten years later, he sold out to his partner, bought property in Cary and built his first Atlantic Tire & Service location. It was a well-contemplated move, no doubt, but he fought the anxiety and uncertainty with countless hours of hard work and a cornerstone belief in the value of customer service and community.



When it comes to customers, no job is too small for anyone at Atlantic Tire, even president Anthony Blackman, who regularly works the front counter. Above, customers enjoy a comfortable, Internet-enabled waiting area.

“Money never motivated me. It was never an issue,” says Blackman, who still relishes being in the store each and every day. What moved him were the lessons learned watching his uncle make a difference.

By the way, he has paid it forward, countless times, giving some employees their first break, handing second chances to others, and providing fresh starts to still others. All are now important elements to the company’s

success. Some have even earned positions as partners in the business.

Building a Reputation

Luck always plays a role in any business success, and Atlantic Tire is no different. However, it was not pure blind luck, but a reasoned, studied variety. When he first looked at the Cary area, it was every bit a small town. Already highly involved in the local community – several local

Chambers of Commerce, Rotary Clubs, and countless community events, programs, projects and groups – gave him access to folks who could give him sound counsel, especially on an ideal location for his first and, later, second stores.

The first eight-bay store was built even as thousands of surrounding acres were being turned from bare fields into dozens of office buildings and shopping areas and housing developments, a period of growth that saw the tiny Town of Cary burst into a burgeoning town of 130,000 right in the heart of the high-tech Research Triangle region of the state. Atlantic Tire went right after those potential customers, literally going door-to-door with wallet-sized discount cards for the new employees and homeowners that now called Cary home.

The second location in Durham, a 10-bay store, opened just a couple of years ago and followed an identical path: find a great location in the heart of planned future development, and then spread the word quickly and effectively.

The Research Triangle area, flanked by both Atlantic Tire locations, is

home to headquarters and regional offices for companies like IBM, Lenovo, Sony Ericsson, Cisco, PPD, John Deere, and SAS. The simple plastic “Group Purchase Cards” were an instant hit. On the front is the Atlantic Tire logo, on the back is store location information and instant discount offers on tires and service. The cards are never punched or collected, so the customer thinks they have a unique, permanent discount.

“Once we get them (the cards) into their wallets, we have them,” Blackman says of the successful promotion. Today, every new business that opens gets a complimentary stack of the discount cards, an attractive offer few can refuse. As a result, both stores routinely shuttle employees to work or back home, or come out to the office to pick up cars, delivering them when the work is completed.

The cards were just one way to drive store traffic. Heavy advertising in community newspapers, local radio and cable TV keep the name top-of-mind throughout the Triangle. Recently, Spanish-language Univision has been added as Atlantic Tire reaches out to a growing

Hispanic population in mid-North Carolina. Every customer vehicle is tracked through Atlantic’s computer system, making it simple to mail timely service reminders.

Just this year, Atlantic Tire revamped its Web site, delivering another level of customer service. Common tire and service questions are answered, car and tire care advice is proffered, Atlantic Tire’s mission statement and philosophy are explained, and customers can print out coupons or set up appointments with just a few mouse clicks. Most importantly, the photos, names and titles of every single Atlantic Tire employee are posted, with direct e-mail access to key managers.

– the entire staff – who answer questions, address concerns and make appropriate recommendations, the spotless sales, waiting and service areas, the comfortable waiting area complete with a variety of current magazines, satellite TV, wireless Internet service and free individual service coffee.

One of the most striking things one notices is the complete lack of tire and wheel displays. “I don’t want this place to have clutter. I don’t want it to smell like rubber, I don’t want out-of-date posters,” Blackman says.

“We have beautiful waiting areas that are comfortable and have a variety of things to pass the time – leather couches and chairs so customers can



Above: Atlantic Tire’s first location in Cary, N.C. Left: Last year, Atlantic launched its Mobile Service Division, taking tire and light vehicle service on the road.



Model Employees

Ultimate customer service includes things both visible and invisible to consumers. Easy to see are the miles of smiles that greet each customer, the knowledgeable staff

rest, read or watch or TV. We have a lot of women’s magazines – and I mean a lot – plus magazines for men, and they are all current. We are as up-to-date in the waiting areas as we are in our ability to recommend the right tire for each customer and the state-of-the-art equipment in our service bays.”

Invisible are the thousands of hours of training that every employee experiences. First, there is learning Atlantic Tire’s way of doing business,



that tireless devotion to customer and team, that can-do customer-first attitude, that attention to detail focused

are uncomfortable and wary of auto service and tire buying, so they take the extra time to educate them and deliver the right information to help them feel more confident in their tire and service decisions.

“Our commitment to professionalism begins and ends with the cus-

tomers,” says Blackman. “In our market area we have set ourselves apart from the competition because we are professional. Because our market is surrounded by major universities – North Carolina State, North Carolina, Duke and others – 64% of our customer base holds at least a bachelor’s degree.

“These are very bright people who’ve done their research. We can’t fail to answer their questions properly or we risk the chance of losing their respect, confidence and trust.”

Having good people means finding good people, and even in an area like the Triangle, that remains a constant struggle for Atlantic Tire.

Before the first brick was laid for the newer Durham store, Blackman had its staff hand-picked and ready to go. New people were brought in and hired to take key spots at both locations, creating a mix of experienced Atlantic Tire employees and newbies at both stores. While plans for a third location are well underway, and even though there is a long waiting list of people wanting to work for the dealership, Blackman worries about finding enough good people. Highly motivated people-people, like Lisa Brandenburg, manager of the Cary location, who came over to Atlantic Tire after a long career in a Goodyear store.

Those who do make the cut are given every opportunity to grow and advance. Some don’t make the grade. Most, though,



on making every customer’s experience the best.

Then there is the technical side. On the vehicle service side, Atlantic Tire hires only ASE-certified technicians, who are expected to advance themselves professionally by keeping their certifications current and staying on top of changes in the industry and with regard to vehicle technology. Techs are sent off-site for training, often well out of town.

Blackman is a big booster of TIA’s tire service training programs, and Atlantic Tire has a TIA-certified ATS trainer on staff. Additional tire training for the techs and counter staff comes from Michelin, Bridgestone/Firestone and Goodyear and its primary distributors, American Tire Distributors and TCL.

The team understands that drivers





buy into the program and prosper personally and professionally. It is not uncommon, Blackman says, for a green tire tech to work their way up to a more lucrative position as an alignment tech and still further.

Those who do make the cut and serve for two years are rewarded with an all-expense-paid vacation for two. Proving the value of motivation and loyalty, one employee opted out of taking the vacation, trading the Caribbean trip for advanced training that resulted in a big promotion.

Above average pay and a full plate of benefits also help keep good people on board. Full-time employees enjoy a matched retirement plan; paid vaca-

tion, holidays and sick days; 75% employer-paid medical coverage; and 100% employer-paid life, dental, vision, short- and long-term disability insurance.

"It's just so hard and expensive to stay up on the service side," Blackman says. "If you are serious about delivering first class service – and we are – you have to make the investment in people and equipment.

"All of this pays off for us in terms of who and what we are, and what we do. A year ago the Cary News named us the winner of their 'Best Customer Service Award,'" he says. "So we understand the value of advertising as much as we understand taking care of the customer."

Blackman even hires secret shoppers to put employees to the test. Poor performances are reviewed and corrected immediately.

"We want to stay ahead of our competition," he says. And competition they have. Within a few miles of either store, Triangle area consumers have a lot of tire choices: Just Tires, Discount Tire, Tire King, Colony Tire, National Tire & Battery, Wal-Mart, Bull Tire & Service and auto service chain locations lie in wait.

That competition has its hands full, because Atlantic Tire simply won't stand still. Late last year, Atlantic Tire began offering on-site service to corporate accounts. The Utilimaster box trucks are completely equipped to install tires, perform tire repairs, and do brake work and oil changes. Even minor service problems can be handled with the mobile service.

And Blackman hired Ed Alexander as vice president of business development. The husband of Amy, Atlantic Tire's COO, Ed is charged with creating new business opportunities with commercial accounts in the region.

The Difference

If there is a "No" bone in Anthony Blackman's body, it is well hidden. Atlantic Tire donates thousands of dollars and hundreds of man-hours to "serve the needs" of Triangle residents, often without fanfare, but always with an eye on what is best.

What is not a mystery is his drive to make a difference, whether it is with Atlantic Tire or the dozens of civic organizations and activities of which he and many other employees are firmly a part. And it is the part of this story Atlantic Tire can best tell, as they wrote in their Top Shop entry:

"In this market, Atlantic Tire is synonymous with community service, so much that the Cary Chamber presented the company with its Community Service Award at the 2008 Small Business Awards in May. This is in addition to another Community Service Award in 2003, Employer of the Year Award in 2004, and 2007 Small Business of the Year Award from the Morrisville Chamber of





Commerce. Owner Anthony Blackman received the Cary Chamber's Citizen of the Year Award in 2006.

"Atlantic Tire's commitment to community service includes too many examples to list in their entirety, but here are a few: participation in American Cancer Society's Road to Recovery, all employees are encour-

aged to participate in local community organizations, adopted a local highway for the past five years, members of several local Chambers of Commerce, and owner Anthony Blackman has served on the boards of the Cary Chamber, Cary Visual Art, White Plains Children's Center and YMCA.

golf tournaments benefiting local schools and charities. In-kind donations include free auto service for all residents of the Caring Place, office supplies and toiletries to Hospice of Wake County, free tires to the Boy Scouts of America for fundraising auctions, and free lifetime oil changes donated to Rex Healthcare fundraiser."

In the South, it's not considered polite to brag, but Atlantic Tire's contribution to the Triangle community is far from bragging. It's reality, and the

logoed items for customers. "We also have a barbecue before the game," he says, "and give away little footballs with our logo on them."

That relationship with N.C. State has even brought some interesting talent to Atlantic Tire's employee ranks. Like Mario Williams, the standout defensive end for the Wolfpack who was the No. 1 pick in the 2006 NFL draft. Williams spent a few months working for the dealership, and maintains a close friendship with Blackman, his wife, Beth, and 18-year-

Atlantic Tire & Service's Mission Statement is quite succinct, a seven-point plan that promises to "practice what it preaches and, in so doing, earn its customers' trust."

- **Provide honest evaluations and accurate diagnostics**
- **Treat the customer like family**
- **Complete the job thoroughly and charge a fair and competitive price**
- **Continue its commitment to excellence by employing certified technicians**
- **Provide a clean and pleasant environment for its customers**
- **Clear up any misconceptions of auto servicing**
- **Be actively involved in the community**

list from the entry was just the tip of the iceberg; missing are the dozens of spur-of-the-moment donations, sponsorships and assistance Blackman and his staff make to charities, civic groups and local schools.

And then there are the tickets – the dozens of tickets to N.C. State football and basketball games that Atlantic Tire shares with customers and friends. An active alumnus, Blackman is a major Wolfpack supporter, and has established the Atlantic Tire Fan Zone inside Carter-Finley Stadium, complete with large banners and

old son, Cameron, who still spends more than a few hours playing online video games with the Houston Texans star. In fact, the Blackman family was invited to attend the NFL draft as guests of Williams.

Between the community service and N.C. State games, it isn't a question of who knows Anthony Blackman, but rather who Anthony Blackman doesn't know. Those relationships and deep friendships have paid dividends personally and professionally.

"All of this has to do with our dislike of saying 'no' to any customer. If

they need a ride to work, we provide it. If they need a ride home, we provide it. If they want to see the part we tell them is worn out, we put it in a plastic bag so they can show it to anyone who wants to take a look. There are no secrets here," says Blackman. "Our slogan is 'service you can trust' and we mean every word of it."

Wife Beth says she has always been 100% behind Anthony's plans, but "she told me later that there were some anxious moments. But I could not have done it without her beside me."

Focused on the Future

Blackman sees having as many as four stores eventually. Any more than that, he feels, will cause him to lose touch with customers – his friends – and the family atmosphere with customers and employees alike.

Site plans have been created for the third store, slated to open in 2009, and initial plans for the fourth are underway.

Right now, the focus is on dealing with the here and now. Recognizing future economic uncertainty, Atlantic Tire has focused its efforts on retaining, motivating and training employees, improving their operational efficiency and effectiveness, and getting both the mobile division and business development efforts established.

At the end of the day, though, the formula remains simple. "It's all about knowledge, commitment to the business, a pleasant demeanor and customer service to the max. This may sound easy, but it is anything but. We must be on our toes every minute of every day to get it right. And we do get it right."

And they have, evidenced by its selection as the 2008 TIRE REVIEW Top Shop Award. **TR**



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