

By Leona Dalavai Scott

# Humble Beginning Leads to 'Number One' Success

*Owner works "on" business, not "in" it.*

Steve Johnson got his start in the automotive service industry the old-fashioned way – by pumping gas. In high school, Johnson pumped gas and worked on cars. But he did not let his humble beginnings stand in the way of his ambition. He worked his way up the ranks, learning as much as he could about cars. Along the way, he earned several ASE certifications and received his state vehicle inspector's license.

Johnson's knowledge and experience grew to the point where he was able to purchase Number One Tire and Service from its previous owner in 1998. Johnson's shop, which is located in Warwick, R.I., offers service repair and also sells tires and accessories.

Johnson's purchase of the business was not without complications. He was forced out of his shop shortly after he moved in to make way for a new Walgreen's. He and his crew moved three miles away to a temporary location for 11 months while a new shop was being built. Johnson and his employees moved into Number One Tire and Service's new facility in February 2004.

What has led to Johnson's success in the independent automotive service industry? He credits his

involvement with Management Success! in helping him become a better business owner. Also, his business philosophy has helped him achieve success.

"My business philosophy is to be a high-volume, highly profitable automotive repair facility, which provides our customers with the highest quality repairs and service," he said.

One of the ways Johnson does that is by fine-tuning his shop's policies. A key policy of Number One Tire and Service is to make sure his service writers offer customers the most accurate pricing possible. In addition, they must educate customers about all of the repairs needed on their cars to be safe on the road.

A big advantage for Johnson in moving up the ranks to ownership is that it has enabled him to learn about all of the other positions in his shop. Having been a service technician, service writer and service manager, he understands the jobs and how they're perceived.

He said techs often see service writers as not important, but, after having been one himself, he knows the difficult customers they must

deal with on a regular basis.

Perhaps what distinguishes Johnson's management skills from that of the average owner is his ability to see his role as someone who works on his business and not in his business.

"As an owner and manager, I oversee everything," Johnson said. "I'm not on stage, I'm in the audience, making sure everything is going well. I do preventative maintenance with my employees."

Part of that "preventative maintenance" is making sure his shop runs as smoothly and efficiently as possible. He oversees the large, as well as small, details. From not permitting cell phone usage in the bay area to ensuring that every car that comes in the shop must have a safety inspection, Johnson runs a



*After some rough starts, Johnson's shop has found a permanent home in its current location.*

tight shop.

Running a tight shop is key to Number One Tire and Service's success. The shop averages 180 work orders each week. To help carry out those repairs in this six-bay facility, Johnson employs two full-time general service technicians, one part-time general service technician, three full-time service technicians, three full-time service writers, a part-time front-end service clerk and a full-time bookkeeper. Johnson said he fills in when someone is out, but for the most part, he manages the facility and lets his employees do the jobs he's hired them to do.

One thing he wishes he could change about his business is the amount of work that comes in as it relates to the number of technicians available.

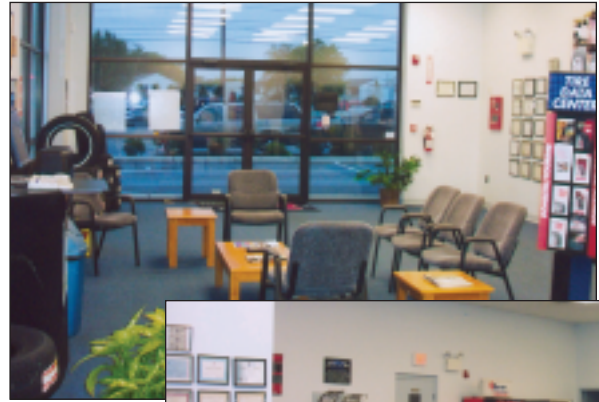
"It would be nice to have extra technicians stored away who I could bring out to put to work when it's really busy and then put away when they're not needed," he said.

Johnson said his involvement in ASA has taught

him that he is not alone out there as a shop owner. In fact, Johnson - who is vice president of the ASA-Rhode Island affiliate - has been actively recruiting other owners and managers in the industry to ASA. His efforts have been so exemplary that he was named the 2005 Chairman's Club Award winner recently and will be recognized for his recruitment skills during the Celebration of Excellence awards ceremony Nov. 4 in Las Vegas. Johnson said he gets members to join by telling them about the money-saving benefits that ASA offers to its members. He also makes sure to tell them about the educational meetings they can attend.

"At the meetings, you can network with other shop owners and give pointers and solutions on how to survive in our competitive environment," he said. "Also, you find out that you're not the only fish in the sea. There are other owners like you facing the same struggles and challenges."

Despite the trials, Johnson enjoys the career he has crafted in the automotive service industry. One of the most enjoyable parts of his job, he said, is the marketing of his shop. His innovative ways to reward his customers always win



Number One Tire and Service averages about 180 work orders each week. The shop prides itself in being a clean and attractive facility.

rave reviews. This Mother's Day, Johnson offered free manicures for his female customers.

Not to be outdone, for Father's Day he had a Hooter's lunch buffet served by waitresses from the popular restaurant chain. Another time, he hosted a two-day customer appreciation event where he served free hot dogs and hamburgers and had drawings for free services and special discounts to further promote his business.

One of his most popular events held this summer attracted more than 200 people. A local radio station was on site to raffle off one of 94 keys that would start a brand new 2005 Corvette and a Harley-Davidson. Johnson had free food, drawings and the Bridgestone/Firestone Fusion tuner car on hand to attract customers.

Last year, Johnson signed a 30-year lease for his 7,200-square-foot new facility, which also houses a large showroom, along with the service bays. His immediate plans for the shop call for an expansion of the parking lot. Looking down the road, he would like to purchase a new alignment rack, and even further down the road he would like to purchase another existing shop. **ai**



Owner Steve Johnson enjoys working on the marketing of his shop.

## Shop Stats

**Name:** Johnson Tire and Service Corp.  
dba Number One Tire and Service

**Location:** Warwick, R.I.

**Number of employees:** 11

**Number of years in business:** 7

**Projected annual sales:** \$1.3 million

**On pricing for his services:** "If you offer great service with quality parts and back it all up with a good warranty, then your prices should reflect that. If you can back up your prices with quality, people won't question your pricing."

