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Road Construction Ahead: Two Survivors' Stories

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There always seems to be road construction ahead, but what happens when it lands in front of your store?

Two fast lube owners have graciously shared their stories — along with some advice for surviving construction.

Scott Lee, chairman of Fayetteville, Georgia-based Auto Quick Franchising, Inc., opened a fast lube and, shortly after the grand opening, road construction began in front of his store. This is his story.

“In January 1997, I opened a quick lube in Griffin, Georgia. My landlord had failed to tell me that the road was due to be widened soon after. In March, we had a grand opening with a local radio station van doing giveaways in the front parking lot and vendors were on site giving demos. The car count that Saturday was 66 cars.

“A month later road work began. The road was cut down 12 feet lower, and the area where we could park cars in front was totally removed. Completed cars coming out of the bays were level for about 10 feet, then the drive dropped off steeply. This turned out to be a problem with cars that were low, such as Corvettes — they had to be routed back out of the entrance so they would not bottom out.

“During construction, there was an entire week when no cars could come in the entrance. We managed to get permission from the unused property behind us to bring cars through an unpaved area after removing a portion of the fence. Our car counts that week were down to four to eight cars a day.

“Needless to say, I lost a lot of money that year. I would estimate about \$60,000 due to the construction, and it took much longer to build up our business than expected. Apparently, the landowner had already been compensated for the loss to his property. Since we were not in existence when the road was approved, there was no compensation for any of our loss.”

The road construction, on State Highway 16 that runs between I-75 and I-85, lasted for about 90 days and halted the fast lube’s growth.

“It took two years to really get going versus six months to a year that it should have taken,” Lee said.

The construction cut the road 12 feet lower than Lee's business, putting it up on a hill. Lee said even after being there four years people would still come in and say they didn't even know the fast lube was there.

Lee said his biggest challenge during the construction was holding his head up.

"Keeping morale up was hard," he said. "I didn't want to let anyone go, and there is only so much stuff you can clean. It was hard to get (the employees) geared up and ready to be friendly."

Lee's advice to others is to contact the local and state governments to see if there is any proposed roadwork.

"I was excited to get into business and didn't look deep enough into what was going on," Lee said. "I would suggest checking with the state (transportation) department to see what's on the books. I might have waited to open my business if I knew what was going on."

Tom Morley, president of Cleveland, Ohio-based Lube Stop, said they currently are facing construction. There are four stores with construction near them: Painesville, Lakewood and two in Mayfield Heights.

A half-mile stretch of Mayfield Road is being remodeled. According to Mayfield Village's website, Mayfield Road, which handles about 35,000 cars a day, is cut down to one lane each direction, and construction is expected to last until September 2009. Lube Stop's Mayfield Heights stores are on either end of this construction.

"Store 18 is right in the thick of it on Mayfield Road," Morley said. "Construction is going on right in front of it. When the construction starts people kind of drive into it like a mousetrap. Then they get creative and find ways to get around it."

Morley said the car count at store 18 is down by about 30 percent.

"Just because the car count is down doesn't equal a dollar-for-dollar loss," he said. "You get people there, and they get great service. With more thorough service, the ticket price may go up."

Morley said construction gives the team an opportunity to deliver the best kind of experience for the customer.

"Now is our time to shine," he said. "We want people thinking, 'It was hard to get there, but it was worth it.'"

Along with the opportunity for more thorough service comes challenges.

"It is important to keep the store's morale up," Morley said. "Let the store teams know this is a short-term thing, and there is a benefit to be gained in the end. Let the team know that the management understands construction is going on and not to get discouraged. You don't want your team to be down."

This is not the first time Lube Stop has dealt with construction. Their Wadsworth store underwent a road-widening project from early 2004 to mid-2005.

Morley explained how the pain of road construction actually led to a gain for the business.

“Car count was down 7 percent in 2004 and 5 percent in 2005,” he said. “Upon completion of the project, car counts were up 10 percent in 2006 and another 8 percent year to date in 2007, for a net increase around 6 percent. While the manager and his team deserve a lot of the credit, some of that volume increase can be attributed to the improved roadway.”

His advice to others facing road construction is to make sure the people driving by know that you are open for business.

“Make sure they can see you are open for business,” Morley said. “When the weather permits, keep the bays open. Have the team working outside. We use sidewalk signs saying the bays are open. Reach out to the traffic, whether it is a curbside sign or an employee holding a sign. Let them know you are still open.”

So when road construction is not so far ahead, heed a survivor’s advice — if you are doing a good job and customers are loyal, they will drive through rain, sleet, snow and construction to get to you.