

SLOW DOWN, SPEED UP *continued from Front page*

should be taken to improve sales, but the need to take action and develop some new approaches. Consider the latest promotion from Starbucks Coffee. The company recently started a program that allows customers who made a purchase in the morning, to return in the afternoon for a free cold beverage. Unless Starbucks' management knows something I don't, there's no potential profit in beverages that are given away at no charge. That being the case, they're banking on the fact that customers will buy something to go along with their "freebie," and may also bring along a friend who will make a purchase.

While this approach doesn't apply particularly well to stores selling racing and performance equipment, it does illustrate that new and unique promotional programs are essential to increasing sales, particularly in a weak economy. Chances are, new customers aren't walking through the front door as frequently as they used to and you may not be seeing your existing customers as often as you did in the past. The first step is therefore to institute a "Starbucks program" - something that will get customers into the store.

Mail order and internet sales notwithstanding, a customer can't buy anything from you unless he/she walks into your store. Building traffic is therefore the first priority. Even if potential customers walk out without making a purchase, their awareness of your company has been increased and if your sales people handle themselves properly, many will return and make a purchase.

Traffic-Builders

With the payback for any type of traffic-building program being "iffy" for the short term, expensive, extravagant promotional efforts don't make much sense. And, they aren't necessary - a number of low-cost options are available. Car shows are cheap and easy. Most racers and performance enthusiasts will jump at the opportunity to show off their vehicles and socialize with other enthusiasts. Many clubs use car shows as charity fundraisers and members will do most, if not all, of the legwork required to get the word out and ensure a reasonable turnout. If your facility doesn't have sufficient space available, you'll have to find a suitable location and a local club can be very helpful in finding a spot.

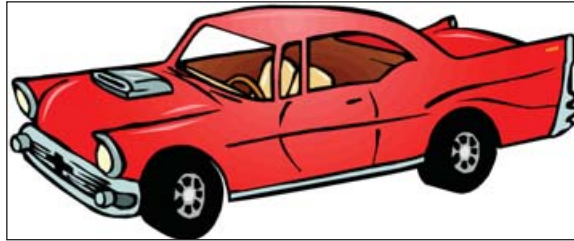
Whether a show is at your facility or a remote location, be sure to have signs and displays so attendees are aware of your involvement and know what types of parts and services you offer. If the show is targeted towards a specific model or type of vehicle, having the right components on hand can be extremely helpful in cultivating new business.

Another low-cost traffic-builder is a seminar. Most manufacturers have knowledgeable technical representatives on hand who are available for local promotional

efforts. These reps obviously promote manufacturer-specific products, but the technical information they provide is typically applicable regardless of the product brand used by the customer. As long as the rep is more technical than "salesy," customers will leave a seminar with sound, relevant information - and many should return to your store to purchase the parts they need to put that information to use.

Considering the current cost of gasoline and diesel fuel, a fuel economy seminar is a no-brainer. Even if the seminar concentrates on driving techniques, tuning considerations and maintenance - things that don't require the purchase of equipment to be effective - you still stand to benefit. A logical question on most drivers' minds will be, "If I can improve fuel economy by doing something that doesn't cost anything, what additional improvements are in store if I buy equipment designed to improve gas mileage?"

The paybacks on economy-improving modifications are a long time coming, but that's a rational, as opposed to an emotional consideration. Many drivers simply feel compelled to do something in response to high fuel prices. To make these efforts more interesting, consider running a contest to see who can document the largest improvement in gas mileage.

**Existing Customers**

New customers aren't the only potential source of additional business. Another is your existing customer base - but it may take some new product lines to capitalize on that potential. Anyone with a race car or high performance street vehicle usually has one or more other vehicles. While they may not want to modify their other vehicles extensively, they may be in the market for custom body parts, electronic components or diesel performance parts. With a little research, you should be able to find out which types of products make the most sense for your store.

The internet is another valuable tool for increasing sales. Web sites are relatively inexpensive and can be used to reach out-of-area as well as local customers. Depending on the resources available, you can easily put together a sales site, which only lists parts and prices, or a sales/information site, which includes technical material. Another option is to include pages with general interest information that will attract visitors. As an example, race results, schedules, news of upcoming automotive-oriented events, a gallery featuring customer-owned vehicles, or anything else you can think of that will draw potential customers to the site.

Whatever steps you take, you're trying to accomplish two distinct goals: directly increasing sales and increasing awareness of your business. Although these efforts are interrelated, they are distinct and require different approaches. On the one hand, you're building it so they will come. On the other, you're attempting to capitalize on the fact that they came.

Source: Import Car