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## Top Shops

By Christopher Doscher

*Hub Starters & Alternators  
172 Broadway, Malden, Mass.*

Louis Farkas, owner of Hub Starters and Alternators, wants the job done right. Farkas has owned the shop for about 30 years, and his sense of pride in a job well done has never wavered.

Farkas worked for another repair shop in Everett before co-founding Hub Starters, an ACDelco affiliate, with a partner.

He took sole ownership four years ago after his partner retired. After so many years in the business, Farkas knows the importance of good customer relationships.

“A lot of customers will hang around if their job takes less than an hour,” Farkas said. “I’ll give them a ride if they need one. I keep the place clean, and keep good equipment.”

Farkas also takes the time to educate his customers about the work that’s being done on their vehicles. He doesn’t mind when people question his work.

In fact, he encourages it.

“I try to show people the parts that we changed and explain the costs,” he said. “I had a customer in here this morning whose pastor recommended me. I saw an oil leak in her car’s valve cover, so I brought her over and showed her.

I do the same with brakes. I say ‘Here’s the pad, here’s what’s left of it.’ I think that builds a lot of trust. It’s very hard to keep customers these days, so I want a professional job and I want to be proud of my job.”

Hub Starters and Alternators, a licensed state inspection facility, has been affiliated with AAA for about 15 years, Farkas said. “People look for a AAA Approved Repair shop. They have faith in AAA.”

Hub Starters & Alternators is part of AAA's Approved Auto Repair Program and is being recognized as this quarter's Top Shop for customer service in Middlesex County.

John's Auto Service 6 Sturbridge Road, Charlton, Mass.

John's Auto Service opened for business in 1983, when owner John Thomas started the shop with his father. Since then, Thomas' own son has joined him in the family business.

Mechanics at John's Auto Service work hard to ensure that they understand the exact nature of the problem with a customer's vehicle.

"That's often the most challenging part, determining what problem the customer is trying to explain," Thomas said. "Once we establish that, we always give a written estimate before we do any chargeable work. I think that goes a long way. We make sure we understand what they want fixed, but we make sure they understand what it will cost."

A detailed explanation of cost does a lot to prevent conflicts with customers, Thomas said.

The full-service shop is just beginning its third year in AAA's Approved Auto Repair program.

Thomas has found the AAA guidelines helpful in delivering quality service. Customers appreciate the AAA warranty.

"I see a lot of difference when a customer comes back," he said. "You can see them relax when you tell them they're covered under the warranty."

While customers may focus on cost, Thomas and his staff aim for quality first, rather than using lower-quality parts.

"We have to explain the difference to the customer," he said. "A lot of what we do is just educating the customer."

John's Auto Service is part of AAA's Approved Auto Repair Program and is being recognized as this quarter's Top Shop for customer service in Worcester County.

Highland Service Center 1186 Walnut St., Newton, Mass.

Highland Service Center owner Joseph Hartin was a senior at Brighton High School – at the time, an automotive repair vocational school – in the early 1970s when one of his teachers offered him a job at a Sunoco station that he owned. A year-and-a-half later, his teacher wanted to sell, so Hartin and a partner bought the station. "My partner said he'd stay for three years because I was only 19," Hartin said. "I took over when he left, and I've been here ever since." Hartin has a lot of personal history with the shop as well, having met his wife through the shop's previous owner.

The shop is no longer a Sunoco affiliate and stopped selling gas about 20 years ago to focus on maintenance. “We do your basic servicing as needed,” Hartin said. “Maintenance is the key to our business.” Hartin and his staff of two mechanics keep track of their customers’ service and send postcards every month to remind them of scheduled maintenance. “They’ve always liked that,” Hartin said.

Word-of-mouth remains Highland Service Center’s most effective advertising tool. “We’re going on our second generation and sometimes our third generation of customers,” Hartin said. “When one of my guys works on a customer’s car, they will always work on that car for as long as the customer is coming here. They get to know the customer, that particular car, and it seems to work better for everyone.” Mechanics also turn an eye toward prevention. “Any time customers come in for a basic oil change,” he said.

Highland Service Center has been affiliated with AAA for about 20 years. The affiliation has brought in a lot of new business, Hartin said. “When a new customer comes in, they’re asked how they found out about us. Many say they went online to AAA looking for a repair shop. Some just happened to be driving by and saw the sign.”

Highland Service Center is part of AAA’s Approved Auto Repair Program and is being recognized as this quarter’s Top Shop for customer service in Greater Boston.

Marshfield Tire & Auto 497 Plain St., Marshfield, Mass.

Marshfield Tire & Auto owner Joseph Bird’s philosophy of service is simple: “We stress that we want to repair your car on time, fix it right at a fair price, and return it clean. You can advertise all you want, but if you aren’t fair, the customer is not coming back,” Bird said.

Bird opened Marshfield Tire & Auto after he retired from a 20-year career with Goodyear. The shop sells Goodyear and Michelin tires, offers complete automotive service and a quick-lube service. A “frequently asked questions” section of the shop’s website aims to help customers with common points of confusion regarding their vehicles. “There’s a lot of confusion about synthetic oil versus regular oil,” he said. “We answer a lot of tune-up questions, even though most cars are 100,000-mile tune-ups.”

Marshfield Tire & Auto has been at its current location since 1999 and draws most of its clientele from Marshfield and nearby Duxbury. Bird knew immediately that he wanted the shop to be AAA-affiliated. “Without a doubt, it absolutely adds credibility. I don’t think there’s anyone in the motoring public who doesn’t know that you go above and beyond when they see that sign.”

Bird strives to maintain a clean, friendly environment where mechanics use the most up-to-date equipment. “I think that’s what AAA helps us do.”

Marshfield Tire & Auto is part of AAA’s Approved Auto Repair Program and is being recognized as this quarter’s Top Shop for customer service in Plymouth County.

Scott Motors 777 Taunton Ave., East Providence, R.I.

The history of Scott Motors spans more than 60 years and three generations.

“My grandfather, Charles Scott, just loved cars,” said the shop’s general manager, Brad Scott. “He started sweeping floors at a dealership and just worked his way up.”

The shop specializes in Volkswagens, which Scott said “require a lot of specific training.”

He estimates that the shop’s 13 mechanics have well over 100 years combined experience working on Volkswagens.

However, Scott invites anybody to come in for service.

“We have really good people and very talented mechanics working for us,” he said.

“We’re honest. We don’t try to sell people a bag of goods every time they come here,” he said. “Many times, we’ll tell customers that they don’t need to have something done, and that gives them confidence in our work.”

Scott Motors moved to its current location last July, and is constantly working to improve their customers’ experience.

The shop has added a quick lube service and has jazzed up its waiting area.

“We’ve created a fun atmosphere in the waiting room,” Scott said. “We have some old gas pumps in there, and put some surfboards on the wall. We have free WiFi and free coffee.”

Scott, who grew up in the business, doesn’t remember a time when the shop wasn’t affiliated with AAA.

“It gives us a certain amount of legitimacy,” he said. “It lets people know we’re a good facility to work on their vehicles, because we have to meet AAA criteria.”

Scott Motors is part of AAA’s Approved Auto Repair Program and is being recognized as this quarter’s Top Shop for customer service in Rhode Island.

Zoel’s Body & Auto Center 19 Hall Ave., Meriden, Conn.

Zoel’s Body and Auto Center has a history dating to 1963.

Owner David Sirois took over for his father in 1979, and upgraded from 3,000 square feet to 14,000 square feet.

Many Zoel's staff members have been there as long as Sirois. "My foreman has been with me for almost 30 years," Sirois said. "Just about everyone in the shop has been with me for a long time. I know I can trust them, and they know what I expect."

Sirois also knows each mechanic's strengths. "Some are Honda and Toyota specialists, some are Chevy and Ford specialists. They know the cars inside and out."

Customers at Zoel's sometimes span the generations, and word-of-mouth remains the shop's most effective form of advertising.

"We have whole families who come back," Sirois said. "I've had families who started coming here, and now their kids are coming here. We have that hometown feeling about our business."

Civic involvement helps build the "hometown" feeling of Zoel's. The shop's former location was next door to a fire station, and Sirois grew up knowing many of the local firefighters.

The shop also supports the local Boys and Girls Club and sponsors local baseball teams. They've also painted vehicles for the police department at no cost. "We try to give back as much as we can," Sirois said.

Zoel's has been affiliated with AAA since the early 1990s.

"It adds a lot. It gives the customer a sense of protection," Sirois said. "They feel secure when they see the AAA sign."

Zoel's Body and Auto Center is part of AAA's Approved Auto Repair Program and is being recognized as this quarter's Top Shop for customer service in New Haven County.

Jensen Tire and Automotive 670 Main St., Trumbull, Conn., and Jensen Tire Auto & Marine, 242 Route 34, Stevenson, Conn.

Eddie Jensen, owner of Jensen Tire and Automotive in Trumbull and Jensen Tire Auto and Marine in Stevenson, brings 30 years of experience to his work.

He's the third generation in his family to work in auto repair. But his specialty has to do with more than auto maintenance.

"We specialize in customer service," Jensen said. "I'm a firm believer that you can get auto services on any street corner, and we'll be judged on how well we take care of our customer."

Honesty is top priority. "I want to inform the customer about all their automotive needs," he said. "It didn't all break yesterday, and not everything needs to be fixed today. I want to make sure customers make an educated decision before they spend a nickel."

The facility offers full maintenance and repair services and is an associate dealer of Bridgestone Firestone tires. Jensen Tire Auto and Marine has been open for 11 years, and Jensen Tire and Automotive is beginning its third year.

Jensen estimates he has been affiliated with AAA for about nine years. They're a total repair care facility as well as part of the Approved Auto Repair program, meaning that mechanics will do a preliminary look at any vehicle towed in within an hour of its arrival. Customers have access to free loaner vehicles and free local pickup and delivery.

"I think what AAA does for any business is show consumers that we will meet a stringent criteria and live up to the expectations that AAA has put out there," Jensen said. "If I do something wrong, AAA becomes an advocate for the customer. It's an issue of accountability. We really don't have customer dissatisfaction issues in the store."

Jensen Tire and Automotive and Jensen Tire Auto and Marine are part of AAA's Approved Auto Repair Program and are being recognized as this quarter's Top Shops for customer service in Fairfield County.