

How We Created a New Normal

Our industry has gone through some interesting changes over the last couple of months, adapting very quickly and remaining resilient as we've all tried to keep our businesses open in a strange new world. For some, the challenges were difficult to overcome while others buckled down and developed or refined current processes to work within government restrictions. As we developed new processes, we educated ourselves on different ways to conduct business while teaching our customers new expectations. In doing so, we created a new normal.

The biggest shift towards a new normal I have seen is the widespread adoption of photo estimating. A practice that has been disputed by some and incorporated by others because of restrictions has now become commonplace. Looking for ways to restrict physical contact photo estimating has replaced the common question we ask of customers: "Can you bring your vehicle in for an estimate?" In the past, I know shops have been asked by a customer on the phone how much a repair would cost, and of course, the first response would be that the shop needs to look at the vehicle first. They might have even had a customer offer to send a picture outlining the damage to help determine the cost of a repair, to which they were told that process would never work.

So, what changed? My guess is necessity. Fortunately, there have been significant improvements made in photo estimating that make the process a little more user-friendly for all parties. Websites have been upgraded to support the process and customers are embracing them because they don't have to make multiple visits to the repair shop to prepare for a repair. As we begin to reopen our collision centers as the government reduces restrictions, will photo estimating replace drive-in estimates at your shop? If not, how will you challenge your competitors that do?

Many of the shops I have talked to recently are now offering pick-up and delivery service for customers to create a "touchless" repair process. Some have always provided this service in their shop but for the majority, this is a new endeavor. As we move into the new normal, will your shop still offer a pick-up and delivery service? If so, how will you manage this process? I know many hope they will be much busier once people start moving around again, so how will you sustain this service while balancing increased business? If you do not intend to continue with this service indefinitely, how will you address the request with the customer who now knows you can do it? It is going to be hard to explain to customers that the practice was only temporary after you have shown the ability. For shops to maintain their market share, they will need to adjust to the shift in attitudes, behaviors and expectations of consumers.

One thing I've noticed throughout all of this is an overall improvement in customer service. It seems shops are talking to customers more, especially regarding what to expect and their options for repair. Front office staff are focusing on scheduling repairs rather than the need to get an estimate. Something I have been discussing in my training for years, and now through necessity, is becoming more frequent in practice. Another shift is in how paperwork is being handled. Some are using a DocuSign arrangement while others are emailing forms and asking customers to leave them in their vehicle. Many have added touch-free payment options by taking credit cards over the phone or through a link on their websites. With everything combined, we have

lessened the inconveniences a collision customer generally endures while they work through the hurdles of getting their vehicle repaired. I think this is a new normal we can live with!

As many have operated in a different world over the last couple of months, they have taken a hard look at themselves and their businesses. I have only mentioned a few of the many practice's shops have changed to comply with government restrictions. My goal throughout this article was to suggest how these changes are affecting our customer base. We have all seen how companies like Amazon, Zappos, and others have changed consumer purchasing habits. Our new workarounds follow in the same vein and could create a difference in how we operate once restrictions are eased.

There are some that say we will probably not go back to the way we previously handled our business. To some degree I must agree with them. The changes we have made in our processes has changed the way customers interact with us today and align us more with Amazon than our collision center prior to this pandemic. As I have asked throughout this article, can you sustain the changes you made in your processes for the long term? If the answer is no, then it is time to look at your processes to see what you need to change so you can sustain them. As we ramp back up towards the new normal, there is not going to be a convenient time to stop doing something that made a customer experience better. We have created a new normal and need to refine our processes to ensure customer expectations are met before the ramp up begins. I feel confident customers will continue to expect the Amazon experience more so than the service we provided in January, and we must be prepared.