

Women show their skill under the hood

The first reaction is often surprise, the second—and ongoing—is appreciation.

By Lisa Jo Lupo

When people drive up to Valvoline Instant Oil Change centers and see women working on the cars, they often have to look twice.

"They are not so surprised to see women working as customer service representatives, but they are surprised to see them working under the hood," said Cathy McGuire, co-owner of two Valvoline oil-change franchise centers.

With half the crew at one of her centers being female, there are almost always women working under the hood, and female customers seem to really appreciate this. "More than half our customers are women," McGuire said, "and I've always felt it important to have at least one woman on."

McGuire herself finds it intimidating to go into a service center which is totally male, she said, explaining, "For most of us, it's out of our comfort zone, and when you see a lot of men standing there, it adds one more factor."

As a part of its diversification efforts and "great place to work" initiative, Valvoline has made a concerted effort to recruit females into the industry, said Steve Lynn, director of business development. In Valvoline service centers across the nation, nearly 15 percent of the technicians and 13 percent of its service center managers are female for franchise and corporate stores combined. In the corporate office, more than 20 percent of all directors, managers and supervisors and nearly 50 percent of all professionals are women.

The increase in women in the industry has been a subtle change over the last decade and a half, Lynn noted, and most likely stems, at least in part, from the increase in female customers.

"At one point, our marketing statistics came back that 51 percent of our customers were women," he said. And, as Valvoline began to roll out its diversity initiatives, it made some new discoveries: "After our initial initiative to target and recruit females in the

industry, we came across a lot who really are car enthusiasts."

One of those car enthusiasts is Lexington, Ky., Area Manager Lisa Powers. "I've always loved cars my entire life," Powers said. "I grew up as a girl in a neighborhood of all boys." Powers and her husband found a commonality in their love of automobiles—particularly racing cars.

Powers began as a switchboard operator for Valvoline's parent, Ashland Inc., and decided to apply for an opening she saw for a Valvoline oil change service center manager. Her experience working with cars—she'd been doing oil changes on her own since she was a teen—gained her the position, and since that time, she has been promoted to area manager.

Powers has seen positive effects from the increased number of women in the industry. Female customers tend to greatly value the connection, and follow through with recommendations. And more than a few of the women tell her, "I'm going to send my friends here," Powers said. There is, however, still a bit of proving ground for women with some customers, she admits. "In some



Birdie Golden checks the oil on a car she's working on at a Minneapolis Valvoline

instances, we would have to prove ourselves. You could see some doubt in some customers' eyes." But, she added, "as long as a woman does her best, you'll be given the respect that you deserve."

"I guess I grew up in the Barbie era that told us that we girls can do anything," Powers laughed. "You may have to work a little harder to prove you are capable," she said, but women—or men—will succeed, "if you are willing to ask questions and ask for help if needed."

It is such people skills that will make a person successful in this field, said



Photos by Jacob Bunge

They're not afraid to get their hands dirty (from left to right): Kelley Sieling, Janice Kaliene and Birdie Golden anchor the team at a Valvoline center in Uptown Minneapolis.

Jennifer Poage, human resources manager. "We really hire more for the people skills versus the technical skills," she said, explaining that technical skills can be taught. "If you have the desire to learn and you're good with customers and good with employees and are energetic and enthusiastic, then you have an opportunity with us to be very successful."

As more women join the industry, it actually helps to promulgate itself. Women who enjoy working with cars may not have thought to apply at an oil-change center. But when they walk in and see other women working there, they see the possibility. And those who are already working in the industry can help mentor new employees, Poage said. "When you have women coming in as new employees, it makes it very beneficial that there are other females that they can mentor with," she said, explaining that this has been voiced, not only by new employees, but also by current service center managers who like having other women to talk with about what they can do to be successful.

McGuire's presence on the Franchise Advisory Council (FAC) is an indicator of how Valvoline encourages women, McGuire said. "They really pushed me for a couple years to run for the FAC board." Although McGuire did not feel she was ready the first time they asked her, the second time she said yes, and won a seat on the board. This, Lynn said, is an indication of women's rise in the industry, as her placement was a

result of recommendations from franchisees.

McGuire's advice to women interested in franchising in the oil-change industry? "Don't be afraid of it. Anyone that likes working with the public will do fine." **FT**



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