

Smart Ways to Increase Your Average Carwash Ticket

By Kyle Doyle

Increasing your average ticket has always been an important part of a successful carwash, but with car counts shrinking or stagnant at many locations, there has never been a more urgent time to focus on getting the customers you do have to spend more per visit. That means that a focus on — or even better, an obsession with — increasing your average ticket should be at the top of the priority list.

Indirect Ways to Increase Averages

Most discussions about increasing ticket averages start with greater upselling techniques and/or menu sign design. While these are important (and we'll get to them shortly), we should start with an obvious, but often forgotten, principle: consumers pay for products and services that they value.

Therefore, if you want people to give you their money, you need to make sure you offer them something of value during each visit. If you want more money, offer more value. The following methods are indirect because they relate to your business as a whole, not just the methodology of getting a specific customer to spend more at a specific moment.

1 Perception is Reality. I know this sounds obvious, but to get consumers to spend more (or at all) you have to do a good job of cleaning their car. What's less obvious is that perception is more important than reality. For example, I once visited a carwash site where the owner had recently replaced his ancient equipment with a brand new rack. At the same time he switched over to a top-quality chemical. The owner was proud of the results and the cars were coming out better than ever.

However, he was surprised that his average ticket went up only a little. The problem was that while he improved the equipment, he didn't do anything about the dimly lit tunnel, its filthy walls and windows, the rusty radiant heaters, or the exposed rusty overhead girders.

Even though he had invested money to produce a cleaner car (and the cars were cleaner) the perception was not equal to the reality. A basic assumption held by average consumers is that a clean car cannot come out of a dirty tunnel. Conversely, some operators can have basic equipment (in good condition, of course) and earn a higher average ticket because of a great soap foamer and bright, bubbly triple foam.

In fact, the prevalence and selling power of triple foam over "hot wax" proves that consumers value perception. I believe

that in the future we'll see more "perception-focused" equipment from manufacturers. One example is the Bubblizer from NS Wash Systems, which adds theater to the pre-soak process by dropping big bubbles on top of the car.

Bottom-line: Keep your site and tunnel spotless and make sure your foamers are in tip-top shape (if you don't have a foamer, put it at the top of your "equipment to buy" list). Take a step back from your wash and look at the overall perception from each point in the washing experience. Consumers will spend more when there is a higher perceived value.

2 Branding = Perceived Value. Branding might sound like just another marketing buzzword, but it could be the most important aspect of your operation. It is essentially the personality of your business. There are many branding definitions, but the one I like the most is from famous ad man Marty Neumeier: "A brand is a person's gut feeling about a product, service or company ... When enough individuals arrive at the same gut feeling, a company can be said to have a brand."

Effective branding increases perceived value, differentiates your carwash from competitors and creates a more loyal customer.

Bottom-line: Don't be just another carwash. Stand for something and make that stand evident at every point of customer interaction.

3 Pricing. Pricing might not be a sexy topic, but it is one of the most basic marketing tools. If you haven't analyzed your pricing lately now might be the time. Make sure you have an up-to-date spreadsheet comparing your prices to your closest competitors'. If you are able to raise your prices even by pennies (hopefully anchoring on a clear promise of value), it can make a big difference at the end of the year.

Bottom-line: Take the time to make sure your pricing is where it should be and don't be afraid to raise it if competition and/or your level of perceived value warrants it.



Direct Ways to Increase Averages

While these methods are more obvious, they still are not set-it-and-forget-it solutions. I highly recommend experimentation with even minor variations over time to see what works and what doesn't. Remember, even an increase in pennies will make a difference at the end of the year.

1 Greeter. No single element improves average ticket more than a trained greeter/salesperson. A trained salesperson can point out the value in each wash and can adapt to each customer and vehicle. While we cannot deny the higher cost of labor and energy it takes to train a salesperson, if done right it is well worth the cost.

In selecting a salesperson, look for someone with good communications skills. This should be someone who is fairly outgoing and wouldn't be described as "shy." You want someone who can look you in the eye and is not afraid to smile.

When it comes to the sales pitch there are dozens of ways to do it. A lot depends on your market, as well as the style of the greeter. One of the best methods is the "service adviser" who looks over the car as it approaches and recommends services accordingly. Advisers may point out some brake dust and suggest the package with the "wheel treatment" or may point to aging paint and suggest a package with wax.

Another method is the upsell. Whatever package the customer first asks for, the greeter suggests the next higher package, pointing out the added value: "For only \$3 more you can get ..." Most customers usually purchase the same thing and might not even consider another package until it is explained.

Note for express operators: Your pay stations are your greeters. Each manufacturer can suggest ways to use the pay station software to hopefully yield a higher average. Make sure you speak with your sales or support rep often to make sure you are using the software to its fullest potential.

Bottom-line: If you're not an express operator, don't put off hiring, training or incentivizing your greeter. If you don't have the energy, higher an outside training firm. Work on new approaches to find out what works. Nothing can bring you a higher average ticket quicker than a well-trained greeter.

2 Menu Sign. Next to a greeter, menu signage is your single most important element. Essentially, your menu sign is a salesperson, whose job is to present customers with options and make recommendations. The key behavioral pattern to remember with menu sign design is that if consumers are confused or overwhelmed by their choices, they will almost always pick the most "basic" option or pick what they've purchased previously.

It's a form of paralysis by analysis, where too much information prohibits an informed decision. Simplicity, ease of comprehension, and intuitive differentiating value are key.

Simplicity is key because customers only have a few seconds to really understand their choices. Too many options will trigger paralysis by analysis. Ideally you should have three wash packages and three extra services (maximum four). Package names should also be simple and easy to remember. Theme-oriented names should be avoided if they're not as simple as Bronze, Silver, Gold or another simple naming convention. There's no need to be overly creative here. Also, too many graphics and/or images can lead to confusion.

Comprehension begins with being able to read the sign, so make sure it is big enough to be read three cars deep in your

stack. If you can't make it that big, buy multiple smaller signs and place them closer to the cars. Remember, too, that we read top down and left to right, so the most expensive (and hopefully the best value) wash should be listed first, either at the top or left.

Also, make sure that service inclusions are easy to comprehend. Don't feel the need to list every possible inclusion (i.e., soap, water, wax #1, wax #2, dryer, etc.). While you might think it increases perceived value, it only confuses. From a design standpoint, avoid decorative fonts. Stick with a sans-serif font and leave plenty of negative space (blank space with no content).

Intuitive differentiating value means that it is blatantly obvious that the Silver wash is a little better than the Bronze wash, and the Gold wash is clearly the best wash. This is another reason why simple package names should be used. It also reinforces the importance of keeping the wash inclusions clear so that it is obvious which additional items customers get with each wash. Color also is an important tool to help signify value and make your menu easier to comprehend.

Bottom-line: Menu signs have a huge impact on your average ticket. If you have a sign that's cluttered, confusing or hard to read, invest in a new, professionally designed one. Every day you put it off is leaving money on the table.

3 Pre and Post Transaction Signs. Another simple and affordable way to increase your average ticket is with pre-sell and post-sell signage. Pre-sell signage is very popular in the fast-food industry and you almost always see them before you get to the menu sign. In the carwash industry, they are just as relevant but not nearly as popular.

I suggest a simple sign that highlights a single, extra service in order to whet a customer's appetite. It could say something like, "When was the last time you waxed?" or "Do you like shiny tires?" Signage should be concise and easily readable as customers drive toward the point of order.

Post-sell signs are valuable because they can sow the seeds of a customer's next visit. Tout the benefits of your top package or the importance of a particular extra service. By planting the seeds during the current visit, you can yield a higher ticket on the next visit.

4 Manager Specials. These types of specials are strategic discounts that are unannounced and random so customers don't expect or wait for them. For example, you might pick a cloudy day to offer an extra service for half price. There are too many variables to suggest anything beyond this, but it's worth a try.

Test it out by running a one-day trial. At the end of the day, check the reports to see if the higher quantity of extra service at the discounted price makes you more than the average quantity at the regular price. Experimentation is key.

Bottom-line: You shouldn't offer these specials every day and be sure to rotate your offers.

These are just some of the ways to increase your average ticket, and in reality, the application of each suggested method could fill volumes. The key is to make it a priority (if not an obsession) and experiment to find out what works for your wash.

In a tough market, nothing could be more important and more urgent than focusing on increasing sales from the customers you already have. Do it well and all those pennies can make a big difference. **MCC**

Kyle Doyle is president of Blue Sky Image Group, a full-service carwash marketing firm. He can be reached at 631.431.2600 or kdoyle@carwashimage.com.