

Prescription for Success

By Timothy Denman

Shawn Gatta is living his dream.

The self-made man has just finished renovations on one of the most impressive stand-alone detail centers in the country — after talking with him it is obvious he couldn't be happier with the results.

The lifelong detailer started out in the business before he even had a driver's license, going door-to-door offering his services and honing his skills. His business thrived even in its infancy, and Shawn soon hired four of his high school friends to help him the summer following their senior year.

"Once I had a driver's license I bought an old Plymouth Valiant and I became a mobile detailer," Gatta says. "We must have washed 1,000 cars that summer."

From 1984 to 1988 Shawn operated Gatta's Car Care, out of his car and eventually van, until he purchased The Detail Doctor and moved the Long Branch based business to Little Silver, NJ.

Gatta leased the property in Little Silver for 16 years until he finally bought his first building and moved the business to its current home in Shrewsbury, NJ.

The one-acre Shrewsbury property has undergone two renovations since Gatta first purchased the property in 2002. The original three-bay building was transformed from a gas station into a detail center capable of servicing up to six cars at a time.

The first overhaul cost Gatta \$200,000, and helped establish his business in the community, but it was the latest renovation that really set the Detail Doctor apart from the competition.

Gatta completely transformed the property, investing over \$1.2 million into the state-of-the-art facility, positioning it as an up-scale reconditioning center. The new detailing mecca features two drive-thru express detailing bays, a cavernous full-serve detail center, and a posh waiting area tricked out with modern amenities.

Packages for the drive-thru express start at \$29.95 and include a hand wash; spray wax; windows, tires, wheels, and doorjamb cleaning. All work is done by hand and no appointment is necessary. Over half of the cars that pull into Gatta's drive come for the express detailing service, which accounts for about 20 percent of the business' total revenue.

Although the express detailing services contribute nicely to the bottom line, The Detail Doctor's bread-and-butter is its full-serve detailing. Prices for a full-service detail start at \$230, but Gatta reports that average tickets are in the \$350 range thanks to the numerous upgrades available.

Over half of The Detail Doctor's full-serve customers opt for some kind of upgrade.



The street view of the newly renovated Detail Doctor.



Shawn Gatta started his business out of the back of his car.



The waiting room at The Detail Doctor is a comfortable place to watch some TV or surf the Internet.

Available upgrades include paint-less dent repair, windshield repair, alloy wheel reconditioning, leather repair, and headlight restoration. Sub-contractors perform all of the extra services.

Affluent communities surround Shrewsburg, and Gatta does his best to capture high-end clients. One of The Detail Doctor's greatest assets is its comfort-laden waiting area.

"I wanted to do something different," Gatta says about his customer waiting room. "My idea was to design an inviting place that people would be comfortable sitting in while they waited for their cars, not unlike their own living rooms."

The waiting area is tricked out with high-quality leather couches, artwork, and Wi-Fi Internet access. All customers are invited to enjoy the complimentary coffee, hot and cold tea, water, and snacks that are always available.



"In the four months since the renovations, I have heard nothing but compliments about the waiting area," Gatta says. "I tell them that their car is done and they tell me they don't want to leave. It is a place for them to get away. They come in here and get some work done, talk on their phones, use the Internet, and leave feeling refreshed."

The building's carved-wood and gold leaf signage displays "The Detail Doctor" name high and proud and meets the 60,000 cars that pass by daily on busy Route 35.

The new construction more than doubled The Detail Doctor's size.



Workers complete the final touches outside the express-detailing bay.

"Before the construction everyone that drove by could see us detailing cars from the street," Gatta says. "I never liked that. I wanted everything to be behind scenes. We designed the exterior to have a high-end feel to it. If you don't know what we are doing here you would never know we were cleaning cars. That is how I wanted it."

It may seem odd to hear a detail operator say he doesn't want passers-by to know he is detailing cars, but Gatta knows what he is doing.

Prior to the construction, The Detail Doctor's three bays were always full, and customers needed an appointment a week in advance. Although Gatta has yet to fill his 12-cars-at-once capacity, he is well on his

way. He predicts that in three years a week-old appointment will once again be needed.

The Detail Doctor is reconditioning 160 cars per week and counting. Gatta's business continues to grow despite the fact that he hasn't advertised in over five years. The center's commitment to quality and customer satisfaction is evident — 70 percent of the business' clients are repeat customers.

Much of the credit for The Detail Doctor's continued success has to go to the dedicated staff. Thirteen full-time employees work 50-plus hours a week, and are rewarded with full health benefits, paid vacation, sick days, and paid holidays.

"All of my employees make a living here," Gatta says. "We don't have any \$8 an hour guys. I expect a business to be able to provide its employees with a fair life."

Gatta provides his employees with a comfortable and fair-compensated working environment and they reciprocate with hard work and loyalty — the average employee has worked for Gatta for seven years.

The employees need look no further than their boss for an example of a dedicated worker — Gatta works 65-70 hours a week. "I don't go anywhere," Gatta says. "There is no need to make an appointment



with me. Just come in. I'll be here"

Gatta's career has been a series of steppingstones, none greater than the slow switch from wholesale detailing to retail. Before he moved the business to Shrewsbury, 75 percent of Gatta's work was wholesale, now six years later it accounts for none.

"It is a different business now," Gatta says. "A better business. With retail clients you are dealing with someone who has a car and they want you to make it better. When you do work for a dealership, for example, they take in a trade and they want it to look brand new, quickly, and cheaply. The profit margins are just not there.

"This property changed my life. Hopefully the addition will further change my life. I can't imagine if I didn't buy this building and run my business on a highway like this. I would still be handcuffed in a dealership somewhere."

Gatta is living his dream, and he knows it.

"I have never worked a day in my life," he says. "I love what I do. Everyday I wake up and am excited to come to work."

We should all be so lucky.

All 13 full-time employees enjoy health insurance and paid time off.



The inside of the newly-built addition.

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