



Overcoming the Odds

Service stations might seem like a dying breed, but Manny Mancuso's making a go of it. There are lessons to be learned in his perseverance.

[BY RENEE PAS]

THE MANCUSO FILE

Store name: Elk Grove Marathon

Owner: Manny Mancuso

Location: Elk Grove Village, IL

Store stats: Service station with 3 service bays, 7 pumps, and 800 sq.ft. store

Employee stats: 3 full-time employees, 6 part-time employees

Signature Strategy: Honesty and personal service

Buying Group: eMpowered Buying with Marathon

Manny Mancuso's operation is a bit of an anomaly these days: A small gas station with three service bays and an attached c-store that's maybe 800 sq.ft. tops.

While repair shops might be the exception, Mancuso is not. He is everything you want in a store owner: honest, fair and hard working. And even though it's been a tough year and a half since he's owned this store, he's making headway.

SET YOURSELF APART

Customer service is what sets the station apart from the competition. "We give people that warm, fuzzy feeling when they come to see us," said Mancuso, adding that his primary focus is on offering top-notch customer service.

"We go out of our way for customers," Mancuso said. "We want to exceed



their expectations.” To do that, he offers extensive personal service, from assisting the elderly with filling up their cars to offering complimentary rides to home and work for repair service customers.

Two full-time certified techs, plus one part-time tech keeps the 3-bay operation running smoothly. The team handles complete automotive repair service on all foreign and domestic cars.

“We’re kind of a dying breed,” Mancuso admitted. “You don’t see this kind of service station at the corner anymore.” He considers his store a one-stop shop, where customers can get fuel, have their oil changed, and pick up some milk at the same time.

“We do complete automotive repair, from cars to light trucks to SUVs: anything from a basic oil change to a complete engine repair,” said Mancuso. “We have access to all the service bulletins and recalls just like the auto dealers do. If our customers prefer neighborhood service to a dealer service, we can assist them.”

And he doesn’t forget to say ‘Thank You’, sending out thank you notes to customers as well as reminders when it’s time to come in to service their vehicle. “My job is to keep my customers that I have built up for the last year and a half,” said Mancuso. “I want to make them stay loyal to us.”

WORK THROUGH CONFUSION

Mancuso knows exactly how important loyalty is, since when he first acquired the store he had zero customers. The previous owner had been doing well at the location and actually took much of the business with him—including the phone number—and opened a new

repair shop just five miles west. It was a confusing period because customers thought they were calling their regular Marathon station on the corner, but the phone was being answered five miles down the road.

“Customers weren’t looking for the previous owner, specifically; they were looking for the Marathon station. Eventually, they found me,” Mancuso said. “But I started out with zero customers, a new phone number, a crappy economy and empty shelves.”



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Manny Mancuso
Elk Grove Marathon

He started to do a lot of advertising for the store. Then a lucky break came and he was featured as a new business owner on a local cable TV show.

“I took advantage of that opportunity,” said Mancuso. “After the show aired, people would come in and say they saw us on TV.” That extra boost of

attention helped the business and also provided a boost of encouragement to Mancuso and his team.

KEEP WORKING IT

Another challenge Mancuso continues to work through is gasoline pricing. His Elk Grove Marathon station rests on the border between two counties—Cook County and DuPage County. Because his store is housed on the Cook County side, part of Chicago, the sales tax is a lot higher. “People routinely drive the extra mile to go into DuPage and save 10 cents a gallon. It becomes a habit. They just think that way,” he said.

For a while he tried to match the pricing and chase those customers, but found the other operator just drops his price to match. “My goal is to stay within five cents,” he said. “I want to be fair. We do our best to stay competitive for our customers.”

He’s also looking for additional ways to drive sales, such as adding a car wash. “The stations across the street do not have them,” Mancuso noted. “It would give me a way to discount fuel and change the buying habit of people.

“Fortunately I have room for a car wash behind the station. And it would allow me to capitalize on all areas with an added profit center. A car wash would be a good complement to the gas pumps and repair shop,” he said.

The only hold-up? Financing. “It’s a long shot right now,” Mancuso admitted, but one that still remains on the horizon.

“I know I need to be patient,” he said. “I keep reminding myself of where I started and where we’re at now. It stresses me out when there are no cars at the pump; then I get excited



when cars are filling up and the repair shop is filled up. It's a continued work in progress."

It's also about loving the business. Mancuso has been in the gasoline business for more than 20 years, starting out as a cashier and working his way up to manager before becoming an owner/operator. He spent seven years at another Marathon station prior to purchasing the Elk Grove Village Marathon. The other site was in need of new underground storage tank equipment, lines, and a new canopy. The investment he needed to make in the property outweighed a buyout offer, so he took the offer and spent a year away from the industry. Eventually, his



ASC-certified technicians John Berti (left) and Dan Bryjowski perform a diagnostic test on a car. The auto repair shop is the bread-and-butter of the Elk Grove Marathon.

passion for this industry led him back to Illinois.

"I missed the gas station atmosphere," Mancuso said. "The everyday customers coming in for newspapers,

lottery ... I grew up around gas stations. I enjoy the environment and the people." That kind of pride and enthusiasm is certain to keep Mancuso's business growing.

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