



Express Carwashing— Phenomenon or Fad?

This spring, I was part of a Car Care World Expo panel on express carwashing. We attempted to define this form of exterior carwashing and finally settled on the following definition: “A below-market-priced exterior wash combined with the offering of free or discounted vacuums.”

The low price and the discounted vacuum offer were the two essential components that distinguished this prototype from all other forms of exterior conveyor washing. The market price is established not by full-serves or self-serves, but by the predominant form of exterior washing in your area, either in-bay automatics or existing exterior conveyors. Some on the panel wanted to include speed as a “new” component. Out of respect to many of the high-volume exterior locations in the Northeastern and Central United States, I could not agree. Although autocashiers add a perceived value of speed and high tech, they are no different than any other piece of labor-saving equipment in the puzzle—beneficial to offering a low-cost product but no more essential than Neo-glide wraps.

Several trends in the consumer marketplace have helped this prototype develop from fad to phenomenon. Increased drive times in every city and metropolitan area has created an insatiable demand for speed and convenience. It’s an ordeal to drive across any city today, forcing us to try to save as much time as possible with our shopping excursions. Drive-through windows can be found at almost every type of business you can imagine. Self checkout at your local grocery store and pay-at-the-pump offerings have created a market of consumers both willing and experienced at pulling out their credit cards and serving themselves to save time and money. People appear so busy. I’ve watched customers vacuum with one hand and talk on a cell phone with the other.

In the Southeast, we have never had widespread success with exterior conveyor washing. I blame that on the lack of road salt, average annual rainfalls of 50 to 65 inches and hurricanes. There has been a proliferation of in-bay automatics, and that has created a customer base of those who desire a quick, inexpensive and less-than-perfect wash. The express locations seem to be tapping into that base. I’m old enough to remember scoffers at warehouse-type stores who thought service was more important to consumers than price. In 20 years of full-service washing, I gradually raised our prices from a base of \$5 to \$15 in an ever-increasing attempt to generate profit. With those increased prices and greater competition from self-serves, automatics and other conveyors, I could see customer frequency going down, down, down. It would offend me (although I wouldn’t dare tell) when my former regular customers would inform me how much they liked visiting the new touchless automatic in town. “It’s so inexpensive and quick!” I’m thinking, “Here I am giving them all this personal service with a free cup of coffee, newspaper, clean restrooms and one to two dozen smiling faces waiting on them and they are

infatuated with that little, cheap floozie down the street.” Wal-Mart has proven it—people want a bargain!

Several trends in the carwash industry have powered this prototype from an experiment by Ben Alford in Baton Rouge, La., four years ago to a national trend unsurpassed in conveyor history. Equipment improvements such as Neo-glide and micro-fiber curtains have enabled conveyors to deliver a very good product with no prepping labor. Autocashier refinement has also reduced labor. But more important, these autocashiers have brought us revenue-increasing, high-speed, credit-card processing. It would be impossible to do a high volume of credit-card transactions with telephone modem and 20-second processing. I think consumers are more comfortable with swiping their credit cards in a machine than they are with handing them over to a person. My credit-card transactions have 100 percent higher extra-service purchases than my cash transactions. And if it weren’t for the improved tire-dressing machines we now have available, my express would have fewer services to offer. If all we had to sell was the wax service, payable by cash only, the express prototype would not work. The tire-shine machine has also proven itself essential to the success of express. There are specific equipment improvements that have helped this phenomenon function with less labor and higher extra sells.

The trends that are going to continue to fuel the express exterior from a fad to phenomenon are not within our industry, or the consumer market, but trends in the labor market. State increases in minimum wages (Florida is \$6.40 per hour), immigration crackdowns and just the difficulty of training young people who would rather spend all their time typing on computers in air-conditioned buildings is driving operators to seek relief with this lower labor prototype. It seems like every year the labor pool of applicants becomes smaller, less motivated and more difficult to retain. We pay our employees an average \$2 over minimum wage, and yet it seems more difficult than ever to deliver quality and speedy service. So, if you can’t deliver the level of quality service you would like, deliver price and speed.

If you had told me 20 years ago that there would be exterior conveyors in the Southeast washing numbers like we are seeing, I would have said, “You’re crazy. My customers love good service. They won’t change.” That would be wrongly assuming “my customers” represented the entire marketplace, and that the marketplace was not going to change. The demand for full-service and detailing is still there but not at the volume levels of the past. There are more consumers who don’t value a “good carwash” as much as they value saving time and money. The dramatic car counts at many locations in the Southeast prove it. This is no fad! Will it change and evolve? Definitely. ☛

Jimmy Branch is a carwash operator in Panama City, Fla, and a past president of the International Carwash Association. He can be e-mailed at washem@hotmail.com.