

Valley Park auto repairs come with prayers



JUNE 29, 2009 -- Technician Andy Gibson checks out a customer's car at Christian Brothers Automotive in Valley Park, where a new franchise recently opened. (Brittanie Williams/P-D)

By [Tim Townsend](#)

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VALLEY PARK — Some customers of the new Christian Brothers Automotive get more than an just an oil change or a new transmission.

"If the opportunity arises, and if someone shares certain details of their life, I might pray with them," said Kip Bynum, the garage's owner. "We're led by what God sees fit to do."

Catering specifically to Christians — who make up nearly 80 percent of the U.S. population — has become a legitimate and profitable marketing strategy for large and small companies.

There are Christian bookstores, moving companies, record labels, debt-consolidation agencies, health insurance companies, clothing brands, dating websites, and film companies.

Some companies target Christians overtly, while other businesses founded on Christian principles favor a show-by-example policy. Their target market may be wider, but such companies use the tenets of their faith — especially the so-called Golden Rule — to attract consumers.

"There is a very strong network of Christians marketing to Christians and really creating goods and services for that group," said Mara Einstein, a professor of media studies at Queens College in New York. "There's nothing wrong with deciding your market is a Christian market, but the issue becomes if you find that's not a big enough target and then you have to appeal to a wider audience."

Bynum and his wife, Lori, opened the first Christian Brothers Automotive franchise in the St. Louis area three months ago. The Bynums were chosen by Texas-based Christian Brothers executives because, among other qualifications, they are what the company's founder Mark Carr called "born-again Christians."

"We all have a common denominator in Jesus Christ, and that makes everyone on an even playing field," Carr said. "Christians are not perfect by any way, shape or form, but I'm comfortable with them because Christ is the boss of their store."

The company's mission is "to glorify God by providing ethical and excellent automotive repair service for our customers, according to Colossians 3:17."

That verse from the New Testament says, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

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Carr said the company's business is mostly marketed by word of mouth, propelled by what he calls "the wow factor." Most of its customers are women, he said.

Christian Brothers builds its lobbies to look and feel like a doctor's office. The lobby of the company's Valley Park franchise features plants, leather furniture and reading material — including a Bible. And for those who can't wait for their car, the company offers a courtesy shuttle.

But there are ethical challenges in running a company based on Christian principles. "It's a sensitive line, but I don't want to use Christianity to market my business," Carr said.

FOUNDATIONS IN FAITH

Christian Brothers Automotive is an \$80 million company with 59 franchises, mostly in the Bible Belt. But larger companies with Christian foundations deal with similar challenges.

Georgia-based Chick-fil-A is a \$2.9 billion fast-food chicken sandwich chain with 1,450 restaurants in 38 states, including nine in Missouri and eight in Illinois. Its corporate purpose is "to glorify God by being a faithful steward to all that is entrusted to us. To have a positive influence on all who come in contact with Chick-fil-A."

Spokesman Mark Baldwin said while the average customer may not realize Chick-fil-A is a faith-based company, there are some clues. Since its founding in 1946, for instance, the company's restaurants have closed their doors on Sundays.

Tom Williams is the founder of Excel Sports Physical Therapy, which provides outpatient care at eight locations, mostly in St. Charles, and employs 80 people. Its mission statement is "to serve God's people, using Jesus Christ's example, by providing a quality, cutting edge, top of the line service."

Christianity, Williams says, "is the fiber of who we are, and comes out in everything we do."

If the company finds out a customer doesn't have health insurance, for instance, it may provide therapy for free.

"We adhere to the philosophy that if you do the right thing, you don't need to be out there saying we're Christians," said Williams.

Buck Jacobs, founder of the C12 Group — a kind of Christian CEO roundtable with 700 members nationwide — said conducting business using the Golden Rule is a common strategy among Christian-oriented companies.

"You don't have to be a Christian to recognize the value of applying the Golden Rule," Jacobs said. "Do unto others, and chances are you'll be successful. A lot of companies recognize that without being Christian."

Susan Hunt-Bradford, a 48-year-old from Fenton who teaches at St. Louis Community College-Meramec, has taken her car to Christian Brothers three times — twice for oil changes and once to get her brakes fixed.

Hunt-Bradford was first attracted by the convenience of Christian Brothers' shuttle service but said the company's principles helped it retain her business. She ultimately paid less for her brake job than Christian Brothers' original estimate, for instance.

"They were able to get the brake pads on sale, and they passed along the discount to me," Hunt-Bradford said. "Christian or not, a lot of companies wouldn't do that."

Christian Automotive Brothers franchisees put up \$65,000 of their own cash and are responsible for a total of \$325,000 in startup costs, for which the company will help them find financing. When the company decides where to build a new franchise, it buys the land and invests about \$1.5 million in the land and construction of the building.

After the franchisee is paid a \$75,000 package that includes a \$60,000 base salary, plus benefits, the company and the franchisee split the garage's remaining profits. The

company requires that the franchise owner be on the premises at all times while its doors are open.

The process of vetting a possible Christian Brothers Automotive franchisee is thorough. Carr said three applicants are turned down for every one allowed to open a franchise. A potential franchisee goes through a series of nine interviews, including one with the company's chief operating officer, about the depth of his or her commitment to Jesus Christ.

HIRING OVERSIGHT

Unless an organization is explicitly religious, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act ensures that companies cannot use religion to discriminate in their hiring.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is charged with enforcing Title VII and looks at the employer-employee relationship as a determining factor in enforcement. That relationship, according to EEOC documents, "depends on whether the employer controls the means and manner of the worker's work performance."

In Christian Brothers Automotive's case, the question is whether the franchisee is a partner or an employee.

"Are you just a glorified regional manager, or do you truly have latitude in what you do?" said Eric Sowers, an employment attorney with Sowers & Wolf. "It's certainly approaching the red zone if not in the red zone."

Jeanne Goldberg, senior attorney adviser for the EEOC's office of legal counsel, said that "for the laws we enforce to apply, it would have to be found that this is a potential employment relationship."

While Bynum said religion is not a factor in the hiring decisions of his Valley Park franchise, during the hiring process, he said, "we try to let people know what this company's about and what we stand for."

Carr said he hears the occasional comment — typically from other Christians — that his company is trading on faith to bring Christians in the door.

"That doesn't even faze me because I know what my relationship with God is," Carr said. "If I'm using (God) to make money for me, I've got real issues when I die. And I don't need that."