



Spitfire Automotive's home in Oak Lawn, Ill., is massive, leaving plenty of room for spacious service bays, product displays, back office space, and even some toys.

## THE BUSINESS TODAY

Spitfire Automotive continues to offer its customers tires as part of its undercar repair service and as a convenience, rather than having to send them elsewhere for new rubber. Malinowski estimates the shop sells about 500 tires each year.

"We advertise quite a bit that we have tires; our website is basically a tire website with the inclusion of vehicle repair," he says. "We market the tires here onsite. We give customers tire calendars each year. We fully identify with being a tire dealership."

Malinowski adds that tires also serve as a tool in retaining a customer, noting, "We have a lot of cases where we put a set of tires on the car and the customer brings back a second car for tires and other repairs."

Nearly all of Spitfire Automotive's marketing budget is dedicated to retention as well, since Malinowski says it is much more effective and efficient to keep current customers than to reach new ones.

"Current customers know us, they know what we do and how we do it – and we treat them very well," he says.

"We used to do general marketing, but

I found the return on that investment was very poor. We once sent out 80,000 post cards to the tune of \$7,000 over a nine-month period and we only got four postcards back.

"A lot of our marketing now is in the form of thank-you notes and service reminders to our current customer base," Malinowski continues. "We get about a 10% return on postcards sent to our current customer base."

Other marketing initiatives include the shop's website – [spitfireauto.com](http://spitfireauto.com) – which offers online appointment booking as well as all pertinent shop information. Spitfire also is active on Facebook and Twitter.

Customer loyalty programs include Spitfire Bucks, which are sent to each customer, along with a thank-you note, following a service visit; mailed quarterly specials; a "buy five, get the sixth free" oil change program that features a customer punch card; holiday cards and gift certificates;

"We are known for our quality service and the fact that our employees are well trained and perform repairs that other people can't," Malinowski says, adding that the shop regularly gets referrals from competitors that cannot perform certain jobs.

"When General Motors first introduced check engine light computers in cars back in the early 1980s, an Oldsmobile dealer in town would send the cars to us to figure out why the check engine light was on and to do the repairs when the car was under warranty," he recalls.

"While we don't see that type of thing much anymore, we do handle a local funeral home's fleet of Cadillac limos and a hearse," Malinowski continues. "The local Cadillac dealer won't even touch them, whether it's a warranty repair or not – the cars have been modified and they don't want to touch them. So we handle that account, anything from warranty work to general maintenance and repairs."