

service reminder cards and emails; and Goodyear calendars and coupon books.

CUSTOMERS AND COMMUNITY

While Spitfire Automotive prides itself on offering its clients expert repair – explained in detail in an easy-to-understand manner – the dealership also offers comfortable perks, including an offer of coffee or tea, prepared exactly how they like it, to all customers.

Each and every customer is thanked several times by the staff at Spitfire Automotive: once the repair is authorized, when the bill is being paid and when the vehicle is being picked up, Malinowski says.

"Customer retention efforts are simple: do the job right the first time; fix the customer's problem with the vehicle; explain what's wrong with the vehicle in detail; charge a fair price for the repair; have the vehicle fixed on time and when promised; and provide a fair and honest guarantee," he explains.

Customer satisfaction is measured in several ways, including unsolicited testimonials and social media comments, as well as through services like Customer Link, Demandforce, RepairPal and AAA – each of which are done using a combination of phone and email surveys.

"Honestly, we don't get customer complaints," Malinowski says. "I can't remember the last time we had a complaint, but if one were to come up, employees would refer the customer to me and I would handle it personally."

That same honest treatment and personal involvement leads to Spitfire Automotive's strong community ties with area organizations.

"We provide both service and monetary donations to local groups – including 5K and 10K runs for breast cancer, church fundraisers for local food pantries, Boy Scout troop fundraisers, and local church and athletic club fundraisers," Malinowski says, adding that also on the list are Knights of Columbus, Oak Lawn Fire Department and the Greater Chicago Food Depository.

Malinowski has long served as a board member, treasurer and secretary of the Evergreen Park Sertoma Club, which provides support to handicapped and hearing-impaired children.

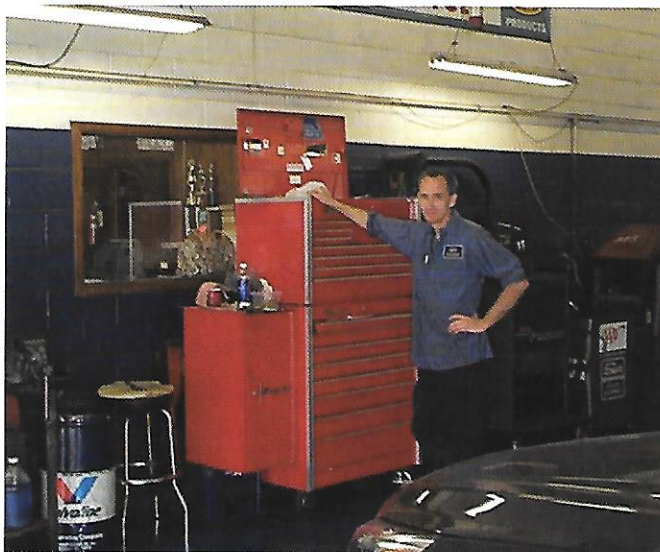
LOOKING FORWARD

Malinowski, 69, along with his son, Richard Jr., will continue to lead the experienced staff of Spitfire Automotive – roughly half of employees have been with the company more than 30 years – for the foreseeable future.

"As long as I'm physically able, I will be here," Malinowski says. "I like coming to work. I work 10 to 11 hours a day and spend time on Sundays doing paperwork at home. It's a fun, challenging daily routine."

Richard Jr. currently runs the dealership's parts department and handles purchasing for the service department, as well as oversees Spitfire Automotive's small wholesale business, selling parts to other shops.

"I've considered a second or third shop but have never made that move because I'm afraid of not being directly involved with it, of running into a quality problem with the type of work that gets done," Malinowski explains.



The generous service area leaves plenty of room to work, and service techs take care to keep things neat and tidy.

"I've seen too many multi-shop operations where certain locations have quality issues because of the lack of control by management or the inability to find the right people to ensure consistent quality."

Looking ahead, he sees the automotive repair and tire industry becoming highly specialized in electrical and computer repairs, wiring repairs and computer programming – something for which Spitfire is already prepared.

"This will be the norm to repair cars in the future, but we have already prepared for this by investing in factory scan tools, programming and flash technology equipment," says Malinowski, who lists dozens of scan tools, TPMS tools, computer hardware and software, etc., that is available to Spitfire techs. "It's always time to make changes and stay ahead of the curve."

As the dealership enters its 100th year in business, it's clear the strategy has worked well. Proved by its latest honor. ■