



Home Run

Contour Washing a Hit in Littleton, Colo.

by Aaron Voorhees

In May of 2003 our family decided that we wanted to become car wash owners. Being formally trained as a marketer (with an emphasis on market research and penetration strategies) and informally trained from my father as a contractor, we set out to navigate this new venture. We began looking at different automatic washing equipment and found they all wash very differently. Different nozzles, speeds, mechanics, motors and pumps all contributed to varying wash qualities and speeds. We drove all over the Denver metro area, washing our car in over a dozen different automatic washes, trying to decide what equipment to put in our car wash. It was a time-consuming and difficult decision for a soon-to-be-operator to make. As we hunted for the right site location, we talked with various manufacturers and distributors. We quickly began to realize that they all have their advantages and disadvantages.

We found a few potential sites in our own neighborhood in Littleton, Colo. We knew the pulse of the area and surveyed several local residents. One outcome—touchless automatics

only! That narrowed our choices of equipment. In our area of town, there is a relatively high annual income per household, meaning more expensive cars, meaning they didn't want them touched! We also found our area has a high volume of large vehicles like SUVs so we needed an automatic that would easily accommodate them. This narrowed the list of potential automatic equipment down even further.

The next factor to consider was throughput time. Marrying into a family of chemists, I understood that all detergents have reaction times and that it is a very poor idea to not allow enough reaction time. After washing my own car in a couple of very fast automatics, I was not impressed with the wash quality. As an owner and investor, I wanted a fast automatic wash—the more cars, the more money. But I was not willing to trade speed for poor wash quality. There is a difference between getting a car *wet* and getting a car *clean*.

We eventually chose touchless automatic equipment, manufactured by Karcher, which contours the vehicle while washing and drying. Since we were eventually planning on

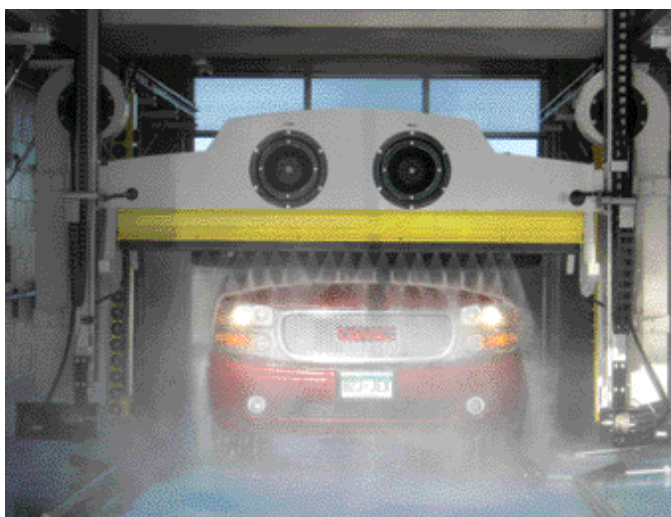
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owning more than one wash, we figured that if the equipment didn't meet our expectations, we would use another equipment manufacturer in subsequent washes.

We also opted to have credit cards because none of the other washes in our area offered the convenience of credit card use, so we chose payment equipment that accepts coin, credit card or code in all the self-serve bays and automatic washes as well. This enabled us to cater to the ever increasingly high-tech consumer who only carries plastic. This payment equipment also gave us the option issuing of prepaid gift cards or post-pay codes for fleet account users.

The Land, The Opening

We secured the lot on which we would build the wash. After completing all the development work with the county, city and architectural committees, we were set to build in the summer of 2004. During the construction of the wash we were met with a little resistance from nearby residents. Some did not want a car wash in their backyard because they felt it would be an eye sore. Others thought our wash would be like all the others they had used before—automatics that don't clean and cost a lot. Observing a partially-constructed building made of grey cinder block, some residents thought the wash would be another unattractive rendition of washes built in the 1980s. However, once we completed



Even the toughest customers with the dirtiest cars are impressed with the wash quality at Living Water Car Wash.

construction and our building was finished with its timbers showing, faux stone pillars, modern stucco colors and ample landscaping, local residents' opinions began to shift. We opened for business in mid-September 2004. We did not aggressively market the wash at first to allow us time to familiarize ourselves with the equipment. But in November, we saturated the market with every form of media known and the vehicles began to pour in. Some of those same customers who had been skeptical or even admittedly opposed to the construction of our wash began to compliment us on our facility and quality product.

With our choice of contouring automatic equipment, our greatest concern was the potential of our equipment running into and damaging aftermarket accessories on vehicles. We opted to offer contouring on our top two washes only, and posted signs instructing customers with large aftermarket accessories to use our bottom two washes. After washing a few thousand vehicles, we found that only about 2 percent had to use the bottom two washes because of large accessories that protruded from the vehicle.

Customer Appeal, Customer Appreciation

We began to receive thank you letters, phone calls, notes and dozens of e-mails stating how much our customers liked our automatics. Several complaining residents now became our Preferred Customers responsible for many of these thank you letters. We thought that maybe just because the equipment was new, or that some customers stated they had never used an automatic before, was the reason they liked it so much. Many stated they had used an automatic years ago, but had a horrible experience and vowed they would never use one again. We opted to give away several FREE automatic washes so customers could try it in order to prove ours truly WAS different. In fact, our tag line is "Experience the Cleaning Power of Contour." I assured them the technology in today's automatics is 10 times better than the ones made 10 years ago. That's true with most brands of automatics today. I would say, "You don't quit eating out because you had a bad experience at a restaurant do you?" The Karcher uses laser eyes to contour the stationary vehicle at a close-up eight inches. We use ultra high pressure and hot water. The result is the best automatic car wash you can get. It impresses even the toughest customers with the dirtiest cars.

One day in particular, we had the Chancellor from a prestigious university visit our wash for the second time in one day. I had seen him there earlier in a different vehicle and now he was back, washing again in one of our self-serve bays. I started up a conversation with him and asked

why he didn't just use the automatic wash. He stated, "They don't clean and I have never had a good experience using an automatic!" I thought this was a prime opportunity to change another consumer's opinion. I offered him a free wash and urged him to bring his vehicle in after it was dirty again. Thinking he would be back in a couple of weeks, he stated, "I have lots of cars. I'm going to go home and get my dirtiest one, the Jeep." He proceeded to inform me that this Jeep had not been washed in six months and had magnesium chloride caked on as a first layer and mud as a second layer. Honestly, I was a little nervous. You should have seen this Jeep! Before he drove it into the automatic, I was thinking that I was going to look like a fool AND lose a customer. I actually broke out into a cold sweat when he produced a white towel and announced, with a sarcastic grin, that he was going to use it to see how much dirt was still left on the Jeep after the wash. I was doomed! I felt confident that we had great automatic equipment but GET REAL! This Jeep didn't need my car wash, it needed Jesus. So what happened? Here is the e-mail he sent me later that week.

Aaron,

Thanks for the free car wash on my Jeep. I took the Durango down later. Very impressive. I still can't believe how clean the auto car wash did on both the Jeep and the Durango. They came out totally clean after six months of winter snow and salt. I've never seen an auto wash that cleans like yours. I'll be a constant customer. Hope the business goes well. You've got one heck of an investment there.

Sincerely,

Ken
Vice Chancellor
University

Apparently his neighbors were just as surprised to see the Jeep had been cleaned by an automatic as well. They all told him they would try it out.

The Building of Another

We knew that we wanted to build more car washes and a commercial lot became available about two miles east of us. Our partners/investors said that they wanted this new wash to be like our first one. Having only a year and a half of car washing experience behind us, we wanted to hear from the Littleton residents again so we created a questionnaire that rated different services and asked questions in an open format allowing their input. We specifically asked them what they would like to see at the second wash location.

It appeared that we needed to build the same wash again with only minor adjustments to the building layout and additions to the equipment line up. We installed two more Karcher automatics and voila—we began receiving love mail again!



Living Water Can Wash ANYTHING!

Our automatics can wash dually pick-ups, conversion vans, full size SUV's, even Hummer H1's. Most gas station car washes cannot. We cater to ranchers, farmers, tradesmen and four-wheel drive enthusiasts. Customers have been pleased with the cleaning quality they have received and we are pleased with the service we are providing.

Our automatics may not be the fastest in the industry, but our customers know the quality is worth waiting for. While the gas station automatic wash across the street stands empty, our customers will wait in line behind eight other cars, for more than 45 minutes! It speaks volumes. We believe that other automatics have accolades ours does not, but I would put the cleaning power of ours up against anything in the industry. All in all, a contour automatic may not be the machine for all operators but it sure has been a hit in Littleton, Colo.!

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Aaron Voorhees is an entrepreneur with 12 years of business experience, who has successfully developed and currently operates Living Water Car Washes in Littleton, Colo. He also owns and operates a multi-faceted design/construction company, a top coat application business, and a car wash management company. Contact Voorhees at aaron@ASLANdm.com.