

Get Rolling

Challenges & opportunities in the wheels & tires market.

By John Carollo

Professionals might think there's not much to worry about when it comes to offering wheels and tires. After all, they are among the first things purchased when an owner takes on customizing their ride.

Laughingly referred to as the "gateway drug" to drivers becoming fully addicted to building their car, wheels and tires are easy to install, make a big difference in the car or truck's looks, and are usually affordable when compared to bigger upgrades.

But, like every other aspect of our business, there are indeed challenges to consider—as well as opportunities to exploit. So we sought out some *big wheels* in the industry to talk about adding wheel and tire service to a business, knowing the related markets, and realizing the potential for add-on sales.

CHALLENGES

When it comes to the single biggest challenge shops face when offering wheel and tire packages to their customers, it often comes down to what you know—or don't know.

Finding Proper Fitment

David Schardt, president of Forgeline Motorsports, says a proper knowledge of fitments is the first challenge that comes to mind for many aftermarket retailers.

"Most car makes have different specifications such as bolt pattern, diameter, width and offset. Brake caliper clearance is also a problem in high-performance cars with large or aftermarket brakes," he explains. "Stay with a reputable wheel company that specializes in a certain car or can help determine which wheels fit correctly. Most cast wheel brands have a *one-wheel-fits-all* mentality.

While others like Forgeline make wheels to fit each application, based on a fitment sheet or other required information."

Chris Bovis, vice president of marketing of WELD Racing, references two possible sources of distress: value proposition and market confusion.

"There are a lot of wheels on the market from many different sources. The aftermarket offers wheels that range in price from \$99 to \$10,000, plus with words like *cast*, *flow formed*, *rotary flow forged* and *forged*. Each material and manufacturing process will carry its own price point and its own value proposition," he explains. "Educating the customer can become very difficult, as each company uses its own language and terminology."

Therefore, education is critical—especially, he says, because there is no regulatory agency that covers aftermarket wheels.

"Educating customers is critical to ensure that they purchase wheels that will meet their expectations and perform well on their vehicle. There are recommended test criteria, but currently there is no agency to file the results with or provide approval. The integrity of the material, design, testing and quality standards are important, but often overlooked."



New wheel and tire installations can lead to add-on sales and increased labor. (Photo courtesy Coker Tire)

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Aftermarket shops are in a position to serve the needs of customers looking for upgraded wheels and tires. (Photo courtesy Timberland Tires)



Quality wheels can completely change the look and feel of a custom car or truck. (Photo courtesy Forgeline Motorsports)



He notes that WELD offers wheels made from aircraft-grade forged alloys, “because this combination of material and manufacturing process provides the lightest and strongest wheels along with the most repeatable result. The forging process eliminates weak spots in the alloys, making them very durable and consistent.”

Bovis next addresses another important, yet complex factor: communicating the right fit.

“Many cast and flow-formed wheels are designed to fit a variety of vehicles, while true forged wheels offer the benefits of custom fitments based on the customer’s specific desire,” he says. “While being able to offer an infinite number of custom wheels is impressive, the customer only

cares about the one that fits their car. Communicating this specialized fitment as well as properly defining the customer’s vision of their new wheels can be challenging.”

Companies like WELD produce extensive fit guides that offer the most common sizes for a specific vehicle and its options like brake kits, as well as the maximum dimensions that will fit under the car.

“However, while this can be a challenge to communicate, it does provide the customer with the optimal performance and overall look,” he adds.

Jess Hoodenpyle, VP of sales and customer service for Coker Tire Co., offers a tire manufacturer’s viewpoint.

“One of our biggest challenges is when a customer wants plus-size tires and wheels. It takes a little longer to make certain the right product is selected.”

And Don Sneddon, advertising manager for Mickey Thompson Performance Tires & Wheels, agrees that education is the key.

“Training is the biggest challenge. Not just sales training, but training on proper fitments, load capacity, inflation, TPMS sen-

sors, plus proper installation using specialty equipment, lug torque and lug type as well,” he believes. “Truck tires and ultra-high-performance, low-profile tires require additional techniques.”

On Display

Aftermarket shops have approached sales of wheels and tires in a variety of ways. Some partner with local shops that offer mounting and balancing services and carry a wide range of brands, while others take advantage of the opportunity to order wheel and tire sets ready to mount right from certain suppliers.

For those shops that wish to become full tire and wheel centers, from displays to installation services, there’s plenty to learn and prepare for, plus space requirements to consider.

“Wheels are a very visual and individualized purchase,” Bovis says. “Being able to display samples of wheels is very helpful in the sales process. In addition, being able to show what the wheels look like on the customer’s type of vehicle is important to allow the customer to visualize what their



Installation of quality wheels and tires can lead to additional customization requests for drivers looking to individualize their rides. (Photo courtesy Timberland Tires)

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When it comes to wheels and tires, it's all about meeting a desire for something unique. (Photo courtesy WELD)



There's a lot to learn when it comes to choosing the proper wheel and tire combination for a specific car or truck. (Photo courtesy Mickey Thompson Performance Tires & Wheels)

vehicle will look like after the wheels and tires have been purchased. As displays get costlier and take up a larger amount of space, we are exploring the use of video with select dealers. Videos provide the customer with a visual representation of the product, plus it shows the enjoyment that the customer will experience."

As far as installation, he adds, "If the shop currently does not own one, it will need to purchase a good-quality tire changing machine."

Hoodenpyle agrees on the showroom aspect, and adds another factor.

"A good display of the wheels and tires you offer can really help a customer visualize the wheel or tire on their vehicle. Plus, we have found many customers still want to see and touch the product before they buy it."

Sneddon notes that not only do outlets need a nice display area, but they may want to consider keeping some of the fastest movers in stock as well, requiring additional warehouse space.

"Shops should prepare to have tires and wheels on display in their showrooms," he recommends. "Consumers want to see and feel the products before making such a big investment. Popular stuff should be carried in stock, so you'll need a large amount of space. Access to hot shot delivery from your WD is key, because customers want it now."

As far as work bay equipment, Schardt lists "a lift, tire machine and balancer. Tire machines and balancers can be expensive, but the labor you can charge on new and

possibly used wheel and tire sales can pay for the machines very quickly."

Look & Feel

Our last challenge question was about how adding wheels and tires can affect other components on the vehicle, and what can shops do to alleviate any negative impacts for the customer.

Hoodenpyle says it's about good communication with the buyer.

"We've found that you have to make sure the customer understands the changes going to a larger tire and wheel can have on the ride and handling of their vehicle. The best way to solve that is to make sure you communicate with the customer and find out how they want the vehicle to look, and how that will change performance."

There are certainly technical aspects that can be affected.

"Pay careful attention to wheel offsets, load capacity, rolling weight, brake clearances and alignment," advises Sneddon. "Heavy wheels and tires may require a brake upgrade."

The right-sized wheels and tires will make all the difference.

"As long as the fitment is correct, it should not affect anything negatively," says Schardt. "An improper fitment can cause



Wheels and tires are usually at the top of the list when accessorizing a vehicle. (Photo courtesy Mickey Thompson Performance Tires & Wheels)

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Reputable companies will have all the information aftermarket shops need to successfully update a vehicle's wheels and tires. (Photo courtesy Forgeline Motorsports)

all kinds of problems, including vibration, rubbing and wear on bearings and suspension parts.”

Bovis agrees that when the proper combination is selected, there shouldn't be many issues with other components on the vehicle, but in select cases there can be some areas of interference or concern.

“The best way to work around these issues is to utilize a fit guide and maintain a strong relationship to technical support specialists,” he says. “In select situations, there may be a

need to move a sway bar mount, replace the sway bar with an aftermarket kit, or similar interference concerns. In most cases, this is due to installing wider wheels, wheels with different offset spacing, or wheels with larger tires.”

And don't forget the brakes.

“The most common question that a custom wheel company will ask a customer is what brakes are on the car,” he adds. “Each brake option and aftermarket kit will likely require a small change to the wheel dimensions, so it is critical to understand what is on the car.”

OPPORTUNITIES

If an aftermarket shop can get a handle on fitment issues, set up an attractive wheel display with room for storage and installation, and recognize the common effects different sizes can have on a vehicle's performance, then offering wheels and tires makes a lot of sense.

Everybody Wants Some

There's no arguing that offering wheels and

tires can increase a shop's standing with its customers—mainly because they are so popular with so many drivers.

“Wheels and tires are at the top of the list when accessorizing a vehicle,” notes Sneddon of Mickey Thompson. “Get that sale and there will be lots of opportunities for add-ons. Plus, tires wear out.

So unlike other aftermarket parts, the customer will be back every couple of years for a fresh set.”

When offering aftermarket accessories, the addition of wheels and tires

can help set you up to handle all of a driver's customization needs, notes WELD's Bovis.

“Packaging wheels and tires together can help provide the customer with a *one-stop* shopping experience. Shops that know their customers well can be very successful at selling wheels and tires as a package. Whether it's a street/drag race customer, a European exotic customer, or lifted truck customer, each speaks a different language with significantly different brand preferences,” he explains.

Having personnel that are experts in the various market segments can help shops provide the appropriate fitment information, and understand the challenges with fitting a specific vehicle combination.

“In very short order, a shop that was never known for wheels and tires will begin attracting a new customer, because they have the knowledge to fit 15-inch rear drag wheels on a Mustang GT, or how to install Bead-Loc wheels properly on a Ford Raptor.”

In general, it makes your shop more



Educating customers is critical to ensure they purchase wheels that will meet their expectations and perform well on their vehicle. (Photo courtesy WELD)

appealing to everyone, says Coker's Hoodenpyle.

“Offering tires and wheels will not only increase sales by bringing in new customers, but it will help keep old customers coming back more often.”

Added Bonus

One thing shops might not immediately think of is that, once they sell that new set of tires and wheels, there may still be a chance to turn a profit on the set they took off as well.

“Used tires create a great profit opportunity,” Sneddon notes. “Many times the take-offs are brand-new.”

Some customers may want their old wheels and tires; but not all of them do.

“Original equipment wheels are easy to sell,” says Schardt of Forgeline. “There are lots of companies that specialize in selling OE wheels, and the shop could broker that deal for extra profit.”

Bovis agrees.

“In some cases, this can become a business in itself. For example, there are companies that sell new wheels to Porsche owners while refinishing their old wheels and reselling them to consumers restoring vintage Porsches. These opportunities are few and far between, but they do exist.”

Hoodenpyle advises you first make sure the old wheels and tires are safe and in useable condition. And then go for it.

“There is definitely a market for used tires and wheels,” he says. “There are many websites where you can advertise the used items.”

And Then Some

It's been mentioned above, but bears repeating—offering tires and wheels can



Offering tires and wheels will not only increase sales by bringing in new customers, but it will help keep old customers coming back more often. (Photo courtesy Coker Tire)

definitely lead to add-on sales.

“With modern vehicles, the most common add-on sale is new Tire Pressure Monitoring System (TPMS) sensors,” Bovis says. “However, the savvy shop will also recommend items like springs, sway bars, and in some cases even coilover kits to enhance the customer’s experience. No one wants to purchase a set of wheels and tires, only to see the same fender gap they had before. It’s about selling the visual presence or stance of the car, so the best route to a happy customer is addressing the fender gap with the wheel and tire sale. Truck, SUV and Jeep owners also desire a certain look when installing custom wheels and tires.”

Schardt’s number one add-on sales product is lowering springs, “especially on a plus application when you are increasing wheel diameter. When you increase the size of the wheel and decrease the sidewall of the tire, you get an optical illusion that the car has been raised. To really complete the performance look with low-profile tires, the car will need to be lowered.”

There are also mechanical issues that come into play.

“When installing new tires or wheels, the customer should really have the alignment checked and adjusted so the new products perform their best,” Hoodenpyle recommends. “And since the vehicle is on the rack, it’s (also) a great time to check other items such as brakes and suspension components.”

The labor involved can pay off as well, Sneddon adds.

“There’s mounting, balancing, sensor replacement, alignments and leveling kit installs,” he says. “Having the tires off the vehicle gives you a chance to inspect for other needed items like brakes, shocks or suspension components. And fender flares are often a great add-on for trucks.”

In conclusion, Bovis says it’s important shops realize that when it comes to wheels and tires, it’s all about meeting a desire for something unique.

“Shops need to remember that they are selling more than just parts. They are satisfying the vehicle owner’s need to customize their vehicle in order to enhance its appearance, performance, or both appearance and performance,” he explains. “You are selling parts, but as importantly you are selling an experience and a lifestyle. Understanding what the customer’s goals are is critical to a successful outcome.” **TS**



Mud Terrain Tires

Dick Cepek Tires & Wheels, Stow, Ohio, presents the new Extreme Country mud-terrain tire, now available in 18 popular 15- to 20-inch sizes for trucks, Jeeps and 4x4s. The purpose-driven tire is designed for sportsmen and off-road enthusiasts with a proven tread compound for excellent traction, responsive handling, even wear, longer life and a smoother, quieter ride. The Extreme Country’s tread features chamfers and notched inner and outer lugs for stability and responsive grip on irregular surfaces.

Off-Road Tires

Toyo Tires, Cypress, California, offers its Toyo Open Country R/T tires. Designed to offer off-road performance and on-road comfort, the tires are suitable for any terrain, combining traction, durable construction and aggressive styling. Their ability to tackle dirt, sand and rocks is inspired by the company’s Open Country M/T, while its quieter ride is a nod to Toyo’s best-selling Open Country A/T II. They are American-made at the Toyo Tires factory in Georgia.



Big Whitewall

Vogue Tyre & Rubber Co., Mount Prospect, Illinois, presents the all-new 305/35R24 Custom Built Radial SCT 24-inch tire, the biggest whitewall ever mass-produced with Vogue’s signature gold stripe. The tire is manufactured with an advanced, silica-infused compound for superior traction and responsiveness, as well as a Broad Shoulder Element design for greater handling confidence. Wide, circumferential grooves in the tread provide all-weather traction and better handling in wet conditions.



Mud Terrain Tire

Mickey Thompson Performance Tires & Wheels, Stow, Ohio, presents the new Baja MTZP3 mud terrain tire with a unique silica-reinforced tread compound for longer wear, enhanced wet weather capability and superior cut and chip resistance. Designed to offer rugged styling and reliable performance in a variety of conditions, along with responsive handling on the street, the Baja MTZP3 features siped tread lugs for better traction and stone ejection, and angled shoulder scallops with mud-pocket scoops for increased performance in mud and loose soil.