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Fixed Ops Magazine
February 2007

NITROGEN TIRE INFLATION: NOT IF, BUT WHEN AND HOW

by

Jay Lighter

Ralph Waldo Emerson never worked in the automotive industry, having died before the modern day automobile was invented, but he did coin an expression that still rings true for industry professionals: "Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door." As quaint as Emerson's observation may sound today, it does begin to explain the increased customer traffic at dealerships across America as more of them are converting the air in car and truck tires to nitrogen.

A BETTER FILL

Nitrogen tire inflation isn't new, it has long been the choice of NASCAR teams and the U.S. military, but less expensive generation equipment and consumer acceptance has created a significant profit center in an industry thirsty for new revenue streams. Following the Firestone/Ford fiasco (more on that later), forward-thinking auto pro's are embracing technology that assures tires stay properly inflated, regardless of driver indifference. Want a formula for inspiring customer loyalty? Improve the performance and handling of their ride, extend the tread life of tires, increase fuel efficiency, and require less maintenance, all for around \$40. "I've been in this business for 24 years," said Ken Nelson, the fixed operations director at Capital Ford Lincoln Mercury of Wilmington, NC, "and nitrogen tire inflation is one of the very few things that there are no complaints about. We're converting about 200 customers a month."

Nelson says the transition to nitrogen has been so successful that his dealership now pre-loads the tires of every car on its lot, new and used.

WHERE THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD

Nelson didn't become a nitrogen fan overnight, preferring instead to do his own testing on a friend's work van he knew was driven hard each day. Some 12,000 miles later, tire wear was even and gas mileage increased by 2 miles per gallon. He also had the biggest skeptics -- his own service writers, technicians, and employees -- drive on nitrogen-inflated tires. "That's a hard audience to sell, and I include myself in that group," Nelson said. "But we all came away fully convinced that this was an opportunity to offer customers value, which is important, and safety, which is priceless."

Meanwhile, in Jacksonville, Florida, George Mathis was going through a similar process. The service manager at Duval Ford researched nitrogen alternatives for three months, also including employees in the testing. "Their buy-in was critical to any long-term success our dealership would have recommending conversions to customers," Mathis pointed out.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

While nitrogen fill has become more widely available the last several years, many potential outlets have resisted the movement, citing the capital investment (larger capacity generators can easily cost more than \$10,000) and monthly projections of a limited number of tires serviced. Some nitrogen companies, however, are now offering dealers options to a generator purchase, recommending stored gas in tanks of varying sizes. For smaller car dealerships, as well as tire/auto repair shops and quick service facilities (generally those filling less than 600 tires a month), it is likely more cost effective to travel this route. The only other materials needed -- an inflator, pressure regulator, purity analyzer, assorted hardware and point-of-sale materials -- are often provided by gas suppliers at little or no cost.

Whichever option is chosen, it is important that fixed operations departments have nitrogen capabilities. It may well be mandated in passenger vehicles in the not-too-distant future, as it currently is for aircraft tires, and those

without nitrogen risk losing customers looking to satisfy all their automotive service needs in one location.

CHANGES FOR 2008 MODELS

The Transportation Recall Enhancement, Accountability and Documentation (TREAD) Act requires that by September 1, 2007, all model year 2008 cars and light trucks sold in the United States must have a tire-pressure monitoring system, and many newer models already have a tire pressure warning light. Designed to alert drivers if low pressure in one or more of their tires requires attention, a flaw in the system, as service managers know all too well, is that the warning light will come on in air-filled tires in response to changes in temperature. In colder climates, the problem is particularly acute. "Changes in outdoor temperature will increase or decrease tire pressure by approximately one PSI (pounds per square inch)," says Ford Motor Company Technical Service Engineer Tom McInerney. "If you park your car in a heated garage and it's minus 30 degrees outside, you'll need to add about seven pounds of air to the tires to compensate for the change in temperature."

Nelson, the North Carolina-based fixed operations director, doesn't expect to deal with temperature swings that extreme, but he does hear from clients about their warning light every time the temperature fluctuates. "We got 8-10 calls today," he said on the day we spoke. "It was mild earlier before going down to 28 degrees. Customers who inflate with nitrogen don't have nearly the problem since the gas maintains optimal tire pressure so much better."

PURITY AND PERFORMANCE

After completing their research and testing, the deciding factor for both Nelson and Mathis in choosing between companies offering nitrogen was an understanding that the benefits of nitrogen are greatly minimized, if not completely lost, on tires that don't contain at least 95% pure nitrogen. "For that reason, we went with the NitroFill program," said Nelson. "They were the only ones that consistently exceeded the minimum standard and their purging and filtering process duplicates results. Other systems we tested were producing in-tire nitrogen purity in the low 90s."

Nelson admits to being on the nitrogen “bandwagon” and, working at a Ford dealership, laments that the technology wasn’t as widespread in 2000 when Firestone treads began separating from the tire core on his company’s Explorer model. “You can’t help but think that if some of those tires were properly inflated with nitrogen, maybe we could have prevented a few of those tragedies.”

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