

# Super service, advertising spells ‘Succe\$\$’ for NAPA in Falls

**Frank Parlato**

The National Automotive Parts Association, or NAPA, was founded in 1925. Today, the company distributes parts to 6,000 corporately and independently owned auto parts stores. Among these is the NAPA store in Niagara Falls, which opened in 1927.

Last week, I went on a tour of the store. As I watched customers roll in and out, cash registers ringing, I noticed the staff was comprised of middle-aged men. They joked and quipped with the customers and yet there was plenty of asking of advice by customers and giving of advice by the mature looking men who worked at the counter. I was impressed to hear the energetic way the men at the counter explained various options to customers.

Our marketing director, Michelle Reeb, was already here and she came from the behind the counter with store manager Tom Becker.

When I told him I was surprised to find his counter clerks were mature men, not young, minimum-wage boys, he told me he had calculated recently that he and his 15 clerks have more than 300 years of experience in automotive parts.

This was their career.

It soon became apparent that Becker was an enthusiast. In fact, I never saw a man wax poetic on wiper blades before. He told me about blade construction, something I admit I never once considered. He spoke of the way it fits the windshield, the tension, life span, level of wiping, range in size. Price. Then he turned to brakes.

“Generally speaking, the more you spend, the longer they last,” he said.

“They make different quality brakes?” I said out loud.

Becker led us through the large store. It was jam-packed with parts neatly laid on every shelf, one shelf above the other, leading up to the very top of the 20-foot high ceilings.

“We try to have as much inventory in the store as possible,” he said. “That is one of the secrets to our success.”

As we continued our tour, Becker showed us three expansions to the store’s footprint, all accomplished since he became manager 15 years ago.

“Our sales have gone up considerably,” he said. “All areas of the business have expanded. In Niagara Falls, if you are going to grow, you have to get into things you did not do before.”

As an example of this, he showed me a new line of auto paints, where they match with precision the color and the style of any paint on almost



*Tom Becker offers super service*

any year or model of car.

As he explained how it works, it struck me that Becker had an uncanny resemblance to Clark Kent, a mild-mannered newspaper reporter alleged to have a hidden life as a super hero whose true identity was unknown, but occasionally suspected.

For a moment, I began to become suspicious, especially when Becker claimed he was 62.

I had taken him for a man in his early 40’s.

Michelle admitted the resemblance, and said the Reporter should do an investigation. Then she began to speak about her favorite topic: advertising.

“NAPA does one very smart thing,” she said. “They advertise a lot.”

“In the Reporter, especially,” Becker said.

“Would you say the Reporter ads work,” Michelle asked.

“Oh, it does very definitely,” Becker said. “We were talking about the fact that we ran a coupon sale in the month of September and we had about a 12 percent sale increase in net dollars even though we were selling at a lesser price. We sold more because of the coupon and the Reporter was our local advertising. We were in the Reporter all four weeks in September and it was very successful.”

When we got to where they keep the brakes, Becker took two out of their boxes and showed them to me. Pointing to one, he said, “The little bit of edging in this brand makes it a quieter pad. Also, the material is a ceramic content. This one is merely semi-metallic. It makes more dust when braking.”

What is the price difference?

“\$60 for a set, versus \$20. But the better pad will last two or three years, even if you are an aggressive driver, versus maybe one year with the lesser priced one. But there is something else. When you talk about stopping, you have to talk about distance. If a little kid jumps out in front of you, there is a real benefit to having a better quality brake than a cheaper one. This pad (pointing to the less expensive brake) will take longer to stop with the same amount of force than the better brand. The better pad could save a life.”

In a depressed and shrinking market called Niagara Falls, where businesses are closing and others are constantly whining about their troubles, Becker’s store is growing.

“It’s nice to turn the key in the door,” he said, “and know that you are going to probably help someone. People do not come in because they want to buy something neat for themselves. They come in because their car is broken. I can look at someone and see

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**The sign of life is strength and growth**



*Tom Becker look-alike, Clark Kent*

their distress. Sometimes they don’t have the money that they need, but if you can do what you got to do to help them get what they need to get on with their business, then you got a customer for a long time. If you just look at people like dollar bills, then you are not going to have a repetitive clientele. If you are trying to help people first, then you get customers.”

Kent, or for that matter even Superman, could not have said it any better.

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TO BE WEALTHY!  
AT LEAST I THINK SO...**



**MAYBE IT’S TIME TO  
START TELLING THE WORLD  
WHY YOUR BUSINESS  
REALLY IS BETTER THAN  
THE COMPETITION.  
TELL IT WITH AN AD IN  
THE NIAGARA  
FALLS REPORTER**

**I KNOW NOBODY WHO EVER  
MADE A LOT WITHOUT SPENDING  
AT LEAST A LITTLE  
CONTACT ME. TOGETHER WE  
CAN CREATE A PLAN TO GET  
YOU NEW BUSINESS  
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