



Program Spotlight: Auto-Lab Complete Car Care Centers

by Peter Suci

For nearly 30 years, Auto-Lab has been a trusted brand in Michigan and far beyond. It has achieved this by staying true to its vision of providing an alternative to the automotive dealership service center. The very first shop opened in 1987 as Auto-Lab Diagnostic & Complete Automotive Repair, and it had the unique distinction of acquiring a Sun Diagnostic System.

That was a significant turn of events as it was the first time an independent automotive repair shop was able to purchase this powerful tool. It paved the way for what would become a significant regional franchise operation.

From this early success the brand expanded quickly throughout the Great Lakes State, and in 1988 the Auto-Lab brand was first franchised. Auto-Lab Diagnostic & Complete Automotive Repair quickly filled the need in the automotive repair industry for sophisticated diagnostic assessment of the accelerating technology that was being used to drive the operating systems of automobiles.

“At the time, the dealers had a stranglehold on the aftermarket shops when it came to offering these services,” said Steve

Wilson, president and COO of Auto-Lab. “Cars were becoming complicated, and there were few options for most drivers.”

Auto-Lab was uniquely positioned in the late 1980s, and its founders saw the sudden advances in automotive technology were beginning to dilute the ability of the traditional mechanic to be able to access and repair cars in a timely and, more importantly, accurate manner. From this insight, it isn’t hard to see how Auto-Lab built its business, and even trademarked a motto that has remained, “We test...no guess.”

Filling the Need for an Aftermarket Alternative

A further big break came for the company in the early 1980s when the federal government recognized OEMs had an advantage — practically a monopoly by some accounts — by having access to much of the high-tech diagnostic equipment on the market at the time. The government passed a series of regulations that required OEMs to share the specifications of that technology and create a fair market for competition, and as a result, an entire industry of diagnostic equipment manufacturers evolved.

In the two-and-a-half decades that have followed, cars have only gotten more technical. Auto-Lab has kept pace throughout, notably by focusing on the diagnostic testing and preventive maintenance. At the same time, the brand has evolved into a cost-effective and convenient alternative for drivers whose only other option might be a trip to the dealership.

“The tech has continued to evolve, but we’ve evolved with it,” added Wilson, who became president and COO in 2006, after holding senior executive positions with Penske Auto Centers and Big O Tires. “We continue to work with vendor partners to get the latest diagnostic tools that are also used by the OEMs. This has allowed us to stay on the cutting edge.”

One notable transformation for the brand came in 2006 when the company’s name — but not its core service — changed. It became Auto-Lab Complete Car Care Centers to address added services customers can expect.

“We changed the brand’s name as we recognized there was a need to show we have a broader stroke in automotive service than just diagnostic,” Wilson explained.

“We may do so much more at this time, but we are still the leader in aftermarket diagnostics.”

Even as cars have gotten more technical, Auto-Lab has strived to stay on top of the latest advances in domestic and foreign vehicles. This is especially important as the brand has expanded beyond Michigan, the traditional backyard of the “Big Three” American automakers.

“We’re seeing that no matter where your car came from, it can take a while to get into the dealer, and unlike a dealer that focuses on one brand, we have to be on top of it all the time,” Wilson said. “At the same time, our owner/operators have an advantage in that we can provide a quality service that is equal to anything at the dealer and at a fair and reasonable price point.”

This has also been important for the company, as many drivers continue to hold on to their cars much longer these days. This has been good news for Auto-Lab, as it means more opportunities to service these vehicles, but it also helps with the relationship building.

“The average age of a car in the Midwest is now 11.5-12 years,” Wilson added. “With the economic downturn in 2008, people have kept their cars even longer. Our customers know they can bring their cars in and we’ll treat them right, and when it comes time to buy a new car, they can come back to Auto-Lab.”

One advantage Auto-Lab also provides is in maintaining records on each vehicle in addition to its actual maintenance.

“We do our 32-point inspection program on each car, and this is so customers

have an opportunity to know that the vehicle was checked out,” Wilson said. “This can be helpful when it comes time to sell that vehicle, too. With our proprietary point-of-sale system and partnership with Carfax, customer information is easily accessible. After every service, customer information is automatically updated to reflect recent service completed.”

Wilson also added that to ensure customers know they are covered, every car serviced is backed by a 12-month, 12,000-mile parts and labor warranty. Later this year, this policy will be doubled to a 24-month, 24,000-mile parts and labor warranty.

Dealing with the Digital Age

It’s not only advances under the hood that have posed a challenge for the entire automotive service industry; the Internet has been both a blessing and a curse for many operators. Auto-Lab has sought to stay in check with it every step of the way.

This has included an updated website that provides crucial information for customers, and soon the brand will enter the mobile world, as well.

“We have tried to take the business model and expand it to the Internet for online appointments,” Wilson said. “In many ways, this industry is recession-proof — as noted by the fact that people keep their

cars longer in down times — but it can be Internet-proof, as well. Unlike big box retailers that saw Amazon take away their business, this industry can’t export work to other countries, and customers can’t go to the Internet to get their cars serviced. They need businesses, such as Auto-Lab, and we need them.”

How customers interact with businesses in the Internet age, however, is changing, and Auto-Lab has successfully rolled with the times and will continue to do so.

“We have our solid reputation, but we’re building on it as we expand to social media,” Wilson explained. “We will launch an app for Apple’s iOS and Google’s Android. It will offer the ability to not only help market to customers, but also allow our customers to track vehicle maintenance records and even contact stores. It is just another way we want to help our customers.”

Market Expansion

As the brand was born in Michigan and headquartered in Auburn Hills, an hour north of Detroit, the company has seen expansion throughout much of the Midwest, but far beyond, as well. Today there are 26 franchise locations, with 20 in Michigan, along with one in Indiana and another in Iowa. The reach of Auto-Lab has gone as far south as Florida, where there are two locations, and in June of 2015, Auto-Lab



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expanded to Texas, where there are now two locations in the greater-Houston area.

"We are always looking at new opportunities," Wilson said. "We're in the practical Midwest, but we also have a triangle to Florida and now Texas. We're vetting another location down in Texas and another in Ohio."

Auto-Lab will continue to seek out opportunities that present themselves, and Wilson added most of the growth will continue to come in that triangle. The pace of future expansion will also likely pick up as well. Wilson said the goal is to have 60 to 70 locations by 2021 — a nearly triple increase for the brand.

"We will continue to look at the viable locations that serve our customers," Wilson said. "The story of Auto-Lab is the people. We think of it as family, so when we talk to people who may be interested in getting involved, we want to know that they are interested in helping people."

Although being a "car guy" may help, and Auto-Lab is known for employing those who have a love of the automobile, its owner/operators need not be mechanics.

"They need to know how to run a business and make it a success," Wilson explained. "You have to work day-in and day-out to raise a family, while giving back to the community in the process. There is more to it, as well; it is taking care of customers on a daily basis."

This also includes giving back, something the corporate office encourages and supports. This can include programs such as involvement of the Houston-based Communitas Auto Group LLC (Auto-Lab Texas) campaign to provide honest and reliable auto repair at an affordable price, while last summer the Auto-Lab Texas Gleannloch Farms location donated 10 percent of their proceeds to the Klein Volunteer Fire Department and the Cypress Creek EMS.

"We like to see our owners involved in giveback programs," Wilson said. "It is a way to help those who are less fortunate, and it is the right thing to do. We know many of our owner/operators are not only entrepreneurs at heart, but they also want to be involved with their communities and be good stewards, which means giving back."

Because of programs such as these, today the company is proud of its network of owner/operators and continues to ensure each owner maintains that relationship with the customers and the corporate office. This remains true even as the brand continues its expansion.

"The most important thing to remember is no matter how fast or slow we expand, we really build our reputation one customer at a time," Wilson said. "We want owner/operators who are committed to taking care of business." 💧