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PRESENT VEHICLES!

CASE STUDY

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Operation Safedrive vehicle inspections benefit everyone, including the parking department.

By Don Walter

When was the last time your parking department was cheered? Last fall, hundreds of grateful University of Georgia (UGA) students lined up to have their vehicles inspected to help them get home safely for the Thanksgiving holiday. When interviewed, many of these happily smiling students actually screamed into the video camera, "We love UGA Parking Services!"

What parking customers want at a university is reserved parking next to the door of their classroom. What they usually get is parking that's far away and too expensive. The difference between what the customer wants and what he or she actually gets is known as customer sacrifice. To be satisfied, customers must be compensated in some way for that sacrifice. At UGA, this compensation comes in the form of clean, safe, and well-organized parking areas, and friendly and helpful service. It also comes through award-winning, innovate programs such as Operation Safedrive, which provides free vehicle inspections for UGA community members before they head home for break.

Background

Many UGA Parking Services employees are parents of college-age children. They know their children do not have the time, knowledge, or inclination to make sure their vehicles are always operating in a safe and efficient manner. Parents also know the anxiety of having children at college, often far away from home, and they especially know the worry of having relatively inexperienced vehicle operators drive home for holidays and school breaks. Operation Safedrive was born from these concerns and has been conducted for three years at UGA, right before the fall/Thanksgiving break and

Students were happy to have their vehicles inspected before break.

Bike inspections are also a popular part of Operation Safedrive

sometimes before spring break.

Safedrive is a free vehicle inspection event for students, faculty, and staff. Professional mechanics top off fluids (if possible), check belts/blades, pressurize tires, and do a quick visual inspection of vehicles. Those mechanics have seen everything from five pounds of pressure in tires, to no hood latch on a vehicle (the hood would have flown off at high speed), to almost no brake fluid, to a squirrel's nest on top of the engine. "You saved my life!" writes a staff member whose inspection revealed several problems with her vehicle. "I fixed everything the same day so I could travel to Atlanta the next day. Everyone was so nice, and I couldn't believe how quick and efficient the process was, not to mention how thorough the check was. I recommend it to every employee I know."

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A student sums it up: "I don't drive my car that much. I wanted to make sure she was running right. I have an 11-hour drive to Philadelphia, so this is great!"

In addition to identifying immediate problems, Operation Safedrive has saved customers money by identifying needed maintenance before the problems became magnified. Mechanics have seen pure water used as radiator fluid, cracked radiators, tires out of balance or alignment, little or very old engine oil, and extremely worn belts.

Students, faculty, and staff who participate also learn something about their vehicles. "I don't know how to open the hood," one student confessed to the mechanic. The mechanics become teachers to many who have never looked inside their engine compartments.

Planning and Execution

The detailed planning and execution that goes into each Operation Safedrive inspection is akin to a military operation. Many military logistics principles go into the preparation for the occasions.

The "long pole in the tent," or the segment of the operation that holds everything up, is inflation of the tires; this takes time, manpower, and air compressors. It also took some trial and error to get going. The first year Safedrive was conducted, light duty electric air compressors were used; unfortunately, they soon broke. The second year, heavy duty electric compressors were used with long extension cords to the power source. The extension cords built up electrical impedance and melted. The third year, heavy duty electric compressors were plugged directly into the source of electricity, which finally worked. Two compressors will

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handle about 200 car inspections per hour (the actual rate of cars seen at UGA).

"Overkill" is another term that applies to Operation Safedrive, meaning the use of excessive force (a nuclear land mine would be a military example). For our purposes, overkill is defined as using many more employees than would probably be needed. Employees are needed to direct traffic, check turn signals and lights, hand mechanics fluids, record inspection results, inflate tires, wash windshields, spell each other on breaks, and many other duties.

About 20 employees are required to handle a flow of 200 cars per hour, so UGA uses 30 employees, just to be on the safe side. These extra bodies have proven very valuable when unforeseen circumstances develop.

Little's Law is another logistical principle that applies to Operation Safedrive (it's also a very powerful planning tool for the parking industry). The long-term average number of customers in a stable system L is equal to the long-term average effective arrival rate, λ, multiplied by the average time a customer spends in the system, W; or expressed algebraically: $L = \lambda W$. Also algebraically, $W = L/\lambda$. So, if the customer spends 15 minutes (.25 hour) going through the inspection (W), and the arrival rate of vehicles is 200 per hour (λ), then the number of cars in the inspection lines will be 50 (L). Little's Law is very useful for planning our staging areas, and for planning "what if" scenarios.

Finally, "never overestimate your allies" is an important military principle we apply to Safedrive. It is essential to find the most reputable mechanics available. UGA uses a combination of mechanics from University Campus Transit and Five Star Automotive, a local, long-standing, highly respected, family-run business. "My car is good to go? Great!" said a grateful young woman at one of our events. "Where I usually take the car, the mechanic always seems to find something wrong that costs me money," she said.

Bells and Whistles

Operation Safedrive has become a popular and appreciated program at UGA. A byproduct of Safedrive is positive publicity that enforces the image that UGA Parking Services is a caring, helpful, and concerned organization (it's really true!). Safedrive events always find a prominent place in local newspapers and campus press.

Parents appreciate that the university cares for their children and is concerned for their safety. As one parent puts it, "If Parking Services is so caring and concerned, just think how well the rest of the university is going to treat my child."

Safedrive has become so prized and valuable an event that other organizations want to be a part of it. UGA Food Services provides each Safedrive participant with a coupon for a free Chick-Fil-A chicken sandwich or biscuit at the restaurant's campus location. The UGA Bookstore provides free giveaways that have included UGA logo car floor mats and license plate holders. Local businesses give away free car washes and other lagniappes. And the UGA Office of Sustainability provides free bicycle safety inspections (conducted by reputable bike shop owners) in conjunction with Safedrive. "It's mostly routine stuff," said a bike inspector, but like the auto mechanics, the bike inspectors found dangerous problems as well. One bike rider relates, "The more that people ride bikes around town and on campus, the better. The fact that UGA wants bike riders to be safe is important."

There are tremendous benefits to events such as Safedrive in terms of safety, goodwill, and positive publicity. However, planning and executing a vehicle inspection program is not for the faint of heart. There is a lot that can go wrong. Good planning, decisions, and execution comes from experience. And experience come from bad planning, decisions, and execution. UGA has learned and improved each time it has conducted vehicle safety checks.

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