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'Not many people are doing it': Nitrogen plays key role in Gem City Tire's fleet service

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Big trucking fleets "want to try the new thing," says Gem City Tire President Jeff Lecklider. "They're impressed that the 'truck tire guys' have nitrogen."

Gem City Tire's tag line is "Your Total Tire Management Partner." That's not just a lot of hot air.

The Dayton, Ohio-based commercial tire dealership sells more than medium truck tires and retreads.

It also offers truck alignments and oil changes, tire lifecycle tracking, wheel refinishing, DOT inspections and -- in an effort to provide fleets with yet another valuable service -- nitrogen inflation for truck tires.

"We feel we have the best tires," says Gem City President Jeff Lecklider. "We have the highest quality retreads. So what's next?"

"Everybody has a deal of the day. We're trying to separate ourselves from our competitors who also have good tires and good service."

If feedback from customers is any indication, Lecklider and his employees are succeeding in that regard.

Built-in service

Gem City started filling truck tires with nitrogen two years ago. The service is becoming popular on the retail tire side, "but commercially, I think it's somewhat of a secret."

No other commercial dealership in his region offers the service, according to Lecklider.

(Gem City has six locations in Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky.) Gem City doesn't charge for nitrogen, opting to offer the service as a value-added feature.

"The trucking fleets -- with the rising cost of fuel and tires -- are kind of choking on any additional expense.

"We're trying to do the best job we can of taking the price of the tire out of the equation. It's nitrogen,

it's alignment, it's tire tracking -- all of those extra things we can do for (customers) that gets them to overlook the sticker shock of tires."

Gem City uses Parker Hannifin inflation equipment. It pre-mounts 150 to 200 truck tires a day at its Dayton location. All of those tires are filled with nitrogen.

The dealership uses a single generator to inflate up to eight truck tires at a time.

Parker Hannifin worked with Gem City to determine what kind of equipment they would need.

"We can't have a little nitrogen machine that fits under the desk," says Lecklider. "Our machine is taller than I am."

Gem City uses regulators on each of its inflation cages, plus emergency shut-off valves.

Installation of machinery and piping was a big investment. "We're going to hang on before we roll out a (machine) to every single location we have."

However, from a labor perspective, there's really no difference between consumer tire inflation and truck tire inflation, he explains.

"We had to make sure of that because we inflate so many tires at one time. We didn't want to offer a value-added service at a big labor expense to us." Nitrogen generator maintenance has been minimal. "Our air compressors seem to take more maintenance!"

All the latest

Gem City encourages fleets to inflate trailer tires with nitrogen since they are the "least-maintained" wheel position, according to Lecklider, who says there are twice as many trailers out there as tractors.

"The highest maintained wheel position is the steer tire. The driver definitely looks at his steer tires and then his drive tires and then typically gets in his truck and goes."

Lecklider has seen trailer tires go up to six months between inflation pressure checks!

"If there's anything we can do to maintain proper pressure in those tires over that extended length of time, we're going to do it."

So far nitrogen inflation has been a relatively easy sell to fleet managers.

"They had read about it, they had heard about it."

Lowered rolling resistance - which translates into fuel savings -- is the biggest benefit of nitrogen that Gem City promotes.

"You're going to have less rolling resistance, so that means less fuel consumption."

Pressure retention is another selling point.

"Nitrogen holds its pressure better than air does. Everyone has had their car in a garage for weeks and the air leaks out of the tires to a certain point. So they know there might be some fruit to this.

"The big fleets expect you to give them the latest technology. They're all trying to beat the next guy."

Gem City also uses inflation to lessen the "sticker shock" that fleets sometimes experience when buying new tires.

"Times are difficult right now," says Lecklider. "We seem to be struggling with selling our most premium products -- not because of quality but because of sticker shock."

Gem City positions the Goodyear brand as its top tier offering. Dunlop and Kelly truck tires make up the dealership's middle offerings. Goodyear's Steelmark line is Gem City's entry-level truck tire.

"Our premium products are the best they've ever been. Our steer and drive tires are the best they've been in the 20 years I've been in the business. We're seeing record mileage to removals. But they're not \$250 anymore; they're \$350.

"We're having to sell more of the value-added stuff than ever before."

Up next

Next on Gem City's agenda is selling small and mid-level fleets on the benefits of nitrogen inflation.

"The more prominent fleets are talking about nitrogen, but the small to medium-sized fleets at the local level... it's not on the radar screen for them. Small fleets aren't going to the trade shows; they don't have the staff for it. They rely on us."

Gem City plans to distribute brochures about nitrogen.

Lecklider also would like to run tests with fleets in order to generate data that can be used as a marketing tool with a possible goal of eventually charging for the service.

In isolated cases, the dealership has charged small owner-operators for nitrogen inflation at \$5 to \$8 a tire.

Going to fleet yards and filling stationary tires with nitrogen also "is on the drawing board."

As busy as fleets are these days, Lecklider believes he could sell that service at a profitable margin. "I'm not sure how much we could charge for it. But that could be reflected in the hourly rate that we charge.

"I'm not really concerned about where the funds come from, as long as they come."

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