

Marketing Machine

Breaking down the bold marketing campaign that catapulted Zara's Collision Center into the potlight.

BRITT JOHNSEN



In 1999, Brad Zara's business hit a sales plateau.

He had grown the Springfield, Ill., shop from scratch since launching it in 1987. For the first 10 years all of his business came from word-of-mouth—and it worked. Zara's Collision Center started as a one-man show, and within a year, he hired four technicians and moved to a new and larger location. By 1995, sales had tripled and staff grew to 24 employees.

But after a decade in business, things slowed. Zara knew he needed to do something different to revive the momentum, so he decided to get aggressive about marketing, even hiring a full-time staffer to manage his marketing efforts.

Since then, a \$50,000-a-year billboard campaign, as well as \$100,000 plus time and energy given to local boards and nonprofits, have contributed to renewed business growth. Zara's wife, Julie Zara, has also helped drive the company's business development and marketing efforts.

About Zara's Collision Center:

Location: Springfield, Ill.

Today, Zara's Collision Center generates \$4.5 million in revenue each year. The shop has also won recognition from local and national organizations for its community involvement and business practices, which have also served as effective marketing tools.

Square feet of facility: 16,000

Employees: 26

Annual estimated revenue: \$4.5 million

Percent of DRP work: 70

CSI score: 98.3

Website: zarascollision.com

“People really do want to do business with somebody who cares,” Brad Zara says.

Out With the Old

Julie Zara left her teaching career in 2004 to help grow her shop. She and Brad Zara knew they wanted to grow their business, and they knew they needed to develop a strong marketing campaign to do that. They just didn’t know where to start.

“Neither one of us were qualified to make good decisions in that area,” Brad Zara says.

They also knew that what they were doing wasn’t working. They worked with newspaper, radio and billboard advertisers whose jobs were, as Brad puts it, to sell ads. But the billboards they put up occasionally, for example, weren’t reaping results.

They weren’t that clever or effective. And yet all of the advertising representatives

claimed that their medium was the best way to boost business.

So when the Zaras heard about a local ad agency that took a fresher approach to advertising, they decided to give it a shot.

“When you deal with a professional marketing company, they guide you. You don’t have to tell them, ‘Here’s what I want specifically for an advertisement.’ You tell them, ‘Here’s what I want to achieve.’ Then they guide you,” Brad says.

The agency completed a full market study, which included the number of licensed vehicles in the county, a full list of insurance agents in the market area, and information about dollars spent per year on collision repair in the market. The Zaras had done a similar market study themselves, and knew that what the agency was presenting was credible.

“We were really impressed with the extensive market research they did,” he says.

A Billboard Boom

The ad company created and pitched to Zara’s a full marketing campaign, which included new billboards—messages the community would not forget.

The creative, clever campaign revolved around short and funny messages about collision repair. One ad, for example, shows a tree with five hash marks. Next to it reads, “Deer Brag Too!” Another says “%\$@#! (French for Deer)” and another has a picture of a crinkled car and destroyed trunk. The message next to it reads, “Junk in the trunk?”

The campaign costs nearly \$50,000 per year for four billboards in high-traffic thoroughfares in Springfield. Brad Zara says that is money well spent; he hears about the billboards on an almost daily basis. Recently a customer came into the shop and said that when the shop changes its billboard to a new message—which they do four times a year—she stops on the roadside to snap a picture and send to her friends.



“Everyone recognized and talked about them, which is why we continue to do them,” Brad says. “In all honesty, it’s just one of those things that we hear about them daily. We’re almost known more for the billboards than we are for the body shop.”

The entire marketing campaign, which also included social media efforts and print advertising, costs nearly \$70,000 annually, Brad Zara says. They choose different marketing avenues depending on the audience they want to target. For example, it costs

\$211 to advertise in Springfieldmoms.org; the community website for moms is a perfect place to let mothers know they offer child seat safety inspections, Brad Zara says. The Zaras also have deep community ties because they grew up in the area, so advertising in the local newspaper keeps their business a household name.

It took awhile to see positive results from the campaign, but the Zaras knew it would happen based on their research and from various professional opinions. During the second year of marketing with the local ad agency, they saw an increase in business of roughly \$500,000—a nearly 20 percent spike.

Julie Zara says it's working so well that they plan to stay consistent with the marketing they have in place right now.

"Once you're out of sight, you're out of mind," she says.



Marketing Through Community Service

Giving back to the community has been important to Zara's Collision Center since the beginning and it also serves as a strong marketing tactic.

Between Brad and Julie Zara, as well as their staff, the business is represented in 36 different local and national organizations. They give \$100,000 in cash to charities each year, plus time and energy to nonprofits, and they also participate in AkzoNobel's Benevolence Program, which allows them to refurbish a car and give it away to someone in the community.

"You get back more than what you give," says Julie Zara, whose primary role is in marketing, largely the community involvement aspect of it. For example, she is the board president of the local homeless shelter for women and children. "Our intentions are not to give or volunteer so we can get more business. We always have given because we have a heart for it. Brad has fixed cars for free just because that's who he is. He says, 'God's blessed me with this ability, so I want to help people in need.'"

In turn, these intentions have built relationships and increased business. In other words, it's another way of marketing, but with many other benefits for both Zara's and the community.

Brad Zara explains that even though they give to various organizations, he doesn't measure the return on investment (ROI) for the contributions. The notion that you receive more when you give is real and tangible for the Zaras.

"I think people are missing the boat by only looking at everything from that conventional, scientific type of thinking," says Brad Zara, who has also spent time with philanthropic business people such as paint distributors. "They definitely helped me to understand that it is our obligation as business



owners to help those in need. It's not a choice. It's absolutely an obligation."

It's gratifying to see what can happen when you give, he says.

"More than just the giving, it's the outcome of what can happen from that. Seeing people go from the lowest point in their lives, and then eventually progress into a better place because of the assistance, it's amazing. We've been very, very fortunate to see some success stories that just inspire you," he says.

Planning for the Future

Zara's has been growing steadily since the couple restructured the shop's marketing efforts.

Marketing Budget Breakdown

Here's a closer look at how much Zara's Collision Center spent on marketing in 2012:



Four billboards: **\$50,400**



Six buses: **\$12,052**



Local newspaper: **\$2,492**



Marketing and media planning: **\$1,200**



Online advertising: **\$2,611**

- Springfieldmoms.org: **\$211**

- Facebook landing page: **\$800**

- Advertising agency services: **\$1,600**

Total marketing expense: \$71,366

So what's next?

"I told our team that hopefully Zara's will be up and going the next 25 years," Brad Zara says.

He's working on succession planning right now. In the next 10 years, he can see himself doing consulting for the collision industry. He loves learning new ideas and processes, and implementing them in the shop.

"I think one thing that I so admire about Brad is that his goals and vision and mission have always remained the same: Great customer service and just really doing a quality job," Julie Zara says. "It's not always about making money; it's about making sure customers are happy and satisfied."

But before external customers are happy, internal customers must be happy. She says her husband believes in helping workers feel that sense of self worth that comes from a job well done, rather than simply having a job to get paid. That deep sense of satisfaction is then

carried over into their personal lives, and creates a better work environment—perhaps the best marketing strategy a shop can have.

Julie Zara says she knows the shop is doing something right because the employees are throwing a party for the Zaras to celebrate 25 years in business.

"How many people want to throw the boss a party?" she says.