

PUT YOUR SHOP AT YOUR CUSTOMERS' FINGERTIPS

BY SARAH M. KENNEDY

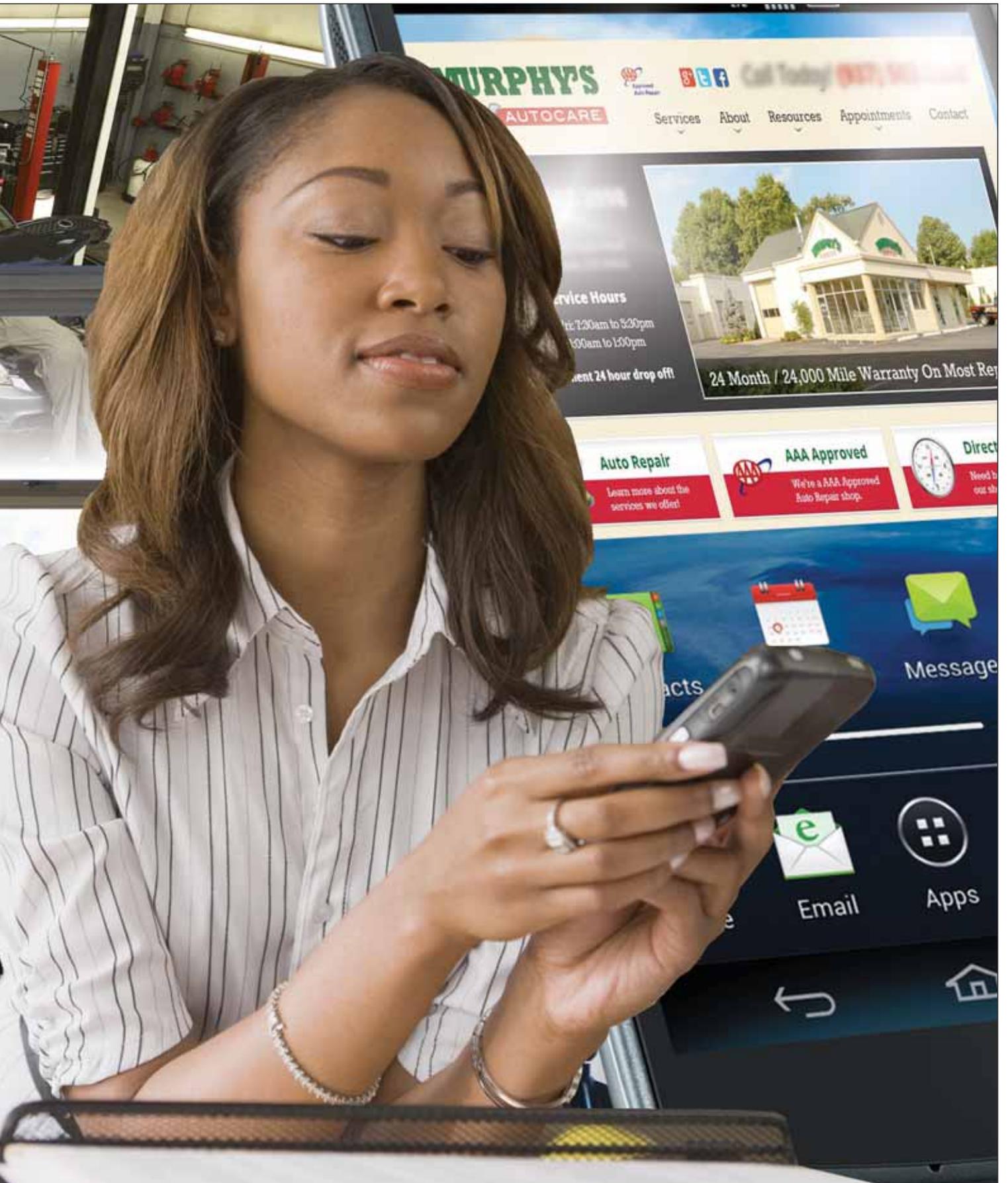
Mobile technology offers new and convenient ways for your customers to connect with your business. Perhaps more importantly, it also provides you with an effective way to keep your bays filled with their vehicles.

Making the assumption that most shop owners with an active customer base have something of a website, it's time to discuss adapting our basic internet presence for today's consumers. If you don't have a website, or don't have a nice, well-kept site, be aware of at least one major consequence (there are several): Without a website, no online passers-by or consumers dissatisfied with their current repair facility will find you outside of a direct referral. In fact, even a lot of referrals may want to check you out online before making a phone call.

Consider how a potential customer would look for you when he's in sudden need for auto service and cannot or will not return to his previous facility. Then envision a regular customer realizing he should schedule an appoint-



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ment, or his bringing your name up in a referral situation.

In all of these cases, how would

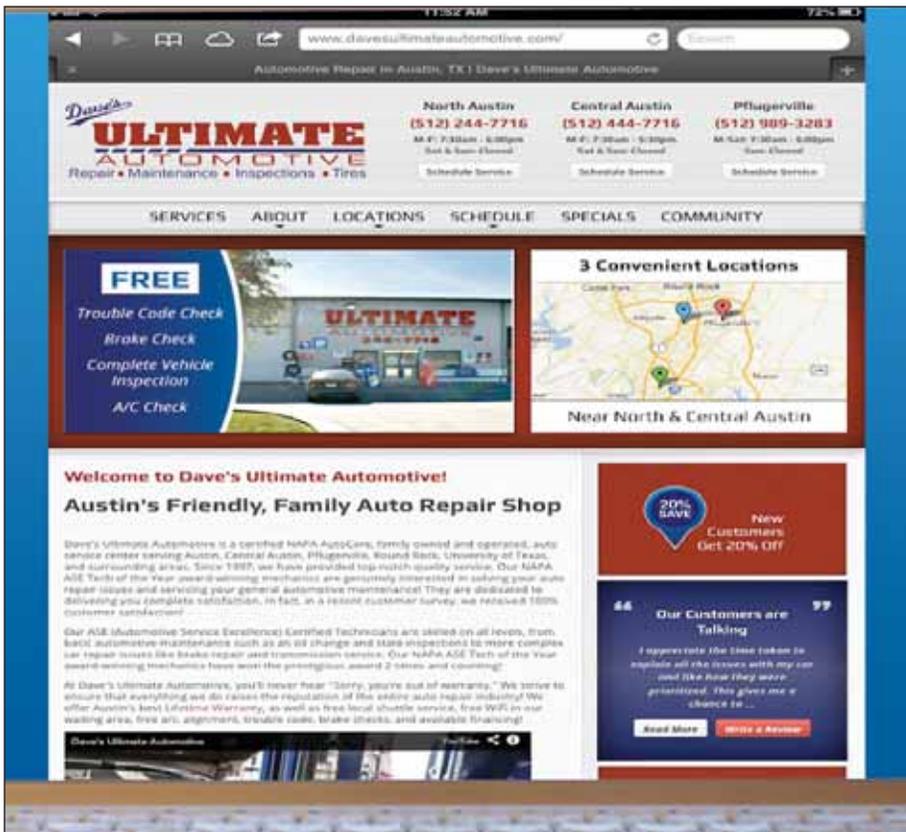
these people quickly access you? Today's consumers are most likely pulling out their smartphones and

searching the terms "Auto Repair, Your City," or (if they're already familiar with you) they would search your shop's name.

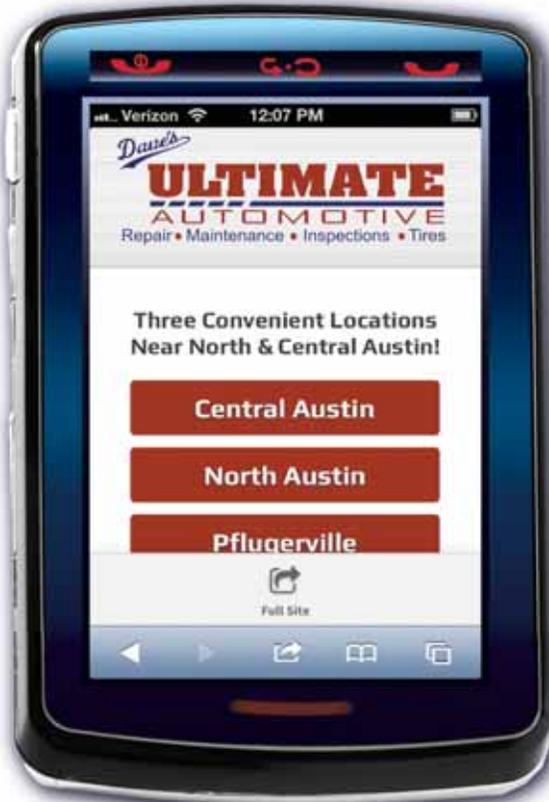
According to International Data Corporation (IDC), a market intelligence and consumer technology research group, mobile-based internet use has already outpaced desktop technology consumption and will continue to do so. Try looking at your shop's website from a tablet or smartphone. Are your facility's name, address and phone number clearly displayed and central to the page? Do you need to scroll left and right and up and down to really see what's on the site? Is the font size so small you need to zoom in to read and click links? If your shop's website doesn't measure up in these areas, something must change or people will not have the patience for your site, and therefore no patience for getting to know what you really have to offer—affordably dependable car repair and service.

What Are the Options?

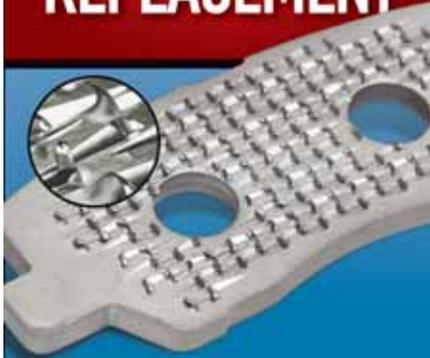
In addition to engaging in search engine optimization (SEO) and Google+ and/or Facebook pages, there are two



Above: The full-version website for Dave's Ultimate Automotive has all the dazzling features meant for desktop and tablet browsing. **Right:** The mobile site created for Dave's shop touts the shop's three locations. It uses clear, large-font buttons for "thumb-friendly" use. **Far Right:** After the user clicks on a location, the mobile site gives options to call, schedule a service appointment and find directions to Dave's shop.



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commonly talked-about platforms available for shops wanting to connect with customers specifically using mobile devices: downloadable applications and mobile-friendly websites.

Many smart device users download individual applications meant to make their lives easier. Whether it's mobile banking, cataloging their favorite music or keeping in touch with friends, these applications have a very honed-in, specific purpose. A downloadable app for an auto repair facility has some interesting capabilities. It can help customers access their vehicle's service history, schedule appointments and e-mail questions to you with easy-to-use buttons. Customers can see coupons or special messages directly from you through "push" notifications that show up on the application's entry-way button or in the form of a text message. In a word, it's a tool for your customers to track their specific activity with your shop.

"They are designed more for customers to gather data for and about themselves and their auto repair needs and history," explained Danny Sanchez, founder and owner of Auto Shop Solutions, an internet marketing agency focused on automotive professionals. Shop owners who go this route, Sanchez warned, should realize that unless customers are using them at least once a month, the app will soon be pushed to the back of their app menus, and eventually removed.

"We had one client who had over five hundred of his customers download his customized shop application, but within three or four months the majority of these customers had already deleted it," Sanchez said.

Overall, apps look neat and are easy to use once they're downloaded, but your customers may not feel the need to have something so specific at their fingertips. After all, you keep their service history on file and can

easily schedule them in and answer their questions in a quick phone call. Additionally, *potential* customers don't know you have a downloadable app, so the possibility of using this type of mobile technology for general advertising is out of the question.

Sanchez is fervent in his belief that in 2014 and beyond, business owners should opt for a more flexible mobile technology to engage with consumers—the mobile-friendly website. When a mobile site is created, anyone using a tablet or smartphone to access your general website will automatically be redirected to the device-friendly version.

"Mobile sites have easy buttons to dial your number, e-mail a service advisor and connect directions to the



Above: This is the first mobile site created for Murphy's Autocare. Basic buttons and a very readable font make navigating a cinch. **Top right:** This SEO advertisement was created for Murphy's Autocare to direct potential AAA customers to the shop. **Right:** The second mobile site for Murphy's Autocare spotlights the fact that the shop is an AAA-approved facility.

user's GPS application; they are what we call 'thumb-friendly,'" said Sanchez. They're also somewhat preferred by Google over a full version, as Google is



very aware of the number of mobile gadgets used over desktops. So when someone searches for a shop with a smart device, according to Sanchez, "Google will automatically promote you more."

Dave Erb, owner of Dave's Ultimate Automotive in Austin, TX, chose a mobile-friendly site because he didn't want his customers to feel like they were spending unnecessary time with their shop on a digital level.

"We don't want to have to convince people to take the time to download something. A mobile-ready option will immediately recognize any smart device trying to access it and automatically redirect the user to our mobile version," he explained.

Mobile sites also provide a very specific feel for users. "Our mobile version has a totally different look than our full website. It's easy for people on the side of the road needing service now to use," said Erb. "Our phone number and location have to be right there, because people doing mobile searches need only about 60 seconds to make a decision on whether or not to give our business a shot."

Dave Murphy, owner of Murphy's Autocare in Beavercreek, OH, opted for creating two different mobile sites, on top of his traditional website. "Our second mobile site came out of necessity. A lot of people searching on their mobile devices for an AAA tow ended up at the AAA facility that had recently opened in our area," Murphy recalled. Although Murphy's Autocare is an AAA-approved facility, in order to provide a competitive edge, Murphy had his marketing agency create a mobile site specifically for people in his area



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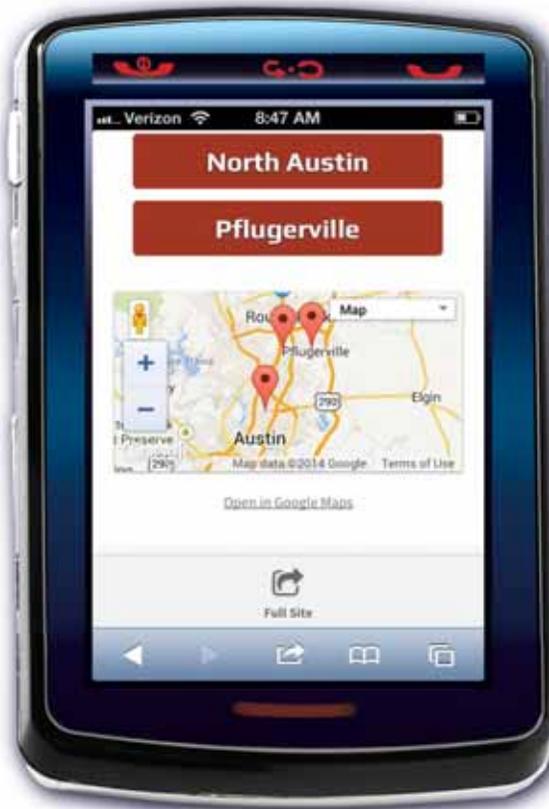
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searching the terms “AAA tow” and other close combinations. “Before this site, a lot of people who even asked to be towed to my facility ended up at the new AAA shop by default, so we had to do something that would show up quickly and effectively when people were searching for a tow in our county,” he said.

Mobile sites are easily customized in terms of what information you provide to visitors, although they're meant to be used as a complement to a full-version website. If you want mobile users to know you have a blog or photo gallery to share, you can build links onto the mobile site that redirect users to the full website.

The first screen on Dave Erb's mobile website includes an easy-to-read Google map of their three locations.



In terms of what to expect when you decide to obtain a mobile site, there are some self-guided builders out there if you're looking to create one “in-house.” However, Danny Sanchez advises hiring a professional to handle it.

“As a former shop manager, there are some things that shop owners can do themselves. But today, when it comes to splitting out domains and getting the proper coding, things are way too complex,” he explained, “It's the same concept we use at the service counter: The best place to go is to a professional, just like a shop owner would say to his customers.”

These simplified versions of a traditional website are provided by fee-based marketing agencies that can both design and maintain your primary website and any mobile versions you'd like to



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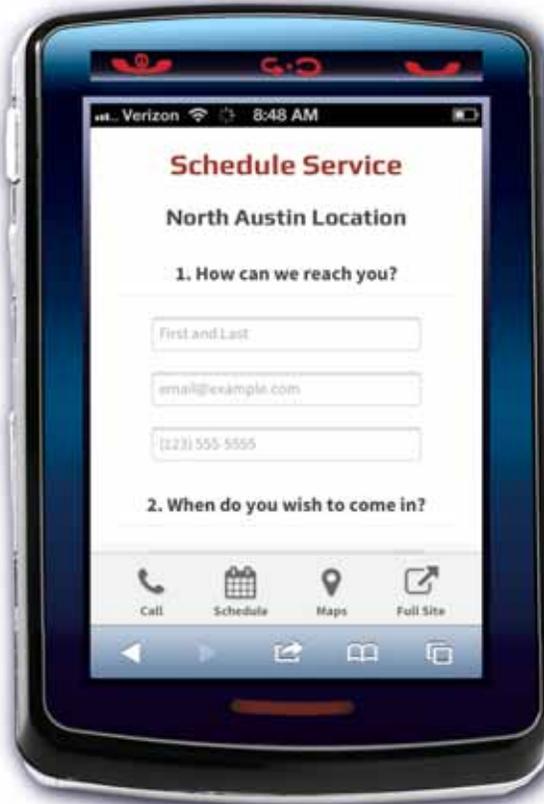
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create. Shop owners can expect a mobile site to cost anywhere from a couple of hundred dollars to a couple of thousand, depending on the complexity of the site and whether or not you elect to have an agency host the site for you, including search engine optimization services.

With ever-evolving technology flashing all the new bells and whistles in front of us all the time, it can be difficult to choose how far into the rabbit hole we should take our marketing efforts. The important concept to keep in mind is that

The “thumb-friendliness” of mobile sites is shown here in the Schedule Service screen. This screen also asks drivers a series of questions, the answers to which will be used by the service writer to schedule an appointment.



when all is said and done, mobile technology cannot replace face-to-face interaction. What good is an app or mobile site if no appointments are set? The mobile platforms you utilize should all serve as means to an effective end—not so much to get your customers engaged from afar, but more to get your bays filled with cars and smiling customers. **M**

Sarah M. Kennedy is the Service Manager at Auto Emporium Inc. in Hilliard, OH. This is Sarah's first feature article for MOTOR Magazine, following her debut in the Aug. 8, 2013 MOTOR newsletter on Shop Operations (<http://bit.ly/SKennedy>). Her perspective on shop operations is a welcome addition to the magazine.

This article can be found online at www.motormagazine.com.

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