

# Matt Curry

## A Better Way

One Sunday after church, nine-year-old Matt Curry looked up at his mother and told her he was going to be fine. An active, interested boy with a strong inner compass, he was never one to sit still, and like many Sundays before, his fidgeting had led to his dismissal from the morning's service.

In his room later, his mother said she was worried about his future, but Matt never doubted himself for a minute. "I can't explain it, but I've always had this strong sense that I'd do big things in my life," he remembers. "I told her not to worry, because I was always going to be okay." Now the founder, President, and CEO of The Hybrid Shop, this inner fortitude and unwavering confidence have kept him steady through hard times and good, leading him to incredible success and into the uncharted territory of a brand new industry. "I like to create my own path," he says. "When faced with limits, I like to go beyond them. That's what entrepreneurship is all about—finding a better way."

Matt got his start in automotive work at his brother's urging when he was 15. Cleaning bathrooms and changing tires in the beginning, he worked his way up to apprentice technician and then transitioned over to management and sales, where he excelled. Over his career, he ran seven different stores with three different companies, tripling and quadrupling sales at each location. "I ultimately realized that, if I could garner that kind of success for others, I could do it for myself," Matt remembers. "I noticed that D.C. has a lot of high-end vehicles, but the quality of the parts and technicians you find at big box stores left much to be desired. D.C. needed a go-to operation for high-end, quality auto repair, so I decided to fill that niche."

The product of that effort, Curry's Auto Service, became expert at servicing all makes and

models, including high-end European and import vehicles. Yet hybrid vehicles remained somewhat of a mystery. Such vehicles entailed a completely different set of operations—a craft that was not being taught in the auto repair world yet. "Hybrid owners wanted to take their vehicles to experts, but such proficiency was hard to find," Matt explains.

That's when he crossed paths with Dr. Mark Quarto, a PhD engineer, at a convention in October of 2012. Mark had been with GM for 28 years as one of the lead technologists in its hybrid and alternative fuel division. A scientist, inventor, software developer, coder, and programmer, he had established himself as one of the world's foremost hybrid experts and even created one of the first electric vehicles as a side project in 1987. As another side project, he created a battery discharge unit that conditions hybrid batteries to return to 95 percent of their original power. "A nickel metal hydride battery can be reconditioned many, many times, but only according to a specific scientific process," Matt explains. "Mark put the hardware together, wrote the software programming, did the coding, and put together the training modules that could accomplish this, and he could prove it through before-and-after power and energy tests."

Mark had explained this achievement to Matt over dinner. At the time, Matt had ten auto repair shops, some of the best technicians in the country, and eight hybrid vehicles of his own. Mark offered to give Matt two days of free training on his machine and then let him test it on those vehicles to make sure it really worked. Matt accepted, and by the end of the training, his five top technicians were conditioning and rebuilding hybrid batteries on their own. "Mark is a world-class instructor, and he just blew us away," Matt recalls.



That was December of 2012. In January, Matt and his team brought Mark back in for an intensive four-day course. They put the machine to work for family and friends through February to test the technology further, seeing real improvement in their cars. "On day one, your hybrid vehicle might get 50 miles per gallon, but at year two, you might be down to 46," Matt explains. "At year four, you might be down to 40, because as the battery goes out of condition, the vehicle has to rely more on the gas motor, sacrificing efficiency and performance. Historically, the only solution has been to change the battery, which can cost many thousands of dollars, depending on the make. But our eight Priuses, which had been averaging between 37 and 44 miles per gallon, increased to between 49 and 52 miles per gallon after being serviced—even better than they were when we first got them."

After the results stayed strong through March, Matt and his wife, Judy, advertised a small notice for the machine in their electronic newsletter, which has over 28,000 subscribers. The customer response was one of excitement and enthusiasm, so Matt went to Mark, and his wife, Chris. "I asked for exclusive rights to the machine in North America, and I offered to sell it for them," he says. "Mark and Chris are incredibly smart, but I could bring to the table the business and entrepreneurial skills needed for success. They agreed, and we signed a contract."

With that, The Hybrid Shop was launched with the goal of creating an international network of high-end auto repair dealers to service, diagnose, repair, and maintain hybrid vehicles. Matt envisioned a company that didn't just condition batteries, but provided comprehensive hybrid care that spanned the gamut of services. They decided on a fractional franchise business model, or a business within a business. Companies like Curry's Auto Service are given the opportunity open a complementary business for a fee that covers the equipment and training, as well as operational, technical, marketing, and sales support. The machine and service can be up and running in four days, and The Hybrid Shop then earns recurring revenue each time it's used. Franchisees also get a five-day course with the Society of Automotive Engineers, a prestigious association that issues certificates of competencies that in turn strengthen the brands of the franchisees.

Now, when a consumer pays \$1,299 to condition a hybrid battery instead of \$4,000 to replace it, everyone wins. It's better for the environment because no new materials are used and nothing enters the waste stream. Manufacturers like Toyota, which spend \$90 million a year to recycle their hybrid batteries and still have to worry about the resale values of their vehicles, have much to gain. Families are saving money, and green jobs are being created to help stimulate the economy—all because people like Matt and Mark believed there was a better way.

Even as a headstrong child, Matt was blazing his own trail and was the kind of kid other children looked up to. Born in D.C. as the youngest of seven children, his family moved to Vienna in 1972, into the house his parents still live in today. He was in second grade at the time and still vividly remembers the wonderful family dinners and holidays spent in that house, which will always feel like home.

"My parents are the best people I know, and my whole family has been a huge influence on me," Matt says. His father, an electrical engineer, was a civil servant who attained the rank of GS-15, Step 10 in the Department of Defense. He worked three jobs through the 1960s and 70s to support the family, while his mother took care of the children full time and then later cared for other kids to earn extra money. "We always had a house full of kids, and to this day, everyone in the neighborhood still refers to my parents as Mommy and Daddy Curry," Matt laughs. "People were always coming and going. That environment brought out my social side, which figures prominently in my affinity for sales today." As a very traditional Irish Catholic family, his parents taught him the importance of God, country, and family, with a focus on hard work and honesty.

In school, Matt preferred to be out in the world, actively engaging with his interests instead of sitting in a classroom. An avid athlete, he always wanted to win at sports, and often did. An early believer in focusing on one's strengths, he excelled at academic projects and challenges that aligned with his interests and was dismissive of those that didn't. "That philosophy wasn't celebrated when I was a kid, but it's very logical in a business setting," he remarks. "I focus on my strengths and hire exceptional people to do the things I'm not good at." Even back then, he was attracted to business aspired to one day be

President of a company, dreaming of entrepreneurship rather than going the corporate route. "I couldn't see myself just sitting in an office," he remembers. "I'm a doer. I like to get things done, make things happen, and shake things up."

As a kid, Matt knew he would have to earn his own spending money, so he sold donuts, newspapers, and magazine subscriptions door-to-door. He cut grass, shoveled driveways, and later worked in a parts store. In high school, he was the first freshman in his school to make the varsity wrestling team in forty years, but a dislocated sternum clavicle landed him on the bench for the rest of the season. Then he played football, his true passion, until he tore all the ligaments in his ankle.

When he wasn't playing sports, Matt worked weekends at the tire shop his brother managed. "I learned how to be a general service technician, changing tires and oil," he remembers. "I learned I was not very good with my hands and didn't want to be a technician, so I got into sales when I was 17."

Upon graduating high school in 1985, he spent a year in college at George Mason University while working part-time at Goodyear, where he learned to be a go-getter and to pursue systems-oriented efficiency in his work. "We'd have to get through 50 or 60 cars in a day," he remembers. "If something unexpected happened—if a stud broke or the wrong part came in—I'd have to figure out creative solutions. To this day, I tell employees that when they run into a roadblock, they should be figuring out what's best for the customer, the company, and them. There's a solution to every problem, even if it means giving a customer a ride to pick up their kids from school while we finish up their car."

Matt then transitioned over to Craven Tire and worked in their wholesale division until, at the age of 18, he was offered a management position at their least productive location. Within twelve months, he brought the store's monthly revenue from \$30,000 to \$100,000, prompting Craven to promote him to their largest store, where he worked his magic again and raised monthly revenues from \$160,000 to \$250,000. "My strategy focused on all the things your mom teaches you to do," he remarks. "Be honest, be nice to people, and do good work. As a leader, you have to work hard and motivate people, remembering that they will only work as hard as you do. It takes process,

procedure, follow-up, and making sure things get done right."

At Craven, it was normal to open the store at 7:00 AM to a line of 15 people waiting for service. Matt would work long hours and then go to school at night until he finally decided to stop taking classes and invest his full focus on his burgeoning career. He went all-in, and can still remember the day an employee picked up lunch for him. He didn't have time to eat it for several hours, and when he finally did, he bit into a french fry and realized that the oil had congealed in a revolting way. "I realized I couldn't live my life like that, so I put in my two weeks' notice," he recalls.

After brief stints selling insurance and used cars, distinguishing himself as the top used car salesman for several months in a row, he decided to return to the industry he had originally been drawn to. He took a position with Merchant's Tire and was promoted to Store Manager within thirty days. Of just over 120 stores, that location was ranked 69<sup>th</sup> in sales and 80<sup>th</sup> in profits. Per his specialty, he turned around the struggling store, bringing it to first in sales and second in profits within twelve months.

Three years later, Matt accepted an offer to run Craven's Tysons Corner location, which he did for about a year and a half. He then opened a door-to-door VIP promotion company for automotive repair shops in New Jersey. "That was one of my first businesses," he says. "It was fun for about a year and a half, but I was doing a lot of traveling, and I had a young family, so I sold it for \$25,000 and went in fifty-fifty with a friend to buy a repair shop in Chantilly."

With that, Matt and his partner launched Curry's Tire and Auto, and over a nine month period, Matt worked 80 hours a week to bring the shop's sales from \$30,000 a month to \$100,000 a month. Unfortunately, however, the partnership didn't work out. "It's hard to put your blood, sweat, and tears into something, and to then have the rug pulled out from under you," he remembers. "Judy had just had our first son, and losing the business—and a friend—was one of the hardest times in my life."

Always one to make success out of a failing situation, however, Matt got back on his feet and took a job with Merchants Tire, bringing its Tysons store back from the brink until it became the company's best performing store. Then, over

beers with a friend one evening, Matt was reading the Business Opportunities section of the *Washington Post* and noticed an advertisement for a Mercedes repair shop for sale. Behind an industrial park and with only four parking spots, it was in a terrible location, but Matt saw potential. "I knew I wanted to open another repair shop, so I figured now was the time," he says.

Matt spoke to the building's owners, who wanted to get rid of it and offered to finance him. With 13 credit cards, a \$35,000 loan from his father-in-law, and a \$200,000 equipment lease, Curry's Auto Service was incorporated in December of 1997. Through January and February, he would work from 6:30 AM to 5:00 PM at Merchants and would then work on cleaning, painting, and building a small showroom for the new business. Judy had just had their second child, Jenna, and she'd bring the baby in and help. When they couldn't afford to hire an accountant, she taught herself QuickBooks and took on the accounting and marketing responsibilities herself. "We were almost out of business before we were in business," Matt shares. "But with the help of friends and family, we worked our way through it and opened on March 16<sup>th</sup> of 1998."

In its first year, the shop did \$1.6 million in sales, and Matt was able to hire additional help. He then opened his second location next to the AOL campus, where many of his customers worked, and a third store in Falls Church. They moved their original store to a better location with additional parking spots, and they opened a Reston shop. "One of the best things I ever did was buying the best equipment I could afford," he says. "Once, the President of the BMW Club needed to mount and balance the tires of his car, and we were the only ones in town with the equipment that could do it. He then wrote a full-page article about us for the local club magazine. I had also been racing cars since the 1980's and knew a lot of people from the racetrack, so from the beginning, our niche was European cars. Beyond normal service work, we were known for high-performance work, avoiding being pigeonholed into just one kind of service."

In 2005, with the four stores largely run by his partner, Matt noticed that the kids in his community had no sports league options. If they wanted to participate, parents would have to make long evening commutes to get them to games in neighboring towns. He knew there was a better

way, so he co-founded Dulles South Youth Sports, raising \$219,000 for a youth sports league and starting with his first love, football. They then added cheerleading, wrestling, volleyball, track and field, lacrosse, and soccer, drawing the participation of about two thousand kids. "It was great to run that program for several years and meet that need for the community," Matt remembers.

He then shifted his focus back to Curry's Auto Service, ultimately buying out his partner and opening a fifth location. "My leadership style is kind of like a bull in a china shop," he laughs. "I'm very direct. I know what I want, and I know that I'll achieve it. Honesty, integrity, and straight talk have been the cornerstones of my approach. I expect my employees to do a great job and maintain the integrity of our work." His philosophy has done more than garnered the respect of employees and the appreciation of customers. In 2009, Curry's Auto Service was named one of the top three independent tire shops in North America by *Tire Review Magazine*, and in 2010, it was voted Top Shop in North America by *Motor Age Magazine*, as well as Best Auto Repair Shop by *Northern Virginia Magazine*. They made the Inc. 5000's list of fastest growing business for three years in a row, were named one of the 50 fastest growing companies by the *Washington Business Journal* several times, and were recognized on the front page of the business section of the *Washington Post* in 2010.

All this attention caught the eye of Monro Tire, who made an offer that inspired Matt to enter a wave of enthusiastic growth before deciding to sell. He opened five stores in four years, and when he sold the business in August of 2013, the enterprise had over 150 employees and was on track to garner over \$19 million in revenue.

Now, his focus is on The Hybrid Shop. As he works to pioneer a new industry, leveraging marketing opportunities and perfecting their robust internet presence, Matt and his team have become thought leaders in all things hybrid. With 22 franchisees up and running by July 2014, and another ten signed contracts in the works, they are poised for rapid growth as the hybrid market doubles and triples in the coming years. They've also received calls from all over the world, including Japan, Pakistan, Jordan, the Netherlands, and Australia, foreshadowing the global presence to come.

He's committed to moving and shaking in more ways than one, however. Matt also has a computer software development company that has built a tablet app, which allows auto repair shops to hold virtual meetings and webinars with customers. "The industry uses hundred-year-old equipment, and we're trying to promote technology and modernization," he explains.

Dulles South Youth Sports also continues to flourish, with ambitions to start a scholarship program to help bring sports into the lives of underprivileged children. "I hope all kids have the opportunity to grow up and have the lives I wish for my own kids—to become healthy, honest, good citizens who can really find true happiness in life." Named one of the top fifty philanthropists in D.C. by the *Washington Business Journal*, he's on the board of Final Salute, supporting homeless female veterans with housing and medical services. The Curry family has done tremendous work with a number of charities and has also traveled the world, finding ways to give back and transform communities in need while expanding their horizons and transforming their own world views in the process.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Matt underscores the importance of finding something you're passionate about and good at, starting at the beginning to

learn it from the ground up, and then finding a better way to do it. "They say that, if you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life," he says. "That may be true, but more importantly, you'll create passion, energy, and profits. The world will always need people who are passionate about finding better ways to do things, so as you walk your path in life, dare to look for possibilities past the traditionally paved routes, and dare to pursue them."

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