



Why Some Self-Serve Car Washes Thrive While Others Simply Survive

By Sean Pashley

Park your car over across the street from your wash. Don't pull into the parking lot. Don't think like the owner. Think like someone who has never been there before.

What do you see?

Is the landscaping clean and inviting? Does the paint look fresh? Are the lights bright enough to make someone feel comfortable washing after dark? Do the bays look clean? Does the property say, "Someone cares about this place," or does it quietly suggest that no one does?

Before a customer ever taps a credit card, picks up a wash wand, or chooses their first chemical, they have already started forming an opinion.

The best operators understand that.

After spending years working with car wash operators across the industry, I have become convinced that most self-serve owners fall into one of three groups.

There is the top third: the premier operators. Their sites are clean, consistent, modern, professional, and profitable. Their equipment works. Their properties look sharp. Their customers trust the experience.

Then there is the middle third. These operators are getting some things right and some things wrong. Their washes may be decent, but inconsistent. One bay looks better than another. Some equipment has been upgraded, while other pieces are clearly outdated. They are making an effort, but not always with a plan.

Finally, there is the bottom third. These operators are

often limited by cash flow, lifestyle restrictions, time, or simply being overwhelmed. In many cases, they are not bad operators. They are operators who have fallen behind, and now the business is managing them instead of the other way around.

Here is the encouraging part: none of these groups are permanent. Operators can move up. And in today's market, there has never been a better time to own a self-serve car wash.

That statement surprises some people. After all, we live in an era dominated by private equity, express exterior tunnels, and unlimited membership programs. New self-serve car washes are rarely being built like they once were.

But that is exactly why existing self-serve operators have such a tremendous opportunity. If you already own one, you are not competing to build a new business.

You are competing to build a better one.

The Ante Into the Game

If owning a self-serve car wash were a poker game, there would be an ante just to sit down at the table. Clean bay walls. Fresh paint. Strong lighting. Working equipment. Good curb appeal. Landscaping that looks intentional. These are not advanced strategies. They are not luxuries. They are not things to get around to someday.

They are the price of admission.

One of the most common mistakes I see is an operator wanting to add the next great piece of equipment while ignoring the basics sitting right in front of them. A customer does not remember that you installed a new dryer if they had to step around weeds, stare at chipped paint, and use a leaking wand.

Customers notice everything.

The top third thinks differently. They understand that customers form trust through small signals. A clean wall is a signal. A working light is a signal. A freshly painted bay is a signal. Trimmed landscaping is a signal. Equipment that works every time is a signal. Those signals tell the customer, "This place is cared for." That matters.

Over the years interacting with Marc Tyndale, Director of Strategic Partnerships at Kleen-Rite, and owner of Fast Lane Auto Wash brand, one thing became abundantly clear. Marc believes landscaping is not really about landscaping. It is about pride.

Customers rarely pull into a self-serve wash and consciously think, "Those shrubs look fantastic." What they do think, whether they realize it or not, is, "This place is taken care of." That first impression carries through the rest of the experience.

If an owner pays attention to landscaping, lighting, paint, signage, and cleanliness, customers naturally assume that owner is also paying attention to chemicals, equipment, maintenance, and safety. They are usually right.

That is why landscaping matters. Not because flowers wash cars, but because pride is visible.

Your Competition Has Changed

There was a time when a self-serve car wash was mostly compared to the self-serve wash down the road. That time has passed. Your customers are not just comparing you to another car wash anymore. They are comparing you to every great customer experience they had all week.

They are comparing you to Starbucks. They are comparing you to Chick-fil-A. They are comparing you to



Costco. They are comparing you to Amazon.

Those companies have fundamentally changed what consumers expect from every business they visit. Customers expect convenience. They expect cleanliness. They expect consistency. They expect professionalism. They expect things to work.

Your self-serve wash is competing against those expectations.

Marc Tyndale gave me an analogy that really hits home. Think about the difference between visiting a Starbucks and visiting a rundown coffee shop. It is not just the coffee. It is the lighting. The cleanliness. The consistency. The professionalism. The feeling that someone is paying attention.

Self-serve car washes create that same kind of emotional response.

Customers may not be able to articulate every detail, but they know when a place feels professional. They also know when it feels tired. Professionalism is no longer a competitive advantage. It is the minimum price of admission.

Modern Payment Matters

Once the basics are handled, one of the first true modernization steps is payment. If your self-serve wash is still cash-only, or does not have tap to pay, you are creating friction.

Today's customer expects to use a credit card. They expect to tap, swipe, or insert a card and begin washing without hunting for cash or oftentimes without even a physical card on their person. Credit card and tap capability on the coin box is not a futuristic upgrade. It is the standard.

The coin box is what your customer interacts with to pay for the wash and select chemicals or functions. It is one of the most important touchpoints on the property, and in many self-serve bays, it is where the customer's perception of the wash is either reinforced or damaged.

A modern coin box should look clean, professional, and easy to use. And bigger is usually better. Even if you do not offer ten or twelve different chemical options, a larger and more professional-looking box communicates value. It creates confidence.

But accepting credit cards and tap to pay is only part of the equation.

Many self-serve operators are still using a countdown model. The customer puts in a set amount of money,

receives a fixed amount of time, and watches the clock count down while they wash. That model creates pressure. Pressure makes customers rush. Rushed customers skip services.

A better model is count-up payment for credit card users. The customer starts the wash, takes their time, uses the amenities, and the system charges based on usage. This improves the customer experience because they are no longer racing the clock. It can also increase revenue because the customer is more likely to use more functions and spend more time washing.

Of course, this needs to be done responsibly. Set a reasonable maximum charge. Make the stop button obvious. Use clear signage that reminds customers to press stop when they are finished.

Will a few people forget to hit the stop button? Yes. It will happen. But if the maximum charge is reasonable, you protect the customer and the business. A refund becomes manageable, not painful.

Good systems make good experiences easier.

Turn the Coin Box Into a Marketing Tool

The coin box should not only collect money. It should communicate.

One upgrade I like is the snap-frame sign system now offered by Kleen-Rite. It mounts directly onto the coin box and allows operators to promote loyalty programs, membership programs, new products, social media pages, seasonal offers, or premium services. That is valuable space.

When a customer is standing at the coin box, they are engaged. They are already looking there. They are already making decisions. That is the perfect time to tell them what else you offer. Too many operators invest money into improvements and then fail to market those improvements. If you add credit card tap readers, tell people. If you repaint, tell people. If you install Air

Shammee systems, tell people why they are great and what they do.

If you upgrade lighting, improve landscaping, add new chemicals, or modernize your equipment, tell people. Put it on the coin box. Put it on signs. Put it on social media. Give customers a reason to notice that the wash is improving.

Improvements create value, but communication helps

turn that value into revenue.

Professionalism Is Consistency

The difference between the middle third and the top third often comes down to two things: professionalism and operational excellence.

Professionalism is what customers see.

Operational excellence is what customers feel.

Professionalism starts with consistency. Your coin boxes should be on the same side in each bay whenever possible. Your equipment should look uniform. Your signage should match. Your paint scheme should be consistent. Your bays should feel like they belong to the same business.

Whether you have one location with two self-serve bays or seven locations with four bays each, consistency matters. It tells the customer that the experience is intentional. Nothing should look accidental. Nothing should feel patched together. Nothing should stay broken.

And if something does break, it needs to be fixed quickly. Customers are very forgiving of an occasional issue. They are far less forgiving when it looks like no one cares enough to fix it.

A broken selector knob, a hose lying on the ground, a light that has been out for weeks, a cracked wall, or a faded sign all send the same message: this wash is not being managed at a high level.

The top third thinks differently. They do not wait until small problems become big ones. They do not allow visual neglect to become part of the customer experience. They fix things. They maintain standards. They protect trust.

Operational Excellence Wins

Operational excellence is not glamorous, but it is what separates operators who hope things go well from operators who know things are being handled.

This is where standard operating procedures become important.

Every self-serve wash should have a clear routine for inspections, maintenance, cleaning, chemical titration checks, equipment testing, and repairs. Daily walk-

THE TOP THIRD

throughs matter. Weekly checklists matter. Preventive maintenance matters. Top operators do not depend on memory or luck. They build systems. They know what needs to be checked. They know who is responsible. They know how often it should happen. They know what standard must be met.

That kind of consistency produces a better customer experience. It also reduces surprises.

If you are only finding problems because customers complain, you are already behind. Your systems should catch issues before customers do. One of the best habits an operator can

develop is using their own wash regularly. Not just when new equipment is installed. Not just when there is a complaint. Regularly.

Use the wand. Test the pressure. Move through the functions. Try the foam brush. Use the spot-free rinse. Run the vacuum. Use the Air Shammies. Experience the wash the way your customer experiences it. That is how you find the little things that matter.

Stop Testing in Isolation

One common mistake among middle-third operators is testing improvements in isolation. They add one new feature to one bay and wait to see what happens. But customers do not experience your business one bay at a time. They experience the entire facility.

If a new piece of equipment is worth offering, consider whether it should be offered consistently across your self-serve bays. This is why shows and networking events with your local and national associations are so important. You can talk to people and get their honest experiences with that new equipment you are thinking about offering.

Take an Air Shammie system as an example. It helps customers dry their vehicle and can dramatically increase the time a customer spends on-site. More time on-site often means more revenue. It also creates a better final result for the customer.

Another favorite of mine is what I like to call “results based signage”. Having signs that explain what each chemical does or how to use it will help your customers understand why that particular chemical is important. Each chemical is there for a reason right? Tell the story and educate your customer.

But details matter.

A two-inch hose may work, but a tapered hose that reduces to something more manageable can dramatically improve usability. That matters for all customers, and especially for customers who may find a large hose awkward or difficult to handle. These are the kinds of details operators discover when they use their own equipment. It is not enough to install something and assume it is great. You have to experience it, pressure test it, and refine it.

That is where top-third operators separate themselves.

Don't Try to Modernize Overnight

You do need to invest money to make money. But that does not mean every operator needs to write one giant check tomorrow. Modernization can happen through a thoughtful capital improvement plan. Start with the most visible trust-builders: landscaping, painting, lighting, bay walls, and equipment reliability. These



are the improvements customers notice immediately.

Then move into payment modernization. Upgrade coin boxes. Add tap to pay capability. Consider count-up payment systems.

From there, look at revenue-expanding amenities: Air Shammie systems, improved vacuums, better chemical options, clearer signage, loyalty programs, and membership opportunities. The order may be different for every operator, but the discipline is the same. Assess honestly. Prioritize intelligently. Execute consistently. Progress compounds.

The bottom third does not become the top third in one weekend. But it can become the middle third by making the right improvements in the right order. And the middle third can become the top third by refusing to settle.

Get Out of Your Bubble

No operator gets better in isolation. If you want to know what is happening in the industry, you need to participate in the industry.

Join your local or regional car wash association. Attend networking events. Go to educational sessions. Visit trade shows. Talk to other operators. Walk the floor. Look at new equipment. Ask questions.

Sometimes the most valuable thing you learn at a show is that you are further behind than you realized. That is not a bad thing. That is clarity. And clarity can motivate you to make a plan. The bottom third usually is not attending those events. That is part of why they stay stuck. But operators who want to move up need to see what is possible.

The industry is full of people willing to share ideas, offer guidance, and help others improve. Take advantage of that.

The Opportunity Is Real

For operators in the bottom third, the path forward may feel overwhelming. But it is also filled with opportunity.

New self-serve car washes are not being built at the pace they once were. In an industry increasingly focused on express exterior tunnels, private equity, and memberships, existing self-serve washes have real value.

If you own one, you have something worth improv-



ing. Start by walking the property from the street all the way through the customer experience. Be brutally honest. Where does the customer lose trust? Where does the wash feel outdated? What looks neglected? What is broken? What would make someone choose another option?

Then begin fixing those gaps one at a time. And as you do, tell your customers. Let them know the wash is improving. Let them know ownership is investing. Let them know there is a reason to come back.

Because when customers see progress, they respond.

Final Thought

The self-serve industry does not need saving. It needs leadership. It needs operators who refuse to accept “good enough.” Operators who understand that professionalism is not an expense. It is an investment. It needs operators who know that operational excellence is not always something customers can see. It is something they feel.

The top third did not get there because every one of them inherited a better location. They got there because they made better decisions, day after day, year after year. That is good news for every operator reading this. Decisions can change. Businesses can change. And if you are willing to think differently, invest wisely, and relentlessly improve the customer experience, your wash can move up.

From bottom third to middle third. From middle third to top third. And maybe, before long, your wash becomes the one other operators look at and say:

“That is how it should be done.”

If you need help along the way, I am always available. Visit seanpashley.com — I would be glad to help you take that next step.

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