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## EMBRACING THE FUTURE

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# EMBRACING CARWASHING'S FUTURE, NOT THE PAST



*We toured Greater Detroit and Southeast Michigan and here is what we saw.*

In 2013, Detroit became the largest U.S. city to file for bankruptcy. The city has gone through tough times, however, over the past few years, there's been an ambitious new agenda to revitalize Detroit neighborhoods, creating jobs and economic opportunity. We toured the Greater Detroit and Southeast Michigan area to get some insight on the past and, most importantly, the future of carwashing in the "Rust Belt" of the U.S.

We started our tour talking with Don Klemmer, a 50-year veteran of the carwash industry.

**PC&D: When did you start washing cars?**

**Don:** In 1970. My family was in the equipment business and I decided this was the direction I wanted to go. I had no idea how much this industry would change over the years.

**PC&D: What were some of the key changes?**

**Don:** Chemical was a big one. We used to get cars clean with phosphates. Then, after that was banned, we had to think fast and educate ourselves on chemicals. It was a huge adjustment. There's more than one way to clean a car; the direction I kept my eye on was polymers. The company Syndet made a splash back then, which later purchased Simoniz. That was my first introduction to polymers.

The other major experience was the \$2 and \$3 carwash, which this area is known for. They're still around, believe it or not, though most are very slow or barely alive. I've watched the Detroit carwash market implode on itself due to this. These \$2 and \$3 carwashes have been hurting our local industry for nearly 30 years now.

**PC&D: How have you adjusted?**

**Don:** We've kept our eye on technology and even how society is changing. Many wash owners get in a mental rut; we do our

best to keep our finger on the pulse of the end user: the paying carwash customer.

**PC&D: What did paying attention to the customer teach you?**

**Don:** People have more money than time. As tough as things are, those working the daily grind simply don't have the time or mental energy to deal with waiting or for complicated processes. They just want to be in and out with a clean car. It sounds simple, but a lot of owners miss this.

I also wanted to simplify the process for the wash owners. Labor is only getting more difficult by the day; it's time to embrace automation and the advancements in chemicals.

**PC&D: How did you make things easier for local wash owners?**

**Don:** I went all-in on touchless in-bays. There are no claims and very little labor and, if you know what to look for, the equipment is very reliable.

**PC&D: It seems like tunnels have been the hot topic for the past few years. Why did you go this direction?**

**Don:** Honestly, it was because of Tom Petit. I've been following him for a long time. He's probably the smartest guy in carwashing, and I've met them all in my 50 years of doing this.

**PC&D: What has Tom done differently?**

**Don:** Tom took the tunnel model and applied it to in-bays. If you get the lowest wash or the most expensive, it takes the same amount of time. Tom also understands saturation. One way we cut down our dwell times is because we saturate the surface of the car much more comprehensively with bigger and wetter droplets of pre-soak — a lot of people miss this. Other methods out there use a light mist, and that takes longer to penetrate the surface. I noticed this many years ago with one of Tom's machines and have been watching him ever since.

**PC&D: How has this changed the game?**

**Don:** The end user gets a cleaner car much faster, which is exactly what he or she wants. Notice I said end user. Not all carwash owners embrace this. Because of this, I've now focused my whole business on these in-bays. We're seeing dollar averages increase, volume increase significantly and now we're seeing monthly plans being introduced to the in-bay market because we can push so much more volume due to being able to clean better and much faster.

We spent a few days touring the area and met up with Bryan Suliman, a seasoned wash owner of over 20 years, who also owns a local tunnel.

**PC&D: What's your newest move in the carwash business? How are you adapting to customers' needs?**

**Bryan:** About two years ago, I replaced one of my in-bay machines with a Petit Accutrac® 360-i.

**PC&D: How did you decide on that machine?**

**Bryan:** It took me about 30 seconds to decide. I went through my first Petit wash and thought, "Yup, I can get a wrench on anything and fix it immediately." And then I felt the power. It washes cars like nothing I've ever seen or felt before in my 20 years of doing this.

Now, at my own site, I see how cars come in and how dirty they are and then see how clean they come out ... it's a wonderful thing.

**PC&D: What is this area like?**

**Bryan:** We're in more of a rural area outside the city. We have a lot of mud out here; sometimes you can't even tell what color the cars are going in, but they come out great. It's fascinating.

**PC&D: How long does it take you to clean a car?**

**Bryan:** About three minutes on our top wash and 2.5 minutes on our other washes. We only need one high-pressure pass due to the power.

**PC&D: Explain your chemical process.**

**Bryan:** We use low pH first, then high pH and then high-pressure rinse with sealer/wax injected. Four passes for all washes, except for ceramic, which is five passes. We slowed the machine down, about three minutes on top wash, plus dry.

I know some other owners out there go with more passes. But, if you can cut down water usage, power usage and chemical usage, and still put out a great vehicle, why waste customers' time?

**PC&D: Has the volume changed since applying this method?**

**Bryan:** We have increased significantly at this site and continue to grow. Overall, this area has been down for carwashes, but it's been our second busiest month ever. Customers gravitate toward this model.



**PC&D: What's the competition like around here?**

**Bryan:** There's a tunnel 0.4 miles away and my own tunnel is 2.7 miles away.

Moving to a site closer to metro Detroit, we visited Tim Dupuie. Tim has been washing cars for over 10 years and is enjoying the lifestyle of the in-bay automatic model.

**PC&D: What do you like about washing cars this way?**

**Tim:** That's easy: no employees.

**PC&D: What's your competition like around here?**

**Tim:** There are nine washes in a 1.5-mile radius.

**PC&D: Explain the rebuilding of your site.**

**Tim:** We put in two Petit machines, added monthlies and haven't looked back.

**PC&D: What have been the results?**

**Tim:** We've increased volume about 300% and increased our wash average by a couple of dollars. It took a while to get used





to, but customers appreciate it.

**PC&D: What do customers say?**

**Tim:** Customers love it. The old wash took closer to five to six minutes; we're now washing cars in 2.5 minutes.

**PC&D: How did customers adopt to being monthlies?**

**Tim:** Well, it's what people are looking for. You still have some people who don't want a membership, and I try to educate them a bit more. It's the way to go ... wash once a week and they already save money. I limit total monthly washes to 15.

**PC&D: What's your chemical process?**

**Tim:** I'm using a polymer alkaline only for my pre-soaks, one high-pressure pass, then spot-free and they're done.

Traveling further to the coast of Lake Huron, we chatted with Mark Morse.

**PC&D: What is your strategy for increasing volume?**

**Mark:** Volume and time weren't our priority; we were after a clean car. We had a high benchmark for clean here — clean was definitely the priority.

We added two Petit machines. We now have a \$3 higher average and our volume has increased by 50%. It's taking us about three minutes to wash a car to our standard. Although time wasn't a priority to us, customers waiting less for a wash is something we noticed and is hard to ignore.

Our next stop was back in Greater Detroit. Although this owner's request was to remain anonymous, the feedback was very informative.

**PC&D: Tell us a bit more about this site.**

**Wash owner:** This is a busy site. I was considering a mini tunnel — thank God Don Klemmer [installer] from Poly Pro Systems talked us out of it. We installed two Petit Accutracs and doubled our prices while tripling our volume. Monthlies were part of that equation.

**PC&D: Why did you go in this direction?**

**Wash owner:** I feel very lucky. I didn't know anything about the Petit Accutracs® 360-i. Don introduced me to this system. Low maintenance and speed were right up my alley. I trusted Don completely and gave it a shot. Now, people drive right by three washes to come here, and these are some well-established tunnel washes.

**PC&D: It seems like speed is a priority for you. What's your process?**

**Wash owner:** Some people want to use cheaper soaps. Stop looking at your soap costs and start looking at your bank accounts. When we are washing touchless, you can't use cheap soap. We soak the car with a light, low pH first, then follow up with a high pH, inject wax through the high pressure and then a medium-pressure spot-free. The cars look great, and no one is waiting around.

The wash relaxes me — it's fun. It's a hobby that produces revenue.

Our last stop is to another wash owner who is new to the business, Alan.

**PC&D: Explain your history and how you ended up washing cars.**

**Alan:** I went to undergraduate business school at Georgetown, which led me to New York City where I ended up in private equity, alternative investing and receiving a master's in real estate from NYU. I always knew I wanted to move back home to metro-Detroit. The idea was to operate and invest in essential, but antiquated, businesses by leveraging my knowledge of technology, marketing and real estate into rejuvenating different industries into the 21st century.

**PC&D: What's competition like around you?**

**Alan:** We have two large tunnels within ¼ mile from our wash, both excellent operators. We are proud to say that we have the highest ratings and online reviews versus any of our competitors.

**PC&D: What are some of your methods regarding your menu?**

**Alan:** "Keep it simple stupid" is a phrase we live by. Only three wash packages, easy to read, and each wash package has only three bullet points. Our mission is to deliver the cleanest, fastest and safest wash every time. Our offerings are crystal clear, and our customers appreciate the simple, but blunt, portrayal of that.

**PC&D: How did you decide on equipment?**

**Alan:** I deeply researched and in-person tested many different suppliers — over a dozen for sure and even some international. The only way I knew we could deliver the cleanest, fastest and safest wash every time was through the Petit system. You get

what you pay for, and I couldn't find anything that was going to wash cars as good and efficiently as this.

**PC&D: Of the other suppliers, how did you narrow it down?**

**Alan:** Some may say I'm a little unorthodox in my methods, but I would physically take buckets of mud, throw it on the car and drive all around Ohio, Pennsylvania and here [Michigan] testing all of the different suppliers. Frankly, it just passed the test better than all of them and was able to deliver on our three wash principles better than any of the others. It also cannot be understated that the folks at Petit and Al's Super Wash share the same values of honesty, A+ customer service and a relentless dedication to their craft. You see that the moment you meet Tom and tour their facility. Having aligning values is as important to us as the quality of their work.

**PC&D: Did you visit any other manufacturers?**

**Alan:** I didn't see a point in touring any other facility when the product couldn't match up to Petit.

The facility blew me away. I worked at an investment bank covering industrial stocks, so I have toured my fair share of manufacturing facilities — Petit's was my favorite. When you walk in there, it just screams hard work and efficiency. It truly is a site to marvel at.

**PC&D: What are some important lessons you've learned?**

**Alan:** Every facet of this business matters and must be addressed with the same level of urgency and care: chemicals, customer service, vacuums, EVERYTHING. When cars leave our wash, they have a sparkle to them that is unique compared to these friction tunnels. We needed a name for it, so we came up with "showroom shine" because that's what it reminds us of.

I mention this because what I learned is your customers notice everything, and you should too. When I came into the carwashing business, I didn't know anything. I found a few experts, and I had to listen well. There's a great concept coined by Ray Dalio about being radically open minded, which is the ability to effectively explore different points of view and different possibilities without letting your ego or your blind spots get in your way.

I made a conscious effort to do that by listening to the right people and trusting their decades of experience. If you can give your customers the best journey when they go through your wash from wash quality and speed, dry, vacuums, mat cleaning, etc., you'll maintain loyal customers for life.

**PC&D: Explain your wash process.**

**Alan:** I'm using a low pH chemical first, then a high pH pre-soak. After that I'm putting the wax and sealant through the high-pressure pass. Honestly, when I started, I had no clue what I was doing. I have great chemical guys and Don, our Petit installer, are who I relied on.

From the pay station to exit, we are washing cars in no more than three minutes. We've done a lot of washes through here, and only had one customer state he wasn't sure if he got all his chemical. People care about their vehicles; it gives them a sense of freedom. As carwash operators, protecting that



feeling is important to us. Our site is also 100% contactless — no attendant needed. Our customers like being able to do it themselves and frankly would prefer not to talk to anyone when going to get their vehicle cleaned.

Dealers have also jumped on board with us. They say they love the way the cars look coming out of our wash. Again, that's why we call it the showroom shine. Go to our Google page, Instagram, Facebook — you will see it all there.

**PC&D: How long did it take to dial your wash in?**

**Alan:** It took a week or two to really tune the chemical. The water is really hard here. I also heat my chemical to about 140° F, so it activates a bit better.

During our tour, it was very obvious that Don has a loyal following for a reason. The owners we interviewed were very successful and commented on how dedicated Don is to being available and getting projects done on time. We get the feeling Don was as much a father figure as he is equipment installer. We follow up with a final question for Don.

**PC&D: What do you think the future is for carwashing?**

**Don:** Technology and innovation are supposed to make things easier and more efficient for all parties. Obviously, this isn't always the case, but it should be. For those willing to do their homework, they will find much more efficient ways to clean cars for the benefit of all parties — wash owners and end users — which is most important. I've been fortunate to be exposed to the right people who think ahead of the curve.

This city is a poster child of hanging on to old thinking for much too long. Look at the big three auto manufacturers; look at how and where they build cars now, look at the imports and how they overtook the industry. Maybe this is why I'm extra sensitive to the cost of hanging on to old methods. As for carwashing, I don't want to be the guy stuck with old ideas and not adapting to the customers' real needs. More and more operators are embracing the new concepts and technology that we have implemented. As a result, we're pushing forward in the Greater Detroit area, which has always been a strong hub for carwashing. **PC&D**