

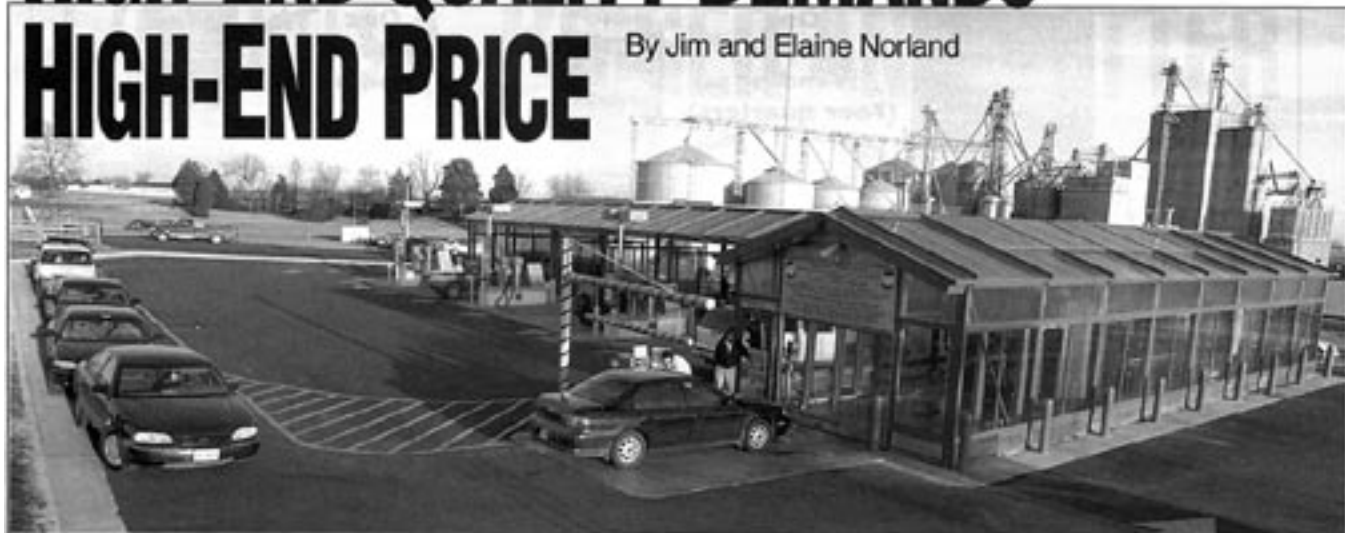
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**AUTO LAUNDRY  
NEWS**

# HIGH-END QUALITY DEMANDS HIGH-END PRICE

By Jim and Elaine Norland



**Top:** Cars line up for the drive-through/roll-over. Evidence of the rural environment can be seen in the background.

**Above left:** An aerial view shows the site layout. Note the vacuum islands at both the entrance and exit ends of the bays.

**Above right:** A customer is about to get the soft-touch treatment.

**C**ommit to quality — and don't be afraid to charge a fair price for it.

Rob Preihs of Culpeper, VA, has operated multiple businesses on that philosophy, and didn't stray from it when he opened Rob's Car Wash in April of 2002. He had a premium location, invested further for top-line equipment and building appearance, and keeps his wash sparkling clean, brightly lit and well-maintained.

For the drive-through wash that's the principal revenue source, Preihs charges prices that top those of many conveyor washes. In fact, his top wash price of \$15 equals or beats the

ticket achieved by some locations for a basic full-serve tunnel wash.

The unattended enterprise offers washes priced at \$8, \$10, and \$15, and averages per-car revenue of nearly \$11 on an average of 80 cars daily. Vehicle owners who prefer to wash their own vehicles can use one of six self-service wand bays at a lesser cost, but they also contribute to additional revenue from vacuums and car-related vending sales.

The pricing, and the patronage, is more surprising because Culpeper isn't a large city, and its income demographics aren't very high. Situated in a rural area of mid-northern Virginia, Culpeper itself has about

18,000 residents — all of Culpeper County has 32,000.

Rob's Car Wash is located at a stop-light-controlled intersection on Highway 29/15 Business with a traffic count of about 26,500 cars a day. The intersecting Ira Hoffman Lane adds another 6,000 to 7,000 cars daily.

While his wash is just across a small road from a 24-hour Wal-Mart, Preihs doesn't have many business neighbors, other than a Ruby Tuesday restaurant on the other side of the highway. The rural nature of adjoining land is evident with the grain bins and silos of the local farmers' co-op clearly visible in the background of the wash.



**Left:** Every wand self-service bay is occupied — just the way we like it!

One feature that makes Rob's Car Wash stand out as an around-the-clock attraction is its glass walls — a Lighthouse Car Wash structure. Not only the wash interior is brightly lit — approaches and exit areas as well as vacuum islands are bright, too. Preihs told his lighting engineer he wanted it as "bright as a tennis court."

With those glass walls and bright lights, plus a cleanliness that is renewed at least three times a day, the wash seems to be a safe environment for drivers of all ages to visit at virtually any hour. The wash is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and Preihs says he's seen well-dressed women washing their cars there at midnight or later. He wanted the wash to feel especially safe and welcoming for women and their children.

The interior workings of Rob's Car Wash are as impressive as the outward appearance. The 65-foot drive-through tunnel is Autec equipped and features multiple pre-soak treatments before a car or light truck hits the treadle for the rollover.

Frictionless treatments, first with low pH, then with high pH solutions, high-pressure wheel washing and a triple foam applicator all precede the rollover unit where Polyflex mitts add a gentle friction scrub.

Equipment there includes onboard wheel washers, rocker panel and wheel blasters. Undercarriage wash, a Bug Buster treatment on the nose of the vehicle, a rinse arch with clear-coat protector, and a final spot-free rinse precede drying with a 75-horsepower double-stack blower system.

With such complete treatment, "I figure a car coming out of my wash

looks as good as those from an exterior-only tunnel with partial service," Preihs says.

He added water-reclaim equipment to his setup, not because it was required, but because it might also enable him to stay open if drought conditions occur. "In our area they've shut down car washes without reclaim in drought times, and others they left open. I didn't want to ever be shut down, and hopefully it's saving me money as well." Reclaimed water is used in the automatic for all operations up to the final rinse.

Doors of the automatic wash are open all the time except when outside temps drop below freezing, in which event they open automatically after a car drives up. When outdoor conditions get above freezing, the doors once again stay open.

**Below left:** The dryers wait their turn.

**Below right:** The end product emerges — clean and shiny!



## PROFILE IN SUCCESS

The entire process is automatic, with customers paying for their choice of wash by cash or credit card. A bank card machine on the site issues wash tokens, which can be used on either the self-serve bays or the drive-through automatic. Tokens can also be bought with cash. Those same tokens, good only at Rob's Car Wash, are used by Preihs as gifts to local charities and community causes ranging from hospitals to sports teams. "The tokens are used as door prizes

at their functions," Preihs explains.

The wash is sized in both automatic and self-serve areas to accommodate any factory-standard passenger car, minivan or pickup truck. The tunnel can accommodate vehicles up to 7 feet high. The self-service bays have a 9-foot clearance, but Preihs doesn't want big delivery trucks or highway tractors in there even if they aren't any taller. "I'm not going after that market. I wanted the women and young kids, and made it

attractive for them."

Security is further enhanced by frequent passes of local law enforcement officers. Preihs, whose other businesses include a dairy farm, home building, and dry cleaning, knows most of the police, and most of them wash their cars at his wash, he says. He is working on a deal for them, but hasn't ironed out the details yet.

Even county vehicles, usually washed by prisoners, frequently come through Rob's Car Wash, thanks in part to a rule that says prisoners can't do such chores in extreme weather conditions.

Just 20 percent of Rob's Car Wash customers choose the lowest-priced wash. Half go for the mid-price \$10 wash, and 30 percent select the \$15 wash. Those prices are more remarkable considering that a couple of in-bay rollover washes elsewhere in Culpeper charge \$5, \$6 and \$7 for their service.

Revenues and convenience for car owners are supplemented by Industrial Vacuum Systems-equipped islands on both the entrance and exit sides of the self-serve bays. A three-column vendor on each vacuum island carries car-related supplies such as towels, detailing diapers, and Armor All products. Those machines are supplied and stocked by Q.B. Enterprises, a Culpeper firm owned by brothers Roger and Mick Kube, who are also friends of Preihs.

Preihs or an employee spends about 30 hours a week at the wash, cleaning it three times a day and making sure that chemicals are well stocked. Keeping the wash clean is essential for maintaining an inviting atmosphere for drivers, Preihs believes. The entire wash is surrounded by well-maintained grass borders and plantings of dogwood and gum trees.

Rob's Car Wash is a far different use of the property than Preihs first envisioned. He had acquired the acre of ground some time ago, and originally thought of putting a new dry cleaning headquarters there and perhaps a small automatic wash behind it, similar to those seen at many gas stations.

While visiting a dry cleaners in North Carolina that had been very well constructed, Preihs drove by the Autec factory in Statesville and wrote down their 800 number. That led to getting in touch with Sean Forsyth and Chris Giroux at Mid-Atlantic Autec.

"Chris came up with the idea of a Lighthouse car wash structure there. He in turn led me to Mike Kinslow of Lighthouse. Mike put a lot of extra effort into my project, helping me and doing studies."

By this time, Preihs figured his site was much better suited to a car wash than a dry cleaners. Kinslow helped him determine

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that such a choice was the right move.

But Kinslow and Mid-Atlantic Autec both figured Preihs could never prosper with prices as high as \$15 for a drive-through wash. "They thought I'd have to be running sales all the time. Mike was saying to advertise \$15 but be ready to sell for \$12, and Mid-Atlantic thought that \$12 would be about right."

When he opened his wash a year and a half ago, Preihs introduced it to the community with a slick-paper insert in the local newspaper, explaining what the wash offered. He also offered the usual \$15 wash for \$10 for the first 30 days, but since then he's offered no deals, no cross-marketing, no coupons or discounts. Any of that would require having an attendant on duty at the wash.

"My thinking is that if you have an expensive piece of land and you put up an expensive building such as the Lighthouse structure and buy the best equipment, you've got to charge \$15. If you do things as nice as you can, you have to be willing to charge for it."

The same thinking will guide Preihs in a new wash he's planning in the Fredericksburg area, about 30 miles from Culpeper, with dual automatic tunnels plus six self-serve bays. His land there is costing over \$1 million for less than an acre. Such investments, he says, demand charging a fair price for a quality wash.

"If you do something and do it very well, you can't be afraid to charge a fair price. That's how I run all my businesses."

Car owners in the Culpeper area seem convinced Rob's Car Wash is worth its prices. "The day after opening, it met my business expectations," Preihs says. "You might figure that everybody was going to try out a new wash just to experience it, but they've kept coming back. We did well right out of the starting blocks, and business is still growing all the time." ■

Jim and Elaine Norland are regular contributors to *Auto Laundry News*.

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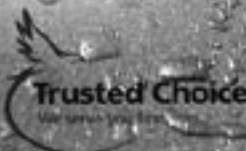
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