

By Dottie Hopkins

# Free, Not Unlimited

## Tokens Provide Light at the End of the Tunnel

**D**uring the revamping of his BP Car Wash in Toledo, OH five years ago, Mike Clarkson installed free vacuum stations as a way to reward his customers for their business. Just a few short years later, he realized that this free service — which even non-customers could use — was costing him plenty. “There were some people who were abusing it,” Clarkson recalls. “They’d stay there all day. It was eating me alive in vac motors and brushes.”

So Clarkson converted the free vacuums, which he originally purchased from JE Adams, to pay-vacuums, by adding coin mechanisms that would accept coins or tokens. That way, he could give every tunnel wash customer a free vacuum token worth \$1 — or four minutes of vacuum time.

Now, if they want more time than that, customers can purchase additional time using quarters. Many customers do indeed buy additional time. Clarkson estimates that a typical change box for the vacuums is filled with 30 percent tokens and the rest are quarters.

“I went with 25 cents figuring I’d cover my costs of operation and maintenance,” recalls Clarkson, who says the whole process was simple, and inexpensive.

“I did not have to change the timers. I just went in and installed the coin mechanisms.” Converting all eight vacuum cleaners from free to token- or coin-operated cost about \$1,000

according to Clarkson. “I had my money back in two weeks,” he says.

Clarkson has been happy with his decision to make the conversion. “I can’t believe how quickly the quarters add up,” he remarks. “People tell me ‘you should charge 50 cents or 75 cents because everyone is priced there,’ but I figure don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

So, how quickly do those quarters add up to real cash? “I make \$1,500 a month that I never made before — I’m not changing a thing,” Clarkson states adamantly.

One aspect of the program that he did change, however, was his token supplier. He recalls purchasing the first order of 3,000 tokens and a subsequent 5,000-token order for about 17 cents per token. Since then he has opted to buy his standard brass tokens online for about 12 cents each, including shipping.”

Those tokens and quarters really add up. “I never dreamed we’d make money on it, but it has turned out real well for me,” says Clarkson. Who can blame him for not nudging up vacuum prices? After all, \$1,500 a month is not a bad bump in revenue. 📧

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