

Nitrogen niche: Valley companies inflating tires with cool gas

The Business Journal of Phoenix - March 30, 2007 by [Ty Young](#) The Business Journal

STORY IMAGES



After three decades in the automotive industry, nobody accuses Frank Ruscitti of blowing hot air when he talks about cars. The former auto technician hopes to make his mark filling tires with something a bit cooler.

Ruscitti recently opened Nitrogen Man in Phoenix. It's among the first companies that fills tires with nitrogen -- and the very first to provide mobile service to customers, using a nitrogen generator that it also sells, Ruscitti said.

People have been filling their tires with nitrogen since the 1960s, claiming the denser gas decreased their need to refill tires. Research has proved that correct, showing that air-filled tires need to be inflated four times as often as nitrogen-filled tires.

The moisture-free, nonflammable gas is not a health danger and comprises 78 percent of the Earth's air. It also is not affected by scorching temperatures, something Valley drivers have complained about for decades. But until recently, it was not an easily affordable option.

During the past two years, the cost of nitrogen-generating machines has become more manageable. In 2005, Costco Wholesale Corp. became one of the first major companies to offer nitrogen, but only in tires purchased from that company.

"Just like computers and cell phones, the nitrogen (market) has come down in price quite a bit," Ruscitti said. "To produce nitrogen on site has become cost-effective."

Ruscitti hopes Nitrogen Man will resonate with Valley drivers who don't want to buy new tires to get the nitrogen benefit. The company offers three services: drive-up inflation for five tires at \$25, mobile inflation services, and nitrogen-generating machines for purchase.

According to the Get Nitrogen Institute, a nonprofit organization that promotes nitrogen use, three companies in the Valley sell nitrogen inflation: Nitrogen Man, Costco and Community Tire & Auto Service.

Community Tire has offered nitrogen service at three of its seven Arizona locations since last year. Owner Howard Fleischman said the popularity has grown so much that he will add the service at all locations within a month.

Fleischman, like many others, was not impressed with the viability of nitrogen use years ago because of cost. He also didn't buy into the idea that it would help keep tires inflated longer, especially in Arizona.

"When nitrogen hit the marketplace, we weren't that excited about it," he said. "Today, we're buying it."

Fleischman offers nitrogen services for five tires for \$30, although he said he plans to offer it at a discounted price as more of his stores add the service.

Scottsdale-based Discount Tire, one of the largest tire sellers in the state, did not return phone calls regarding nitrogen inflation in their tires.

Linda Gorman, a spokeswoman for AAA Arizona, said the association does not have an opinion about tire inflation with gas or air. But it has been discussed, she said.

"Every time gas prices rise, more and more people inquire about it," she said. "It's becoming more and more popular, especially in the hotter environments."

Some of the people most affected by tire deflation are recreational vehicle drivers and those with boat trailers. Because their vehicles sit for long periods, tires slowly deflate in the changing temperatures. This, Ruscitti said, causes rubber breakdown and potential danger when users do drive their vehicles.

"Their tires are basically rotting from the inside," he said.

Ruscitti is targeting car dealerships because their cars tend to sit motionless for extended periods. He sold a nitrogen generation machine to Porsche North Scottsdale in February and is in discussions with other local dealerships, though no other deals have been made official, he said.

Moving to nitrogen was an easy choice for the Porsche dealership, said Wayne Witten, a dealership service assistant who took part in the decision.

"It prolongs the life of the tire and reduces the amount of time spent inflating and deflating them," he said. "I've used it in my car for years."

After researching nitrogen for more than two years, Ruscitti said, the time is right to begin selling nitrogen services and products. Although he is selling the generating machines to potential competitors, he thinks there is plenty of need for Arizonans who battle drastic temperature changes and long hours on the road.

"I read and read, and studied, and spoke with people in the industry," he said. "There are plenty of people who want nitrogen in their tires."

Get connected

Get Nitrogen Institute: www.getnitrogen.org

Community Tire & Auto Service: www.communitytireaz.com

Nitrogen Man: www.nitrogenman.com

Costco Wholesale Corp.: www.costco.com

AT A GLANCE

Nitrogen vs. air inflation:

1. Tires with air lose pressure four times faster than those with nitrogen.
2. Nitrogen-inflated tires are less susceptible to steel-belt and rubber damage because the gas has no moisture.
3. Nitrogen-inflated tires run cooler and require less maintenance.
4. Nitrogen is nonflammable and has been used in aircraft and race cars for more than 30 years.

Sources: Michelin Tire Manual, Goodyear and Get Nitrogen Institute



Photo Credit : Jim Poulin/The Business Journal

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Frank Ruscitti's Nitrogen Man business is one of the few options for nitrogen-filled tires in the Valley. His company provides mobile service and sells nitrogen generators to car dealers.

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Nitrogen Man founder Frank Ruscitti inflates tires with nitrogen.

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