

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



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You know when a doctor has a good bedside manner. He has an easy-going, supportive way about him. He gains the trust of everyone he treats. Consequently, the patient's illness is easier to bear; the treatments are easier to administer.

In months to come, you doctors of import repair can look to **Carside Manner** for ways to improve relationships with your customers. This column will help you sell peace of mind by increasing your awareness of customer concerns and anxieties about auto repair.

Unfortunately, the best repairs and most conscientious workmanship in the world mean nothing unless your customers perceive and appreciate them.

The days of the glib attitude are gone. No more: "Take it or leave it, pal, it's good work whether you know it or not so pay me cash and get out." Like it or not, in the majority of cases, cordiality is essential in your business dealings. Don't misunderstand. We do not by any means endorse or support smooth-talking incompetents. We just hate to see them cut into your hard-earned profits. Good business is more than quick cash. Truly good business keeps customers smiling. It keeps them talking favorably about you to others, and above all, keeps them coming back again and again.

When I am the customer, I know the importance of a friendly greeting, a businesslike attitude, prompt and punctual service, and simple honesty. These are the elements of trust, and trust is slowly built—easily ruined. An old song suggests that "little things mean a lot," and they do. Little things such as your appearance and your establishment's appearance create an immediate and often lasting impression. A favorable first impression can only help ease customer skepticism and fear.

Sure, you know you're good. You know how hard you've worked to succeed. So why is the customer so darned skeptical of your talents? Simple, he doesn't know anything about you! Don't assume that he does. Impressions are all he has to go on at first. You have to sell him what you offer him in terms of skill, equipment, and dedication to excellence. You may have to

sell yourself to a thousand different people in a thousand different ways. You need to go beyond marketing, management, and "mechanicking." You need to sell, and selling is the art of making people feel good about spending their money.

REACH OUT AND HEAR SOMEONE

Learn to talk *with* your customers, not *at* them. Listen carefully to their problems and try to determine the nature of their complaints. A lack of clear communication invariably leads to misunderstanding. All too often, I have seen ridiculous disputes grow from false expectations on both sides.

Giving each customer a fair and detailed estimate of costs, a reasonable explanation of the work performed, and some idea of completion time will sustain that good first impression.

Dealing with the public can be a real hassle at times. We all know the wheeler-dealers, the brother-in-law who can tell you everything about a car but how to fix it, and the ubiquitous cheapskate. It is easy to become jaded and cynical about the clientele. That attitude can turn people away when it goes unchecked.

It really helps to stand on the customer's side of the service counter from time to time and imagine how unsettling a first encounter can be. Your customer may have already been left standing at the church by others less competent and caring than yourself.

Import Service wants to help you improve the skills necessary to keep them smiling. We don't pretend to have all the answers, but we've been in your shoes.

Since 1973, as a flat-rate technician, service advisor, service manager, and owner of my own repair shop, I have ridden that roller coaster called customer relations. Even though the stains on my hands are ink at the moment instead of grease, I haven't forgotten how rough the ride can be. And when my knuckles have finally healed, I don't want to forget how important and generally underrated you folks in the trade really are.

Carside Manner is such an important concept to us that we intend to run it as a regular feature—not as a soap box for our opinions, but as a forum for exchanging ideas. We plan to spotlight real people solving problems in the real world.

So write. Or call. Tell us about your successes and failures. Let us know when you're tearing your hair out, and just as importantly, share a good chuckle when you've got one.

Who knows? Maybe you'll get into print. Won't that make your mom proud?

So if you've grumbled for years that nobody was listening to you, this may be your big chance to do some good.