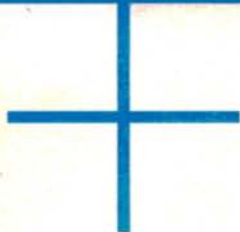


Understanding A Female Customer

Don't Underestimate this Emerging Market



The red 911, sparkling like a diamond in the sun, pulls up to the shop. Two tan, slender legs exit the car, followed by a raven-haired beauty. One mechanic in the shop nudges another and exclaims, "Hey Frankie, check out the babe!" The "babe," aware that the guys are admiring more than the sleek lines of her car, glances down quickly to make sure that her blouse is buttoned, her skirt straight. As he saunters toward her, Frankie smiles and thinks, "Man, what a waste it is for a broad to be driving that car!"

What Frankie says now, and how he says it, may well convince the woman to let him fix her car. But

it could just as easily make her exit as fast as her fiery red chariot can fly!

Bear in mind that very few women feel entirely comfortable in a service facility. Generally, it is an area dominated by men. Traditionally, women have not been expected to be knowledgeable about their cars. Therefore, that confident-looking raven-haired beauty who pulls up to your shop may be a bit more nervous than she appears.

We're going to discuss things you can do to gain her confidence and get her business. And actually, this advice will go a long way toward helping you deal with any prospect who walks into your shop.

Changing Times, Changing Roles

It used to be a rarity for a female to be seen alone in any service center with her car. Her husband, her boyfriend, or even her father would undoubtedly accompany her, or else take care of the car for her.

The American way used to be that boys were always Dad's captive audience out in the garage. Young ladies, meanwhile, were taught that little girls belonged in the kitchen with Mommy, learning to cook. But times are changing. Today's woman is marrying later, divorcing earlier, or simply staying single. Many women, regardless of their marital status, are becoming more independent. They're taking care of all aspects of their lives themselves. Whatever the reasons, all shops—import and domestic—are seeing an influx of women customers. Because women now make up as much as 50 percent of the service-buying public, you must learn to do business with them.

Facts and Figures

For purposes dramatic, the female in this article is driving a red 911. To you and me, she's of indeterminate age and occupation. But not to the people at J.D. Power. They know there's a good possibility the woman pulling up to your shop is driving a VW Cabriolet. She's also 29.1-years-old, single, and works in a professional, clerical/administrative, executive, or sales position. The job description is ambiguous, only because the statistics are equally divided among the four job categories. Jean Pellegrino of J.D. Power, one of the leading automotive research companies in

America, shared some information from one of their recent surveys with me. According to this survey, the nine most popular import cars with American women are:

- VW Cabriolet
- Mitsubishi Cordia
- Nissan Pulsar
- Toyota Tercel
- Honda Prelude
- Mitsubishi Mirage
- Subaru XT
- Toyota Corolla
- Subaru Sedan

Chances are better than even, Pellegrino said, that the owner/driver of any one of these vehicles is a woman.

Who's driving what? The car that attracts the youngest median age group (28.8 years old) of women is the Mitsubishi Cordia. The Nissan Pulsar, at 28.9, is not far behind. The import car that seems to appeal to the oldest median age group of women (49 years old) is the Jaguar XJ6. The Mercedes 190E, at 45.3, is close on its wheels. Thirty-six to thirty-seven percent of the XJ6 and 190E buyers are women!

Now that I've piqued your curiosity, let's peek at a few more stats. The VW Cabriolet attracts the highest percentage of single women buyers. Forty-nine percent of the female buyers purchasing it are single with a median age of 29.1 years. Twelve percent of these buyers are daughters still living at home. And, among the buyers of these nine imports, the Cabriolet buyer's family has the highest median income, \$53,000. On the other hand, the Toyota Tercel is being purchased by families with the lowest median income, \$26,000.

Most popular among the married crowd is the Mitsubishi Cordia. Forty-eight percent of the females purchasing it are married. In the divorced/widowed category, the Toyota Tercel, Toyota Corolla, and Honda Prelude tie with 28 percent of the female buyers choosing them.

Why am I barraging you with all these stats? To show you that a large number of import cars are selling primarily to women. And, this trend is expected to continue. So, the number of women service customers will also continue to grow. Therefore, it's crucial that you learn to work with these women.

Attitude is Everything

Recently, I asked one group of shop owners the following questions:

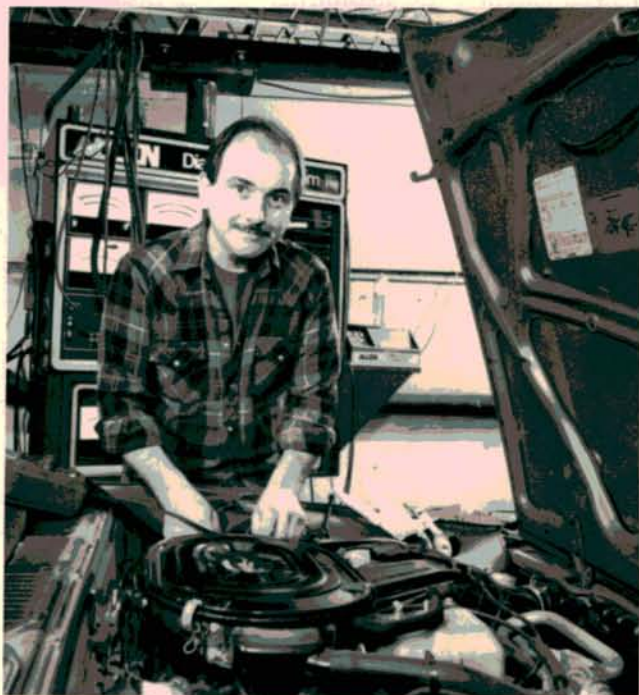
- 1) Do you treat women customers differently than you treat men?
- 2) Do you point out what is wrong with the car?
- 3) Do you take the time to explain what you're going to do to the car to fix it?

In complete astonishment, this group replied, "No! It's the car we're working on, Marla—not the customer!"

If that's your attitude, then you're in for a rude awakening! You're also probably spending more time

than you should be arguing with customers. Some very successful and perceptive owners and managers gave me a very different outlook on dealing with men and women customers. Their philosophy says:

- We do not fix cars for a living, we sell a service.
- The service we sell happens to be *automotive* service.
- Before you can sell anything to anyone, you must first sell yourself.



When he's out of town, Tim Moore likes to phone unknown shops and play "prospect." Of their phone etiquette, Moore claims, "Some are condescending and unconscionable."

You must sell yourself in order to earn the prospect's confidence. Anything you say or do that diminishes her confidence in you may prevent you from ever touching her car. What's more, confidence and trust are the keys to good repeat business. As Tim Moore of Dynotech in Minneapolis, MN, told me, "Just practice the Golden Rule and treat people like you'd want to be treated." I couldn't have said it better myself!

Choosing a Shop

Since money does play an important role in the car care business, a woman who is unsure where to take her car may start out shopping for specials. But women are not stupid. Signs proclaiming "Transmissions—TODAY ONLY—\$19.95" will not fool them. Industry veterans agree that most women who start out shopping for specials end up shopping for mechanics.

Diagnosis and Discussion

Generally, people have a pretty good idea of when something is wrong with their cars. In fact, my sources said that import owners tend to be more aware of their

vehicles' states of health. Dick Mitchell of Jim Wynn VW/Volvo, Norristown, PA, is a veteran service manager who's had extensive experience in both domestic and import shops. "Most people who own European cars," he said, "are more in tune to them than those who own American cars."

Regardless of what you think the potential customer's car knowledge is, don't presume anything. Instead, begin at the beginning. Ask the woman what the car is doing that prompted her to seek your services. Then listen very carefully to her.

Whatever you do, don't say anything condescending such as "Well now, little lady, why don't we take a look to see what's really wrong!" You wouldn't insult a man's intelligence with stupid comments, so treat a woman with the same respect.

Once you have examined the car, explain in easy-to-understand language what is wrong with it. Tony Dibbayawan of T. Scandia in Tigard, OR, suggested that if you're going too quickly, slow down! If the customer still doesn't follow what you're saying, try making analogies to the human body. Example: the oil needs to be changed. The customer wants to know why. Technical answer: your car needs an oil change because the oil begins breaking down and losing its viscosity after your engine has run for so many miles. Therefore, it no longer functions as a proper lubricant. Consequently, the engine's moving parts may freeze up and cause total engine failure.

Better answer: when body fluids are not doing their job and arteries go bad, major heart attacks can occur. So it is with the oil and your car's engine.

First, I Look at the Purse

Assuming that the prospect does decide to do business with you, understand that money matters. To many people, an unforeseen sum of money that has to be spent on car repairs can be devastating. While the male customer may get angry or frustrated, chances are he won't burst into tears. A woman might. According to Nancy Louise of Import Country Garage in Eugene, OR, many of her male mechanics had difficulty dealing with these emotional outbursts. Louise advises that you take these reactions in stride and treat them with plenty of patience and Kleenex.

Set Service Priorities

Once you have diagnosed the car, explain step-by-step what service the vehicle needs and when it needs it. Don't spout off that a hundred items need to be fixed immediately or the car will fall apart.

Be reasonable. Explain what has to be repaired now and what can wait until later. Dynotech's Moore calls this technique "prioritizing." Moore said that setting priorities on services makes these expenditures appear more palatable and affordable to the customer. The result is that you're more likely to write more service

business per customer.

Other shop owners agree with Moore's approach. They also emphasized that you should fill out a personalized maintenance sheet for every car that comes into your shop. The reason behind this? A woman, they told me, is much more likely to follow her own car's maintenance chart than she is to look inside her owner's manual.

As you fill out the maintenance sheet, take time to point out the different parts of the car. Explain what they do in layman's terms. People like to be educated about things they don't know. Your honest explanations about proper car care will help build your customer's trust in you—and therefore, help you win her business.

If the customer still decides to shop around, assure



Dick Mitchell on the difference between domestic and import car owners: "Most people who own European cars are more in tune to them than those who own American cars."

her that:

- she should not be looking for specials;
- she should look for a caring, trustworthy mechanic;
- you'll be happy to help when she decides.

Some shop owners prefer to follow up with a prospect a day or so later to see if she has found a mechanic. If you do follow up, don't pressure her or try any scare tactics on her. You won't build confidence by saying "Listen, if you don't get that thing fixed now, it may blow up and I won't be responsible!"

Little Courtesies Count a Lot

When scheduling appointments for a customer, inquire whether or not she will need a ride home or to work. Remember, people find it extremely inconvenient to take their cars in for repairs. It often means mak-

ing arrangements for a ride home or to work.

If the required work will take longer than a reasonable waiting period, offer to have someone in your shop take the customer where he or she needs to go. Unless, of course, she's headed for Timbuktu or somewhere of equal distance! In that case, offer to take her to the nearest bus stop or train station. And tell her exactly when the car will be ready. If you can't be exact, ballpark it and promise to phone her when it is ready. Don't forget to ask her if she needs a ride back to your shop to pick up the car.

These are small courtesies, but they are things the female customer will definitely appreciate! After all, women are much more attuned to small details and courtesies than men are. Something as simple as your offer of a ride—whether or not it is taken—may well



Nancy Louise comments on women customers: "Women are more able than men to admit that they don't have money/finances. They're also more likely to burst into tears."

make your new customer a life-long patron!

When a woman comes in to pick up her car, take the time to go over an itemized bill with her. A lump-sum bill is as unwelcome as a lump-sum estimate. In plain English, explain what repairs were made. When appropriate, explain how long these repairs can be expected to last. Remind her of the maintenance chart, and tell her that you'll contact her when normal maintenance needs to be scheduled.

Remember that presenting lump-sum bills is no way to build trust with any customer!

If the work done is something other than routine maintenance, some shop owners make a follow-up call several days later to be certain everything's working well. They believe this gesture 1) shows the amount of pride they take in their work, and 2) shows the new customer how important her business is to them. You

can never assume that no news is good news.

Suppose the customer says something is still wrong with her car. Offer to look at the car again and look at it promptly. This kind of considerate treatment will net you recommendations to her friends and relatives.

To maintain contact with your customers, consult your charts regularly and send notices out accordingly. These car-care reminders are often the difference between doing a one-time tune-up and developing a steady customer!

Foreseeing the Future

How do import service professionals see the future of customer relations changing? Be the customer male



Tony Dibbayawan (left): "The younger women seem more informed about their cars. But the older ones seem more anxious and sometimes need a bit of hand-holding."

or female, Mitchell believes managers should assign a car to one mechanic and one mechanic only in order to build customer/technician rapport. Louise asserts that the mechanic of the future is more likely to be a woman because women have the patience and understanding to deal with the rapidly growing female customer base.

Whatever the mechanic's gender, two things are certain:

- competition in the service industry and the growing complexity of automobiles will force customers to seek highly qualified technicians;
- technical competency alone will not guarantee survival.

A combination of competency and good customer relations may not guarantee survival, but it'll sure improve the odds of doing so! ■