

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



If you want to talk effectively with your customers, it helps to have some insight into what they really mean, regardless of what they say. There are more than a few classic lines float-

ing around that are dead give-aways about what's really going on.

Even though a customer may occasionally leave you mumbling in your beer, it's surprising how humor can put some silver in the lining of that cloud.

So pay attention, cross only with the light, and watch for these warning signs of customer tom-foolery:

- *"Don't worry about the brakes, the FM reception sucks."* This observation usually comes from a 17-year-old Phil Collins look-alike. The mangled grill and headlights on his car suggest that he's found an alternate way of stopping. Crude, but effective.

- *"Don't worry about the brakes, just fix the remote trunk release."* The car belongs to this customer's estranged wife who is having a deuce of a time loading groceries. He'd rather be on the back nine at Sunnybrook.

- *"Just patch it up. I'm gonna dump it anyhow."* Parsimony and sentimentality will keep this baby in the family until the Second Coming. Besides, he still owes a grand over loan value on the slug and couldn't unload it on a bet. If you get sucked in, he'll be back on a regular basis complaining that your repair didn't hold up very well. He will then be harder to get rid of than head lice.

- *"But it was just tuned up."* The repair in question was performed during the first months of the Eisenhower administration. My, how time flies.

- *"I'll be back with my attorney."* Don't fall for this old ploy. The attorney can't fix the darn car either.

- *"There's nothing seriously wrong with it."* It took this customer two weeks of diligent searching to find someone who could tell him what he wanted to hear, namely that some small, and more importantly, cheap repair would eliminate his rod knock. The technical source of his information is a neighbor who sells lake-front lots in New Mexico.

- *"What do you mean, it's out of oil?"* This customer firmly believes that the dipstick is hermetically sealed at the factory, and that disturbing it can cause male-patterned baldness. Also believes Nixon will win in '92.

- *"I don't really have the money to fix the car right now."* Besides, there's the golf outing Saturday, the pool needs to be cleaned, and the beer cooler on the boat is broken.

- *"Take as long as you want with the car, there's no hurry."* Today is the 17th of the month. He gets paid on the 15th and 30th and his wife has already exceeded the credit line on the charge, the bill having arrived yesterday.

- *"I'm a mechanic myself, you know. I just don't have time to work on the car."* He and his brother split a case of brew one Saturday and screwed plugs in the Datsun. They only cross-threaded two.

- *"Change the oil but not the filter."* This customer usually showers and puts his dirty socks back on.

- *"I brought my own parts."* The parts in question are either the wrong ones for the repair, or fit a Hupmobile. This man once embarrassed his wife to abstraction by taking his own eggs and bread to a restaurant.

- *"Let's see if the insurance will cover it. The car was in an accident."* The car in question lost a taillight lens to a shopping cart. A week later the transmission went to the great beyond. Looks like a case of simple cause and effect to me.

—By Ralph Birnbaum