

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



Last month's look at outrageous customer behavior was admittedly tongue-in-cheek. And while consumer groups love to throw stones at the auto repair industry, you don't hear much about the frustrations some

customers inflict on their mechanics.

Far too many customers know far too little about their cars. Knowledge of engine overhauls is not necessary. A basic familiarity with the operation of the vehicle, and an awareness of the need for proper maintenance doesn't seem unreasonable, however.

There are times when public transportation seems to be the only logical alternative for some folks.

The following examples are real — and sobering. And even though they may tempt you to hire a graduate of the Ayatollah Khomeini School of Public Relations for the front desk, you must resist.

- A customer called to schedule an appointment. Some annoying light on the dash refused to go out. It was so annoying that he'd covered it with black tape. He wasn't sure which light it was.

He refused to believe it was anything serious. He also refused to look at the owner's manual to determine what the light was telling him.

The car arrived on the awkward end of a tow truck the next day. "Darn thing quit," he mumbled. "While you've got it, fix that stupid light." That stupid light was the oil pressure warning light. The motor was trash.

When we gave him the bad news, he swore for almost 20 minutes without repeating a single word. We were crooks, liars, and a disgrace to the American way of life.

He finally wore himself out. "Go ahead and do what you have to to fix it," he said. "And please, please fix that light."

- Once in a while you see a car that's been so totally neglected that you're amazed it ran as long as it did. That was the case with a car that came smoking and panting in the door with a blown head gasket.

The engine oil was beyond filthy, the tires were all half-flat, and the remaining coolant would fit in a small sponge.

To describe the customer as "cheap" would be too flattering. In addition to the oil change and filter, replacement coolant, and a few clamps, we were allowed to replace only the very worst hose — the leaking one.

For giggles, I initialed the oil filter with a paint stick before I shipped the car. (Zoologists tag wildlife — why can't I paint filters?)

A year and almost 20,000 miles later, the car

returned. *Deja vu!* Same car, same problem, same condition. The oil filter still had my initials on it.

When I tried again to convince the customer that routine maintenance and under-the-hood inspections were essential, I was informed that she hadn't bought a new car to have to "tinker with it all the time."

- A customer returned with his car, one month after we'd overhauled the carburetor. It was running badly again. Why hadn't we done a good job of fixing it the first time? The customer was very upset with us for being inconvenienced in this way.

A look inside the air cleaner housing revealed a five story mouse mansion and about three pounds of dog food, stored by the little critters.

When informed that the dog food was restricting the air intake, the customer responded, "That's impossible, we never give the dog anything to eat in the car!"

Go ahead, try to keep a straight face.

I think it's pretty obvious that there's a real need for customer training. Some of your customers will steadfastly refuse to learn anything at all about their vehicles. These customers will usually do as little as possible in terms of maintenance, and cry the loudest and most incoherently when the pain reaches their pocketbooks.

There are customers willing to learn and cooperate with a little coaching, however. They would love to have someone work with them to protect their investment. Many are willing to attend an evening class on the fundamentals of auto ownership.

Some will respond to a personalized maintenance schedule for their glove box. Mailing friendly reminders at regular intervals about oil changes and tune-ups will appeal to others.

What are you doing to handle this problem of customer training? If you've found a recipe that works, let us know. It is a real problem, and will probably get worse as the gap between customer understanding, and vehicle complexity widens.

Perhaps a little time spent making your customers easier to work with will make their cars easier and more profitable to repair.

Now that people spend more time paying for their cars than it took them to complete college, it seems only logical that they make some effort to learn to care for this very expensive purchase.

—By Ralph Birnbaum