

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



It was a quarter 'til five. It was Friday. Sweet Friday. It had been a long hard week. Bad weather had produced long lines of no-starts and frozen fuel lines. Many of our customers, suffering from the late

winter blues, had proven impatient and irritable.

Today, in particular, had seemed especially trying for all concerned.

As we struggled through the slush and snow trying to deliver as many cars to customers as possible, we all kept an eye on the clock.

At five before five, two men entered the front door. (Gimme a break, I thought.)

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"Yeah, we need a timing."

"Excuse me?" I said.

"Whattaya deaf? We need a timing."

(Four or eight cut—with or without anchovies?)

"I see. You're having a problem with your car."

"No, it ain't my car, it's my brother-in-law's car," he said pointing to the smallish man at his side. The brother-in-law smiled sheepishly, offering a small wave that looked like he was washing windows.

It was a clear cut case of DBIL (Dreaded Brother-in-Law) Syndrome if ever I'd seen it.

"Do you mind my asking what's wrong with the car?"

"The car won't start when it's cold, okay? What is this, 20 questions or what?"

Terminal halitosis, notwithstanding, I was beginning to genuinely dislike this character. The owner of the car had said nothing. I was beginning to feel sorry for him. Especially when it came to his sister's choice of husbands. This one obviously had the demeanor of an unfed dog.

"Excuse me, sir," I said, turning to the owner of the vehicle, "Does the car refuse to crank or does it crank but won't..."

"He doesn't know squat about a car," the brother-in-law interrupted. "If he did, he wouldn't have taken it to every moron wrench-turner in town to get it fixed. I been fixin' it for him."

At this point, my patience tried and tired, I managed a smile through clenched teeth. "Let's take a look at her," I suggested.

Grudgingly, the brother-in-law led the way to a dented, leaning little sedan. As he raised the hood, I winced. The car needed a priest, not a mechanic. With the exception of a shiny new alternator and battery, the contents of the engine compartment looked like the inside of Carlsbad Caverns.

"The battery's going dead, huh?"

The brother-in-law eyed me suspiciously. "You

gonna time this thing or what?"

"No," I replied, "I'm afraid I'm not interested."

"Whatsamatter, you too good or something?"

"Look, is there any way you'd let me talk to this gentleman?" I said, pointing to the owner. "I really need to ask him a couple questions."

"I already told you, he don't know nothing about a car."

"He doesn't need to know a lot about cars, all he needs to do is to accurately describe what the car is doing. We have to start somewhere."

The owner of the car, finally given an opening, beamed from ear to ear as he found his voice and unloaded.

"Wellitwon't start," he smiled. "Won't do a thing but go clickclickclick." He spoke rapidly, running his words together. You could tell he wasn't allowed to talk often—or for very long. He needed to hurry.

"It's like it's outta time or..." The brother-in-law wasn't about to cave in without a fight.

"I'm sorry, but we weren't quite finished," I responded, never taking my eyes off the owner. The brother-in-law simmered.

I asked the owner for the keys, opened a creaking door and turned the ignition to the "on" position.

There was an oil light burning, but the charge indicator light was out. Hmmm.

I explained to the owner that the charge indicator had to work for his car's charging system to work. He nodded, smiling. With hands out, palms upward he added, "Fix it."

No fuss, no muss, just fix it. The brother-in-law, frustrated beyond belief, walked away uttering assorted obscenities.

I explained to the owner that we'd pull the car inside, charge the battery fully, and test the electrical system. I informed him of the basic checkout charge and reassured him that we'd call back with an estimate of repair costs. The owner's joy was exceeded only by his brother-in-law's ire.

As things turned out, I had to come in on Saturday to install the bulb and clean some connections. In the long run, the owner turned out to be a good customer. The brother-in-law is only a painful memory.

—By Ralph Birnbaum