

# CARSIDE MANNER

## REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



The mess shown in the photo is brought to you compliments of an old friend of mine. This photo was not a set-up. He actually works from this pile.

Don't doubt his abilities. Somehow

he finds whatever he needs, whenever he needs it. Occasionally, he disassembles a tranny or an engine and throws them into the pile, just to up the ante.

Somehow, he manages to make some sense out of this chaos and actually fixes things. He's kind of the Robin Williams of improvisational auto repair, a semi-gonzo, fly-by-the-seat-of-his-pants genius.

Unfortunately, he's not always taken seriously or given the credit he deserves for the fine job he does fixing cars. Instead of receiving praise from management, he normally hears about the need for a haircut and a shave, or the frightful conditions he finds conducive to proper automotive repair. Appearance can be reality.

### GETTING LOST IN YOUR WORK

I've known a lot of really talented people over the years whose minds were so busy solving problems that they had no patience whatsoever with the appearance of what they were doing. To them, the proof was in the pudding. Did I fix it, or didn't I? If it's fixed, then don't bother me with the piddling details.

The problem with this theory, is that we don't work in a vacuum. We not only present the quality of our work to the public, but a personal image as well. The fact that you fixed the car may not be enough to satisfy some people. The fact that you really know your stuff may not be enough either. The customer wants to feel comfortable with you, reassured that he got a quality repair from a talented person at a reasonable price.

Try to imagine a doctor digging through a pile of potato chip bags and empty pop cans to find his scalpel. Not a very reassuring picture is it?

Before I start sounding holier than thou about this matter, let me digress to inform you that I can be one of the great slobbers of all time. I know that and readily accept the responsibility for my occasionally slovenly behavior. I had to make a conscious effort over the years not to let my tool box and work area look like the Thing that ate New York.

You know how it goes. You get wrapped up in the difficulties of the job. You forget to drain all the oil from a transmission before you upend it. And so on.

And just about the time you get so wrapped up in what you're doing that you forget how overwhelming the mess has become, you pull a stunt like lighting that oil slick with a stray spark from a welding torch,

usually with the customer watching.

Believe me, I can relate.

There's no denying that some customers arrive with a chip on their shoulders. They have a low opinion of mechanics as a whole and relish any bad press given the trade by journalists and consumerists who have never fixed anything in their lives. The unfortunate reality is that we are engaged in a battle to improve our image. We live in a time when image is



reality. Leased yuppies and Gucci shoes seem to be the standards by which success is measured.

The way things are, your image can be either your biggest asset or an insurmountable liability.

### FIGHTING THE IMAGE MAKERS

The slander of the automotive technician has spread to the advertising world. Instead of promoting the positive aspects of their product in the hands of a qualified technician, some advertisers have chosen to grab a few laughs at our expense. We have been portrayed as mindless buffoons who slobber, wear our hats sideways, and speak in mumbling monotones.

Is it any wonder we have a hard time projecting an image of competence?

Personally, I don't care if a man carries his tools to work in a paper sack or avoids a razor like the plague, as long as he fixes cars. I'm just getting tired of being portrayed as an idiot just because I repair cars for a living. And when these yoyos start taking their pot shots at the trade, I'd hate to think I did anything to support their foolishness.

The image change we need so badly is going to be an uphill battle. But the appearance of order and discipline is a critical first step in making people take us seriously.

—By Ralph Birnbaum