

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



CHOCOLATE SAM AND THE BECKWITH BROTHERS

—By Ralph Birnbaum

Last Saturday I spent some time going over our 10-year-old, bronze, Toyota Corona. My girls affectionately call him Chocolate Sam. At 110,000 miles, Sam has more than a few gray hairs showing. I'm afraid that our obsession with road salt in the state of Ohio is finally taking its toll.

At any rate, Sam's cosmetic deterioration aside, he is still one heck of a car. I suspect that he had good genes to start with. But I've spent time with Sam on a regular basis, checking his belts and fluid levels, looking for the telltale signs of a developing problem, and correcting little faults before they became big ones. He always has clean oil in his crankcase. He sips his fuel and breathes through fresh filters. His engine, transmission, and differential have never been apart for any major repair.

My wife has sensibly agreed to look under the hood once a week when I'm away on business, and is quick to inform me of any potential problems. If Sam were the family pet, he'd get the kind of dog food that makes gravy.

Saturday, as I worked cleaning the battery terminals, I was struck by the fact that a lot of people don't have a mechanic "on retainer" to do all these things, and good genes aside, I am quite sure that Sam's lengthy service is directly proportional to the care he's gotten.

This all leads me to wonder what I'd do if I had to rely on someone else to keep Sam running; someone who doesn't know him on a first name basis.

I'd want someone who likes working on cars. Someone who appreciates the value of keeping good equipment in proper running order on a regular basis. Someone who'd rather have me as a steady customer, paying regular but manageable maintenance bills, instead of the once only, or occasional customer who brings his four-wheeled catastrophe in for major surgery.

Odds are, I'd be a lot happier customer. My car would be more fun to drive, less apt to strand me on a frozen winter's night. The likelihood of my being without Sam's services as the result of a major breakdown would also be reduced. And if Sam were a new car, I might even have something left of him when the payment book was empty. (He was, and I do!)

If I didn't do my own work, I think I'd look for a fellow like David Beckwith.

IN FOR THE LONG HAUL

I recently had the pleasure of talking with Mr. Beckwith, who with his brother Daniel, runs Beckwith Import Service in West Newbury, Massachusetts.

I had originally called him about a specific automotive question, but the conversation wandered a bit, and the topic of customer relations came up.

Beckwith has some good ideas about handling customer relations, that have a lot to do with building the foundation of a stable, successful business. A business built for the long haul.

He's not interested in getting rich every time he writes a repair order. He's more interested in building a steady, repeat clientele by offering the type of attention to his customer's cars that I give old Sam.

He suggests that service is the name of the game. He uses the suggested maintenance schedule as a rule of thumb, and then custom tailors it to fit the needs of each specific customer.

Rather than charge a customer for a full blown maintenance every 15,000 miles, he chooses to combine a more-frequent-than-recommended oil change schedule with an inspection. At this time he makes minor adjustments, looks for signs of coming problems, and generally keeps tabs on the general health of the vehicle. His customers are conditioned to bring their cars in at regular intervals for their "ounce of prevention".

Then, at 30,000 miles, the vehicle gets a thorough maintenance and inspection. It's more expensive than the oil change check-ups, but most major inspections are routine as a result of the ongoing care the vehicle has received. Since they work only on Hondas, the Beckwith's have managed to custom tailor their operation and improve the quality of their service. They've also managed to cut costs, both for themselves and for their customers by looking for ways to prolong the useful life of key components and if necessary, to repair, instead of simply replacing components when they do fail.

Beckwith informed me that of their approximately 600 regular customers, some now have 200,000 miles on their vehicles. Many own more than one Honda. The vast majority will repurchase. The cars have good genes, and their owners know where to take them for service.

PLAYING THE ODDS

Routine maintenance has never been a guarantee that a car would never experience a major break down. The results of sustained negligence are a lot more predictable, however.

Customers need to understand the difference.

We need to start convincing customers that a little time and money now, can save them a lot of both later.

Service (as distinguished from repair) is a big market. And a car that was good to start with will usually repay your attention with better than average service.

Ask Chocolate Sam.