

Are Customers Flipping Over You?

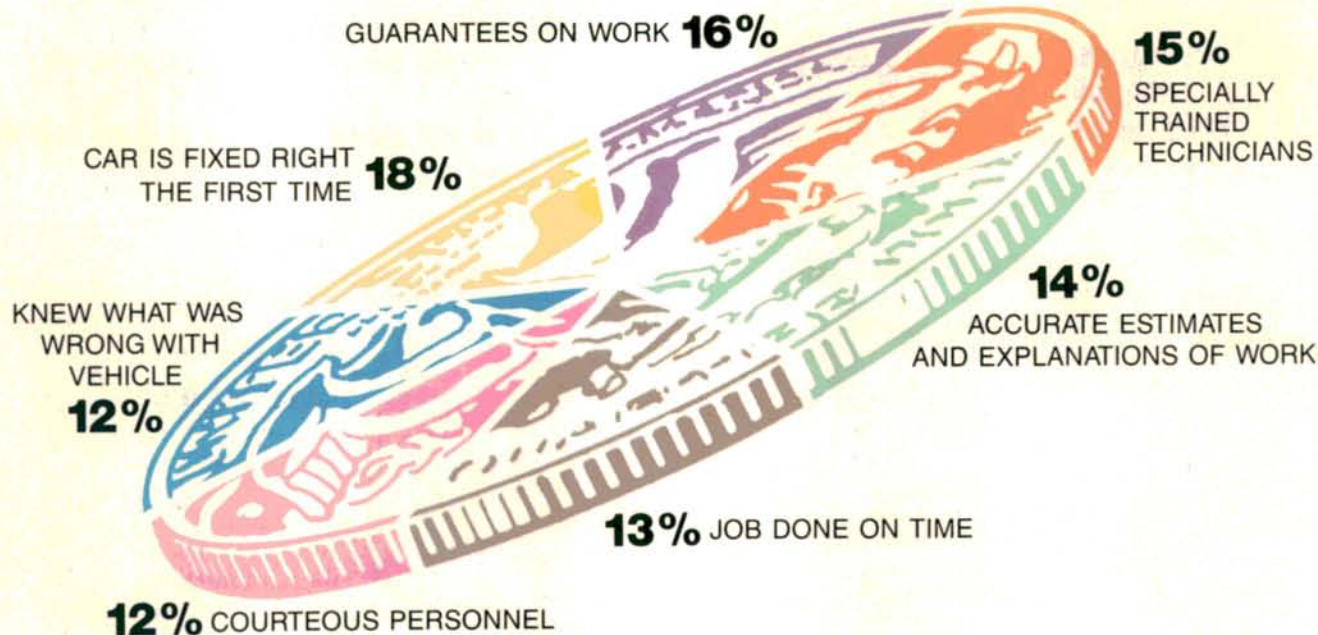


A toss of the coin, a roll of the dice—what causes a customer to look at you twice? That is what we at *Import Service* wanted to find out. We thought that if we knew the answer to that extremely important question then we could better inform you how to attract and maintain customers. So we did a little surveying. We first phoned 1000 households known to have registered import vehicles in the 3-8 year old (service age) category. "What," we asked, "was the main reason you chose the service facility that you did?" We compiled those answers and came up with the top 14 items. We then phoned an additional 1000 people and asked them which of the items they felt was the

most important.

We found, not surprisingly, that the items fell into two categories—quality and convenience. Sixty-nine percent of those polled felt that the quality-related attributes were the most important. Thirty-one percent cited the convenience qualities as the deciding factors in choosing a service facility.

We took our findings back to our readers. At random, we pulled out some 20 or so names from our computer's list of import repair specialists. "What do you think of these items?" we asked them. "What do you feel are the main reasons customers choose you, and what do you do to ensure that they will continue



to come to you?" We hope that the results of our survey, combined with their suggestions, will help you to increase your business volume.

Quality

According to Webster's Dictionary, quality is the optimum price-value relationship—in other words, getting the most for your dollars spent. That seems to make sense. After all, who likes to plunk down money, and not feel that it's well-spent? What makes purchasers of automotive services feel that they are getting their money's worth? Let's take a look at what the consumers have to say:

- Car is fixed right the first time;
- Company stands behind work and guarantees it;
- Technicians are specially trained (by car line or type of service);
- Technician provides me with accurate estimate and explanation of cost and work done;
- The job is done in a timely manner, as expressed in estimate;
- Personnel are courteous and helpful;
- Technician knows what is wrong with my vehicle.

All of the above points are various definitions of quality. How can you increase your "quality image" to help draw customers? First you have to establish an image. Certainly, there's no big magic to that. In fact, we've already discussed things like yellow pages advertising, signage, radio spots, and newspaper space, in previous issues. What we haven't really talked about is word-of-mouth advertising. It may not be a reason that customers return to a service facility, but it was mentioned repeatedly by consumers and shop owners as a reason that customers go to one in the first place. You have to become **the** place in town

to have a car fixed. To do that, you need to be honest, and a little bit creative.

Be honest. Give accurate estimates on cost and the time it will take you to repair the vehicle. "Low-balling" bids (giving a low estimate and then charging more when the customer comes in to pay for the work) often backfire because a customer will, most likely, never return to you again. It's sort of like the places that play "bait and switch," offering you inferior goods for a low price. You go to the store, and they're either out of that item, or they try to talk you into a more expensive one. Do you return? I doubt it.

What if you cannot do the repair because of time, knowledge or equipment?

"Customers are looking for quality and timeliness. Don't work on anything if you're not 101% qualified because all you'll get is frustrated customers."

Steve de Jung
Owner of de Jung Motorsport
Cotati, California.

According to our consumers, your honesty will make them return and recommend you. Your broken promises to fix a car by a certain time, or assurance that you can fix a vehicle, when you really can't, will quickly turn customers away. Many of our readers reiterated that taking a car to be repaired is a big inconvenience. So customers want it done right the first time. They don't want to keep taking time out of their days to get their vehicles repaired.

Consumers and shop owners agree that an explanation of the work done on the car, as well as a price breakdown, are two key ways to produce satisfied customers. "I love how you explain things, and make them simple so I can understand," remarked one customer to Steve de Jung. Customers need to feel that you are treating them honestly and intelligently. According to Joe Barstys, Head of Customer Service Satisfaction at Subaru, attitude sells a customer. Other things that sell customers? Parts and warranted work.

Customers are looking for parts that are equivalent to or better than OE parts. So install quality merchandise. Let customers know what parts you are using and be certain that they feel comfortable about it. Also, return or show them any parts you take off the car. That way, they know that you are replacing when you say you are.

"On our invoice, we note that we provide a three month/3000 mile warranty. Plus, we tell them that if it's not right, they can bring it back."

Deborah Shumake
Manager of Big Al's Small Car Repair
Americus, Georgia.

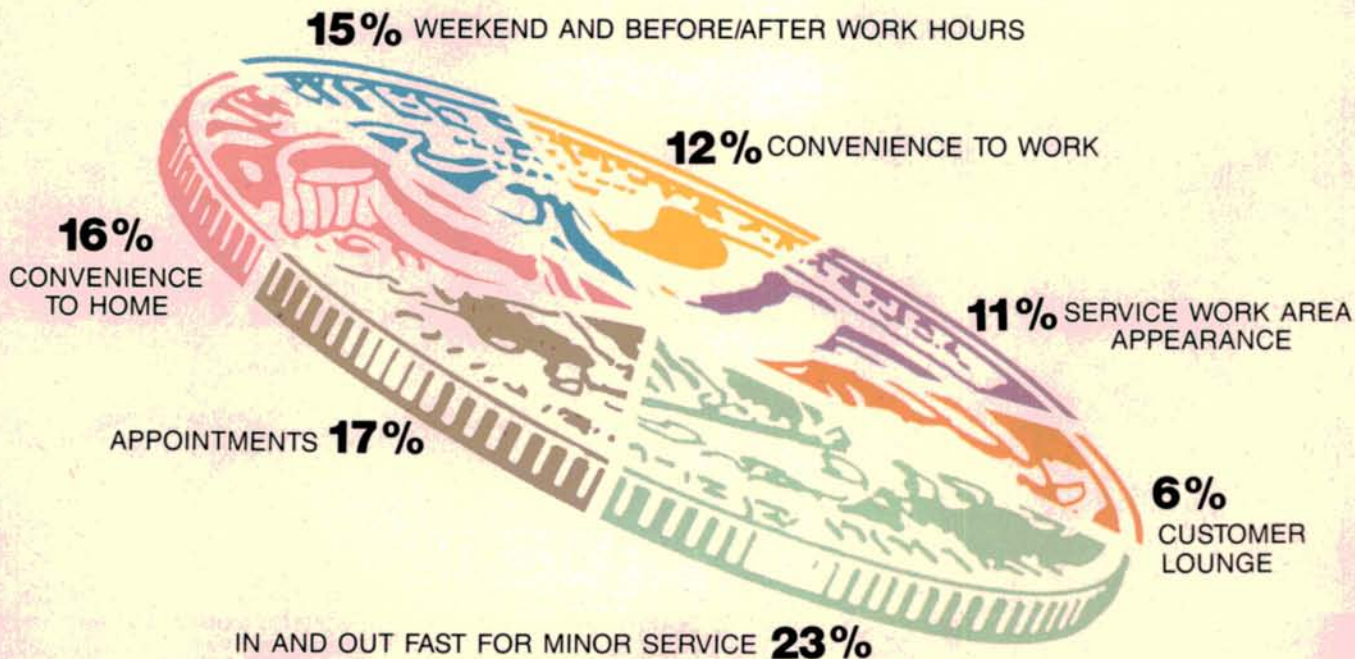
Stand behind your work by guaranteeing it for a certain period of time. Remember, that's the number two item cited by our consumers as a reason for choosing the facility they did. Do follow-up work with your customers to see that they are content with the service. If they are not, offer to do something about it.

Learn to use your customers as an advertising tool. How? Make them feel familiar and appreciated. Learn about them: their names, jobs, interests, families, and keep files. Then, when they come in, talk to them, not only about the work to be done, but about their lives. Offer discounts, service perks (for example, a free oil and filter change), or promotional gift items to customers who refer other people to you. If you have specific diagnostic equipment, employees who are specially trained, or have won awards of any sort, advertise those facts. Let your customers know. They'll pass the word around. Also, include this information in your ads and mailings.

Mailings are a fairly easy way to attract new customers and keep the old ones coming. Send out maintenance reminders to old customers. Send greeting cards on holidays if you'd like. To attract new customers, go to a company like R.L. Polk, who can provide you with registration lists of vehicle owners in your area. For a few cents a name, you can acquire hundreds of names of potential customers in your area. Send out mailings to acquaint them with you and your services. If your old customers permit, include names and numbers of people to contact for references.

Convenience

While it may appear that the majority of customers are willing to trade convenience for quality, 31% of the consumers we polled did choose convenience factors as their reasons for patronizing a service facility. We usually think of convenience in terms of location. And, short of moving your shop, this is something which can be fixed. Don't ignore potential customers who live outside of your service area. They may shop



or work in your area. Distribute flyers or advertise that you can "fix the car while they shop or work." If you do advertise in this way, you may want to provide your customers with transportation to or from work or shopping while their car is being repaired. While our consumers polled did not expect loaner cars or transportation, they did mention it as an item that they greatly appreciated. One of our readers even noted that he's loaned his own car to many a customer while he drove theirs to discover what was wrong with it. If you do this, please be certain that you're insured accordingly.

Other factors mentioned as convenience items were:

- availability of appointments
- hours open
- appearance of service work area
- customer lounge

Do you take appointments? This seems to be a double-edged sword. Some people said that they don't like to just wait, they want an appointment. They also don't like to wait too long to get one. In many cases, the lengthy wait for dealer service was one key reason that consumers turned to independent repair facilities. Customers also like to be able to drop off cars when

an emergency or a minor repair comes up. Flexibility is the key here. One way to handle this is to schedule big jobs and allow minor repairs and emergency work to come in unscheduled.

What are your hours? Are they consistent year-round? Do they appeal to people needing weekend or evening service? If so, advertise these facts. Working customers cannot always get away from work to bring their vehicles in or pick them up. So, they appreciate facilities that are open before work, after work, or on weekends.

Many of the customers who don't have traditional jobs are moms. To them, as well as to most of your customers, appearance counts. "Cleanliness," "a clean shop," "neat employees,"—those items cropped up again and again in our conversations with both customers and owners. Neat service areas, friendly employees, technicians in shop coats—these things don't go unnoticed. Customers appreciate lounges that provide chairs and entertainment, in the form of books, magazines, or toys, for their children. Free beverages, neat service areas, and clean bathrooms are also mentioned as noted conveniences. Many of our readers not only provide these conveniences, but insist upon washing customers' vehicles before returning them.

“They are so pleased,” one reader noted, “to get their cars back not only fixed, but clean.” I know, from personal experience, that my next stop after the repair garage is always the car wash.

Appearance is not only how you look, but how you act, how concerned and caring you appear to the customer. “I feel a lot more comfortable trying to explain that my car is making strange noises to someone who is attentive and courteous, than to someone who is looking at me like I have no idea what I’m saying,” said one pollee. “Rudeness,” “snottiness,” “an attitude,”—these items showed up as reasons customers would never return to a facility again.

“Listen to customers. They know more about their cars than anyone. Women especially. When a woman tells me something, even if I can’t find it right away, I can bet that it does exist.”

Rodger Grieb
President of Jerviden’s Service
Syracuse, New York.

“Listen to your customers, treat them well, and fix the car right the first time and they won’t mind paying for service,” summed up another service owner. That seems to be true. In our survey, the price issue came up only as a reason for not choosing a service outlet, or as a reason for annoyance if the car wasn’t fixed right. Many shop owners did seem to think that price was an important factor. If you are not doing all you can to satisfy your customers, then price probably will be an issue. And, in some cases, no matter what you do, you’ll end up with a problem customer who will never be satisfied. But, in most cases, if you are giving fair, realistic estimates, explaining the service, making the customer feel well-cared for, and fixing the car correctly, and in a timely manner, then price should not be an issue.

That’s a tall order, I know. But, a lot of you out there are already filling it. And if you aren’t, you can learn to.

Good luck!

—By Marla Schleider