

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



I stopped the other day to see my old buddy Buttsn D. Ashtrey. (His parents were really sick people.) Buttsn runs a repair shop nearby and always has something interesting going on. Today was no

exception. "C'mon out back," he smiled. "I have a little project I want to show you."

He led me to a late model sedan, hood up and dashboard removed. The exposed wiring harness was charred and torn. It looked like the type of eighth grade science project that earns the student an incomplete and leaves the teacher wishing the kid had made an anemometer out of sliced ping pong balls.

"Real beauty, eh?" Buttsn smiled from ear to ear.

"How did you inherit this mess?" I asked.

"Nobody else wanted to touch it. You see this guy's kid installed one of those killer sound systems. The kind that leave you brain dead from decibel abuse in about ten minutes. He cut speaker holes in those pretty door panels with a small chainsaw. Then he started baring wires under the dash and randomly hooked up stereo feeds until it made loud music."

The holes in the velour door panels were indeed a work of art. I wondered where the kid was staying these days.

Buttsn continued. "As if that wasn't bad enough, the kid just twisted the wires together—no solder, no butt connectors, no tape. And then he left all the bared wires he didn't use just laying there."

"What did the customer have to say about all this?" I asked.

"Boy, was he ever happy," Buttsn said dryly. "The dash lights started flickering like the strip in Vegas. He started looking for a place to buy fuses in bulk. It finally got to the point where 30 amp fuses in 5 amp slots weren't enough. And then the smoke started rolling out."

"Did that finally convince him to seek professional help?" I asked.

"No not really. Apparently the harness melted just enough to make a stink and keep on working on an intermittent basis. The customer felt that once some of the trapped smoke had been released, things would be okay."

"The old trapped smoke theory," I observed.

"Yeah, well the next time the smoke started, it was curtains, so to speak. The guy actually had to leave the car it was so bad. Fortunately, somebody stopped and disconnected the battery for him before the car torched itself."

"And then you inherited it?"

"No, the car was towed to a couple of guys who just threw up their hands and asked not to become involved

"By the time I saw it, the guy was wishing the car had burned."

"So why'd you take it in?" I asked.

Buttsn smiled. "I love jobs like this. I grab the wiring diagram, my test equipment, my soldering iron, some heat shrink tubing, and a roll of tape. I make a pot of coffee, turn on some nice music, and proceed to conquer the beast."

"Sometimes, I have to buy a new harness and install it, but usually my repairs are actually better than original. I use a heavier gauge wire wherever I feel it's necessary. I actually provide separate ground wires for key consumers."

"Isn't this all pretty expensive for the customer?"

"Most customers are happy to find someone who'll take the job in the first place. I don't gouge them for the repairs, but I do make money on these. The customer understands that this won't be a rush job. He's informed that I won't shortcut the job, and he also understands that it won't be cheap. The nastier and uglier the job, the more I want it."

"And the best part of all, is that I make a friend for life. I would much rather make a new customer out of a job like this than I would out of an oil change special. When this guy leaves here, he'll know what I can do and he'll trust me. Most of the time, this kind of job wins me a regular customer."

I stopped back to see Buttsn a week later to see how things had gone. The customer had ordered new door trim, which was being installed when I arrived. Buttsn had reinstalled the original radio at the customer's request, and everything was back in working order.

"How's the man's son doing?" I asked.

Buttsn smiled. "Well he's still living at home, but the old man has informed him that any further attempts to act like young Tom Edison will leave him grounded longer than the Spruce Goose."

—By Ralph Birnbaum

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