

# CARSIDE MANNER

## REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



At one time or another, most of us have looked down at our hands wondering where the grease ends and that fresh blood begins, and muttered angrily, "Are we having fun yet?"

You stand there, tapped out and frustrated. The car on your lift is begging for the services of an exorcist. The customer who owns the piece is clearly disturbed by the apparent lack of progress, and shares his disdain with vigor. And knee deep in all this unhappiness you realize that things aren't as simple, or as much fun as they used to be.

This entire situation—car, customer, and consternation—is really getting the upper hand. The biggest problem here, however, is that you've started fighting yourself. Your batteries are low and you're beginning to actually *dislike* the customer.

### REMEMBERING WHY

So why did you pick auto repair? Probably because you liked doing it. And the reason you liked it? Probably because you did it well.

You were young and a little crazy. The word "failure" wasn't in your vocabulary yet. You were ready to make a fearless attack into the unknown where not-knowing-any-better made you intrepid and eager. You stubbed the big toe on your ego, busted your knuckles, and kept right on going.

Cars were like little puzzles, and people were going to pay you money to figure them out. Nothing dull, boring, or routine here. No two were exactly alike, although many were similar. The trick was understanding all the variations and using a little ingenuity to solve the puzzle. Money was important, but it wasn't everything. Good thing, because there were days when money wouldn't have been enough.

You see, I never forgot the rush I got out of fixing that first Volkswagen engine. The little grinder had done an unbelievably accurate impression of a grenade as I drove to work one day.

You know. Loud noises, smoke, and small flying pieces of metal. I mean, we're talking *realistic* here.

Anyhow, after my old man towed me home, he looked at that piston rod standing at attention through a jagged hole in the case and pronounced the engine DOA. When I suggested to him that I would fix the car myself, he pronounced me DUMB.

Having the old man tell me I couldn't do something had always been incentive enough for me, and this small matter was no exception. Never mind that I had no knowledge of what to do or where to start. If ignorance was bliss, I was a truly happy young man.

### FOOLS RUSH IN

I won't drag you through each and every agonizing detail. There are, after all, limitations on the space provided for this column, not to mention the patience of both my readers. Suffice it to say that the next four days—18 to 20 hour days—were among the happiest of my life.

Time flew. Setbacks were expected, and as a result, accepted as part of the game. Good tools and information were hard to come by. The junk yard sold me an anchor-quality used engine. My family suggested that the Good Lord had done all of creation in only a week—including a day of rest. And on. And on. Amazingly, none of it ever got the better of me, because I was having fun.

### IT RAN!

You heard me. It ran. It was good to just stand there and listen to it run. I almost got a tan from basking in my own glory.

Later, when fixing cars became a job, instead of a hobby, the addition of a thing called the "customer" to the equation had a tendency to erode some of that early enthusiasm. Humans, it turned out, just weren't as predictable as mechanical things, and as a result, proved to be a very frustrating commodity.

And since I wasn't equipped with a low battery light to tell me when my attitude needed recharging, I ran dangerously low on several occasions. When the fun factor decreased, tolerance for the creatures from our planet who own and drive cars suffered correspondingly.

Well I don't know what works for you, but I'm sure most of you have your own past glories to recall. And sometimes, looking back helps most by showing you just how far you've come; from intrepid amateur to master of the puzzle.

Fixing cars, having fun.

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