

# CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



**WHAT WE HAVE  
HERE IS A FAIL-  
URE TO COMMU-  
NICATE**

Communicating with your customers is one of the most difficult and occasionally frustrating parts of your business life. Good communications prevent misunderstandings. Good communications separate what a customer says he wants from what he expects. Good communications help unearth the real problem with the car so you can satisfy your customers. Good communications can bring the customers back to your door and enhance the perceived quality of your work.

Consider these observations from two of our readers.

## HOW TO KEEP 'EM

E.T. suggests that one of the best ways to keep tabs on customer satisfaction is to be sure the customer always pays the bill in full. It's an old joke, but he suggests that he and the bank have an agreement. He doesn't lend money—they don't fix cars.

"If a customer pays the bill in full, and has a complaint, you're more apt to hear about it. He paid to have the car fixed and he wants it right." E.T. makes it as easy as possible to pay by accepting most major credit cards, knowing that most people with cards have extended credit available through the card. A large sign explains in no uncertain terms that an accounts receivable file is not to be found on the premises.

"If a customer pays only part of the bill and isn't satisfied, he may feel that since he only got part of the job, you're only entitled to part of the payment. He doesn't pay the balance and surely doesn't come back to complain. Now you're out the cash, and you lost the customer."

Most importantly, if there is a problem, the time to handle it is now, right now. He's never embarrassed to ask customers for their opinions of his service, and doesn't make the customer wait for an adjustment.

He even takes the time to talk to customers away from the shop. "If I see a guy at a party and he's a customer, I ask him right in front of everybody what he thinks of my work. Usually it's positive, but even if it isn't, it gives him the chance to tell me how to make things right. I look like I care about his business and other people notice. They ask me for a business card."

## HOW NOT TO LOSE 'EM

Occasionally, a customer puts his foot in his mouth and is too embarrassed to face you. He was unhappy about something, complained, and later found that he was wrong to blame you. Now he's so embarrassed at his own stupidity that he just stays away.

This one is really tough. The customer is gone, and you don't even know it. How are you supposed to deal with it?

D.S. sold a set of tires to one of his better customers. The customer had two vehicles he regularly brought for service, never complained about anything, and always paid his bill without a hassle.

A few months after purchasing the tires, the customer's wife called to ask if the tires were warranted against road hazards. D.S. informed her that they weren't covered for road hazard damage. She accepted the news without complaint and hung up.

"That was a mistake on my part," says D.S. "The woman had a problem and needed help. My first reaction was to answer her question. I should have been solving her problem." Later, her husband called. He was civil, but there was a certain edge to his voice. He didn't like the idea of having to pay for a new tire. He was also reluctant to have D.S. just absorb the cost. Wasn't there something the "factory" could do to make it right?

"This guy didn't want to owe me. We talked about the whole thing but the longer we went on, the more upset he got. I finally told him what I should have told his wife in the first place—to bring the car in and let me look at the tire.

"Turns out the tire was low on air. That's all. It wasn't damaged. I pulled the tire and wheel, checked it, corrected the tire pressure, and explained the situation. She thanked me, apologized for the hassle, and left.

"A week later I see the guy's car down the street at another garage. I know he's not going to get the same service there. He knows it too. But he made a fool of himself about nothing. He's just too embarrassed to come back. It's too bad."

You're human and so is the customer. You get hurried and distracted and sometimes the two of you just aren't on the same wavelength. But ultimately, the most important things are to keep the customer coming back; to keep the dialogue going; to listen as carefully as possible to what the customer has to say; and to view good communications as the start of problem solving.

Opening clear lines of communication, using them to your best advantage, and keeping them open is hard work, but it sure beats the unwanted results from a failure to communicate.

—By Ralph Birnbaum