

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



Imagine going into a restaurant where all the menu selections are printed in a language you don't speak. Imagine that no one will explain to you what it is you're ordering. Imagine that you have to

guess at your selection and hope for the best. I doubt you'll stay for dinner.

Well some of your customers have the same problem understanding just what they're ordering from your shop's menu when they try to understand the complexities of auto-ese. It's all too easy at times to forget that many of your customers don't understand an oxygen sensor any better than they do the Greek alphabet.

This can be especially frustrating to those customers who really would like to understand what's going on. And you can be sure that just like you, they want to know what they're getting for their money.

But how are you supposed to explain all this to the customer's satisfaction? How do you tell a customer what happens to a contaminated oxygen sensor? Or what an oxygen sensor is, for that matter?

HOOSIER HOSPITALITY

Trish and Curtis Lloyd of Lloyd's Professional Auto Repair in Knox, Indiana, have decided that a picture really is worth a thousand words when trying to explain just what happens when the frammiss hits the gizmo and the rest hits the fan.

The Lloyds operate a family business that specializes in import vehicle repair. Knox is a rural community, and the Lloyds' attitude toward their customers reflects the civility of our great Midwest.

The Lloyds wanted to avoid the confusion that some customers experienced when it came to understanding auto repairs. They really wanted a better way to communicate with their clients. Since teaching the complexities of automotive theory was a pretty big task, they decided to at least eliminate some confusion about automotive parts.

SHOW AND SELL

They took a large piece of plywood and made themselves a parts display board. It reads "CAR PARTS. What are they? What do they do?" Trish Lloyd writes, "It's a great attention getter and conversation piece. But most of all, it has been an education builder for our customers."

Attached to the board are all sorts of used and damaged car parts. Included are samples of broken or damaged parts, as well as parts that have suffered from the effects of corrosion or contamination.

"For example, you can tell a customer that he needs an oxygen sensor . . . and if you have an old sensor that has corrosion on it and carbon build up, he can see first hand why and what."

In addition, the board has been a great help in writing estimates and in selling work. Now the customer can see a concrete example of the part and understand why and how that part can be damaged or simply worn out.

This sampler board also shows the effects of sustained negligence and abuse. Seeing is believing. And knowing what happens when you let things go unattended too long is a great incentive for the customer to invest in an ounce of prevention.

Finally, the board can help educate the customer about the probable cause of a failure without the need for a teardown of a major component. A hands on inspection of a similarly failed part may be convincing enough to get you a go-ahead on a job.

When the job is completed, a comparison of parts from the customer's car with the original sample can reinforce the customer's perception that the problem was understood and properly diagnosed *before* the repair was started. You can inform the customer that you suspected this was the problem all along, and sure enough, it was.

Trish Lloyd continued, "This is a great technique for our lady customers who nowadays are really trying to understand the repairs on their cars, and for older couples on a budget who like to know in advance just exactly what they are getting for their money."

How do the customers feel about this approach?

"Customers enjoy the extra attention and they feel better because they have learned something.

"We benefit from a closer relationship with them. You build trust and gain a customer who recommends you to others. You don't experience problems when it's time to pay the bill."

This all makes sense to us. Remembering our comparison to the restaurant may help you appreciate this type of approach to customer education. This is another of those cases where properly selling the job puts the customer at ease with you and the repair being done.

SHARE YOUR IDEAS

If you have a unique approach to customer relations, please let us know. As often as possible, we'd like to highlight a real world technique that's proven successful.

We don't care if it's car clinics, phone follow ups, or dancing bears. We do pay close attention to your mail, however. We really are interested in what's happening out there.

So don't be bashful.

—By Ralph Birnbaum