

# CARSIDE MANNER

## REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



I was in a shop the other day when a very well-dressed man approached the service counter. He identified himself as a first-time visitor, and as the owner of the slush-covered, but expensive car sitting by

the front door. It was clear that the oil change service he requested was a trial run for the shop. You got the feeling that if the shop could handle this seemingly mediocre task, maybe he'd let them do some "serious" work on his baby when the time came.

After signing the repair order, he turned to leave. At the door, he paused and turned back again. "Oh, by the way," he added, "do you think we should check those wiper blades?"

It was kind of a silly question.

In January, in Ohio, when you can empty the windshield washer reservoir twice a day just trying to get some rough idea of whether or not you're still on the road, this was a little like asking the captain of the *Titanic*, "Do you think I'll need a life preserver?"

What a great sales opportunity, I thought.

To my surprise, the shop owner responded, "I don't normally stock wiper blades for your car."

What a great way to kill a sales opportunity, I thought.

The owner of the car apparently agreed with me and winced a little. The shop owner had just told him volumes about his attitude toward his customers and their needs with one little sentence.

What must have gone through the customer's mind as he left? I know what he might have thought.

"This guy probably won't check my wipers because he's too lazy to find a set for the measly couple of bucks he stands to make on them. And if wiper blades are a problem, getting the right oil filter will probably drive him insane."

### A BUCK HERE AND A BUCK THERE

Contrast this with the approach used by a good friend of mine. He and his technicians open the doors with one thing in mind every morning. They're there to make money, the more the better. And they firmly believe that people will spend more of their money if they're just encouraged to do so for logical reasons.

My friend is especially keen on selling those small, seemingly insignificant safety-related items—wiper blades, washer fluid, and light bulbs. Since his shop test drives every car it works on, right down to oil changes, his technicians have been trained to check the lights and wipers on every single car, as well as noting any other abnormalities they find.

He notes that, "A lot of shops think that bulbs and

wiper blades are a nuisance. They go out once and buy a wiper blade assortment and a bulb rack. And instead of selling the daylights out of them, the wipers and bulbs sit in the corner, collect dust, and end up being cursed as a waste of time and a big dent in cash flow.

"I went out and bought blades and bulbs and informed my technicians that safety inspections were now a part of even the most basic oil change service, and that we were going to sell this stuff. We did."

### SEEING AND BEING SEEN

"I don't wait for the customer to ask me if he needs wiper blades. I suggest that we ought to save him the grief of installing wiper blades in the frozen parking lot of some discount store. The customer usually finds himself experiencing the joys of frostbite because his wife has threatened his life unless he finally remembers to put some new blades on the car.

"I run more sales on wiper blades than Sears does on hardware, and we install blades for free.

"We do charge for headlight aiming and some tough to reach bulbs. If you've ever been blinded four times in four miles by the cross-eyed sealed beams on oncoming cars, you know what an untapped labor market that is!

"Most customers will actually get used to seeing where they're going and get spoiled by the good visibility. They also get a good feeling having all the lights work so they don't get rear-ended because a brake light or turn signal quit.

"Many of them just leave it up to me now. They know I'll check things for them, so they don't even bother mentioning it. They just expect to have it handled. You'd be amazed at how many of them notice the improvement and mention it, especially in the winter months."

### IT ALL ADDS UP

If you think that this is nickel and dime stuff in terms of profits, let's run some hypothetical figures through the old adding machine. Let's say you run 10 cars through your shop each day. And let's say you average a three dollar profit per car hustling wiper blades, bulbs, and headlight aimings. That's 30 bucks a day, 150 bucks a week, and unless the batteries in my calculator are dead, \$7800 per year.

Anyone feeling this is small change can prove the point by mailing me a check in that amount, care of the magazine, although cash is always nice.

—By Ralph Birnbaum