

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



I hate to admit it, but I am occasionally susceptible to the powers of suggestion. Marla Schleider's article on telephone skills last month raised my awareness level a notch in that area. You see, I

have to spend an awful lot of time on the phone. And as a result of her article, I suddenly find myself paying more attention to what happens on the other end of the line than I used to. Last week, I made a call to a shop that will forever stand out as one of the worst phone answering jobs in recorded history.

We'll call the shop Ralph's Import Emporium. (I chose Ralph, because those of us labeled with that once proud moniker are now accustomed to having it used to name every shaggy dog in pet food commercials, every henpecked husband in laundry soap commercials, and every nerd in every movie ever made. I have therefore sacrificed the name one more time and beg the indulgence of fellow Ralphs everywhere.)

At any rate, I called the shop and was greeted with: "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I must have the wrong number."

The loud click at the other end informed me that we were done. Little did I know that the bell had sounded, signalling the end of round one.

I dialed again, more carefully this time.

"Yeah?" Same voice, same challenging tone.

"I'm sorry to bother you again, but I'm trying to reach Ralph's Import Emporium. Could you help me?"

"Yeah."

"Is this Ralph's?"

"Yeah."

"Is Ralph there?"

"Yeah."

At this point, I remembered having spoken to trees with bigger vocabularies—and better attitudes. I was almost afraid to ask any more yes-no type questions for fear of hearing the dreaded "yeah" again. But I was even more afraid I might overload this character by asking a question requiring a complete sentence response.

"Do you think I could speak to him?"

"He's on the throne," came the unabashed reply.

Oh swell. Now I know why Ralph is so hard to reach. He's royalty.

"Maybe I should just call back later."

Again the resounding CLICK. End of round two.

One More Time

I went to my corner, bewildered but not beaten. A cold sponge, a styptic pencil, and some encouragement from a fellow worker and I was ready to try again.

This time I didn't hesitate. As soon as we got "yeah" out of the way, I got bold.

"Lemme talk to Ralph," I said gruffly and with authority. (I'll show this joker who's boss, I thought.)

Mister Yeah had more tricks up his sleeve, however.

At this point, he let the phone receiver free-fall. The noise in the ear piece was similar to having someone place a steel bucket over your head and then beat it with a stick. The noise continued, loudly and rhythmically, as the receiver dangled from an alternately winding and unwinding cord.

In the background, I heard Mister Yeah use the rest of his word list, which included Ralph's name, screamed at the top of his lungs, and assorted other descriptive words. Turns out he did have a large vocabulary after all.

During the five minutes I waited, I think I heard someone in the background yell that Ralph was away on a test drive. At any rate, five minutes is an embarrassing time to wait on the phone. I finally hung up.

End of round three.

A Sucker for Punishment

Bloody but unbowed, I wasn't ready to quit. Oh sure there was a ringing in my ears, and my vision was blurry. They hadn't scored a knock out, but were way ahead on points. I resolved to enter the ring one last time in the hope that a quick KO would win the day.

I dialed again. Muscles tense, I could feel the adrenalin doing its work. The phone rang. And rang. And rangandrangandrang.

"Looks like I win by default. Ralph and his boys forfeit." They hadn't answered the bell for round four.

It was a hollow victory, though. I realized that a potential customer wouldn't have put up with all that phone foolishness. I also knew what kind of mental image I had of this establishment.

I finally gave up trying, and I have to suspect that a lot of potential customers do the same after calling Ralph's Import Emporium. Poor Ralph is getting his nose bloodied and doesn't even know it. Maybe he needs to fire his trainer and get a receptionist in his corner.

—By Ralph Birnbaum

DON'T FORGET ABOUT TECH TIPS

Many of you have sent in tips for our **Tech Tips** column. We'd like to thank you for your help. To those of you who haven't sent your tips in yet, we'd like to hear from you. It's your chance to win some great prizes, get your name in print, and help out your fellow technicians. Write out your mechanical tips or tricks on the reader response card. Don't have enough room on the card? Drop a note in the mail or give us a call. We look forward to hearing from you.