

CAR SIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



We've talked a lot about communicating with customers. Occasionally, it's fun to look at some of the crazy things that could cause misunderstandings at the service desk—like confusion over

what certain words really mean. In an effort to get you and the customer on an even footing, we offer this tongue-in-cheek glossary, defining certain terms commonly thrown around the shop. Some are strictly automotive in nature, some are common words that can take on special meanings when they enter the Automotive Zone.

Besides, sustained seriousness gives me a headache. So just for fun . . .

Child-proof locks—A cruel prank used to trap adults in the back seats of cars.

Differential—The gap between the amount of money you want to charge and the amount the customer expects to pay. The term “backlash” comes as a result of improperly adjusting the differential.

Tomorrow—When the customer would like to pay you.

Today—When all your bills are due.

Yesterday—When the customer would like his car—especially if the parts needed are out of stock, back-ordered, and no longer in production.

Clutch—What the customer does to his heart and wallet when informed of the bill for fixing his long neglected vehicle.

Shiftless—The term a DIYer uses to describe his burned out automatic transmission.

Tune-up—A term that means whatever someone wants it to mean. Usually a last ditch effort to remedy sustained vehicle neglect by changing a few spark plugs. The term tune-up is usually used with the word quick, implying that if this set of plugs doesn't set things right, the customer wants you to stop what you're doing and move on to something else.

Battery—A word used with assault.

Terminal—Where you take the customer to catch a bus when you can't get parts for a week and a half.

AM-FM Digital stereo with memory, auto-reverse tape deck, CD player, and graphic equalizer capable of putting out 500 watts per channel—The reason some people can't afford an oil change.

Intermittent wiper—Something caused by a loose connection at the fuse box.

Fuse—A circuit protector, commonly made to work in a pinch by wrapping it with aluminum foil. The foil is usually used as a stop-gap measure and then left in place until flames shoot out from under the dash.

Emergency flasher—An exhibitionist who loves to show up at accident scenes.

Memory steer—A Black Angus with total recall.

Maintenance schedule—Something that receives as much attention as the Whig Party candidate for vice-president.

Preventive maintenance—Not to be confused with safe sex, this archaic theory has been replaced by the “I have extended insurance coverage” theory.

Extended insurance coverage—The expensive coverage which relieves the owner of a vehicle from any further responsibility for the care of said vehicle.

Fine print—The fly in the ointment of extended insurance coverage.

Normal seepage—A warranty-evasion euphemism used in place of the word “leak,” and described as the minimum amount of oil needed to properly lubricate the exterior of a crankshaft mainseal.

Sunroof—A calibrated water leak.

Vent window—A calibrated wind whistle.

Headliner—You know, like Wayne Newton.

Ash tray—Something a customer never uses if there's any room at all left on the floor.

Air bag—A passive restraint installed beneath the dash on newer cars. Formerly installed in the back seat, it was also known as a mother-in-law.

Owner's manual—A pamphlet written under the usually correct assumption that it will never be touched by human hands.

Appointment—A list of your customers and the times at which you expect them to arrive, give or take six hours. Arrivals off by seven or more hours are known as “disappointments.”

Schedule—A list of appointments, otherwise known as crowd control.

Gravity—A law of nature which attracts nuts, bolts, and wrenches to a point on the floor below a vehicle where they are least accessible.

—By Ralph Birnbaum