

# CARSIDE MANNER

## REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



The February **Carside Manner** prompted an interesting response from an import specialist in Texas. Basically, the letter pointed out that there was more money to be made doing major re-

pairs than there was in replacing wiper blades and bulbs.

It went on to point out that time lost doing less technical maintenance on vehicles could actually cost a shop money when more expensive jobs were waiting.

Since the fancy letterhead used for the letter showed that the shop specialized in the repair and maintenance of a very expensive kind of car, I was a little surprised at first. Not surprised by the response, but by the source of the response.

After rereading the letter, it became apparent that someone was pulling my leg. You just don't service cars and clients like these without paying attention to the little things as well as the big ones.

### Healthy Competition

So I called the gentleman in question. He was indeed pulling my leg, and we got a good laugh out of the whole matter. And after a few more pointed questions about how the shop services its customers' needs, it was fun to know that the shop did indeed have some very specific ideas about customer service.

Since the cars in question seem to be the type that would stay at the local dealer for maintenance and repair, I wanted to know how this shop dealt with dealer competition.

"We do everything recommended by the manufacturer and add some extra services we feel were left out. We just don't charge more to do those extras.

"We've reduced the oil change interval. That way the customer gets his car looked over more often at a very reasonable price.

"We're a lot smaller than the dealer, and try to run the business on a more personal basis. We do have the time to talk with our customers. We explain the nature of the repair or service and give fair estimates.

"The cars are returned on time. The cars are clean and the windows washed.

"If there are any changes in costs or promised delivery time, we call the customer and let him know.

"I really don't view the dealer as competition. He sells the cars that keep us in business. I'd like our customers to enjoy these cars enough that they go back

and buy a lot more of them. The dealer sells more new cars. We stay in business."

### Ignorance Is Bliss?

Does the shop ever have a problem with a customer who doesn't care to know anything about his car?

"Yeah, (and then with a chuckle) but we don't let them get away with that. These cars are a big investment. We really try to get customers involved in their cars and show them the best ways to protect that investment. Most of them get interested, and end up working with us instead of against us. It makes things a lot easier.

"We know the problem areas on these cars. We try to inform the customers about them. Sometimes you have to gently remind them about the inconvenience and expense of getting stranded. It gets the point across.

"Once the customer better understands his car, he's more likely to let you prevent that breakdown before it happens. You just don't wait for it to happen.

"The customers do see the benefits of good maintenance in the long run. But you have to point it out to them or they may miss it. You can't just assume that the customer appreciates the trouble he *didn't* have. You have to remind him about it."

### Whole-istic Medicine

Back to wiper blades and bulbs. What about this shop?

"Our technicians look at the whole car. We've trained ourselves to do that. We don't just do oil changes. You know, pull the plug, screw on a new filter, and then ship it. We all try to look at the whole car while it's in. We do check all the little things, and since we have such a good working relationship with our customers, most get taken care of right away.

"We don't just assume that the customer understands the extra work involved. We blow our own horn a bit. We're not obnoxious about it. It's more like sharing information about the health of the customer's car. But that way he knows we checked his safety items so he could drive with peace of mind."

### Pull My Leg, Please

Thanks for the letter. Thanks for taking the time to talk on the phone with us. You can pull my leg any old time.

We love hearing from folks who really understand that customer service and profit really do belong together.

—By Ralph Birnbaum