

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



Paul Stock of Stock's Underhood Specialists in Belleville, Illinois has spent a lot of time thinking about the relationship between customer service and profitability. Paul is ASE certified in all ASE

categories including truck and auto body repair. But being a World Class Technician has never been a guarantee of business success, and he knew that from the start.

So Paul stopped and took a long hard look at his business a couple years ago. He wasn't happy about his profits. And he wasn't always happy about the type of client he was sometimes forced to deal with—or the type of work they brought him.

Finally, he realized that he was trying to compete with other shops in an insane price war. He knew he was doing good work, and he knew that his most profitable customers were also his friendliest and easiest to deal with.

Then one day he decided to try something out of the ordinary. He started selling memberships in a preventive maintenance program. For the paltry sum of 90 dollars per year, he agreed to perform an oil change and lubrication service every 90 days, or four times a year. The membership fee included the oil and filters!

More For Their Money

But Paul did far more than just a quicky LOF. He also set up four separate and very detailed inspections of the customer's vehicle and performed one of these inspections at each visit. The inspections didn't have to be done in any special order, but the idea was to give each vehicle the following inspections during a calendar year:

- **A visual underhood inspection.**
- **An engine analysis.**
- **A brake and tire inspection.**
- **An undercarriage inspection to examine all exhaust and suspension parts.**

Paul created an exhaustive checklist for each of these inspection areas. Some of the sheets have as many as 100 specific items listed. The forms are filled out completely using a rating system that includes not only your clear-cut good vs. bad ratings, but adds a third category for marginal or suspect components.

"Once the sheets were completed," Paul noted, "I didn't even have to see the car to know exactly what it needed. The customers were surprised at the thoroughness of the inspections and appreciated the value of the program.

"I spent a lot of time convincing people that mileage wasn't necessarily the best gauge of when to change your oil. If a car had been driven hard for 90 days, it would be ready for an oil change service based on mileage anyhow. And if the car had been driven short distances during that time, it probably needed that oil change just to get rid of all the unburned fuel and condensation that accumulates in the oil pan from short runs around town."

He even went so far as to establish a safety check list that had to be filled out during each and every visit. It included tread depth measurements at three separate points on each tire to head off serious tire wear problems before they became visible, and a lighting inspection chart that even had a column for cracked lenses. This service was also included in the original 90 dollar membership fee.

Wait A Minute . . .

Somebody out there is about to ask how this is supposed to be profitable. How can a shop owner charge a customer an average of \$22.50 per visit, provide the oil, filter and labor, do a long and complicated inspection, and still make money?

"It does look a little crazy at first glance. But you can't sell service unless you see the customer and his car. That's the point of this program. It gets the car in my shop at least four times a year. It lets me get to know the customer on a personal basis. When the car does need added maintenance and repair service, guess who gets the job?

"This program isn't for everyone. I don't advertise the memberships. A customer has to hear about the program from another member and then approach me. Even then, I'm forced to counsel some people that they still aren't serious enough about a good maintenance schedule to make the program worthwhile.

"Those customers who are serious about the memberships are more likely to spend their money correcting the problems we find during the inspections. This makes selling the jobs easier because the customer is interested in keeping his car in good shape.

"My customers spend an average of 150 dollars per inspection visit, or an average of 600 dollars per year. On a normal day, I do three or four inspections. I have a membership base of about 200 customers. We do other work for non-member clients, but this membership base has given us a steady flow of good work with a group of customers we really enjoy seeing."

(Rather than leave anything out, we decided to do this in two parts. Next month, we'll look at some of the unexpected benefits this program has produced. See you then.)

—By Ralph Birnbaum