

How do your customers picture you? Do they see you as a competent, caring professional? Or do they have a less pleasant picture of you and your business?

One sure way to find out what they think is to come right out and ask them. A simple customer follow-up program can:

- 1) Tell you how your customers see you.
- 2) Keep track of customer satisfaction levels.
- 3) Improve your positive image with your customers.
- 4) Keep good customers coming back.
- 5) Sell customers more service.

The Customer Follow-Up

If you're not doing customer follow-ups, you probably have no idea how many good customers you may be losing each year. Even if you feel you're doing quality repairs at a fair price, it's good to remind yourself that honest differences of opinion will lead to dangerous misunderstandings if they aren't cleared up.

By not doing follow-ups, you give up the opportunity to avoid those misunderstandings. You forfeit the chance to save those customers and keep them coming back.

If you think to yourself, "Who wants to call customers only to hear them complain—they'll call if there's a problem," you may be doing your customers and your business a great disservice.

Don't Go Away Mad . . .

Many customers won't go away mad, they'll just

Good Guy

How customers

go away. This is especially true for those nice, easy-going folks who seldom complain, pay their bills in full, and are most likely to give you the benefit of the doubt when there's a problem. These are also the customers you can least afford to ignore since they're the ones you most want to keep.

Believe me, you'll always hear from the customer who isn't satisfied with anything, anytime, anywhere. But do you want to build a customer base that way?

Industry statistics show that a dissatisfied customer will probably tell 10 to 15 other people about his unhappiness. The trouble is, he may not tell you.

Compare that to the same study that showed that a satisfied customer only shares his good experience with 4 to 6 friends, neighbors, or relatives. Apparently, bad news does travel faster than good news does.

If you have enough bad news being spread around about your business, it can develop an unstoppable momentum all its own that could ruin your business.

Nobody's Perfect

No matter how good you are, you can't please all of the people all of the time. The key is to find those dissatisfied customers and deal with them in a positive way. Customer follow-ups let you do that. And remember that it is still cheaper to keep the customers you have than it is to constantly look for new ones.

So call your customers. Listen carefully to what they say. Customer complaints can be a real opportunity if they're handled with the right attitude. If the customer does offer you the chance to work with him, grab it. At least you know he still wants to come to

Bad Guy

picture you....

you for service, and is willing to give you a chance. This opportunity is priceless!

But if you don't call, you don't know. The problem—real or imagined—doesn't get handled. The unhappy customer is a little like a man with a stone in his shoe. If the stone isn't removed, it just gets more and more annoying as time goes by.

Follow-Ups On A Budget

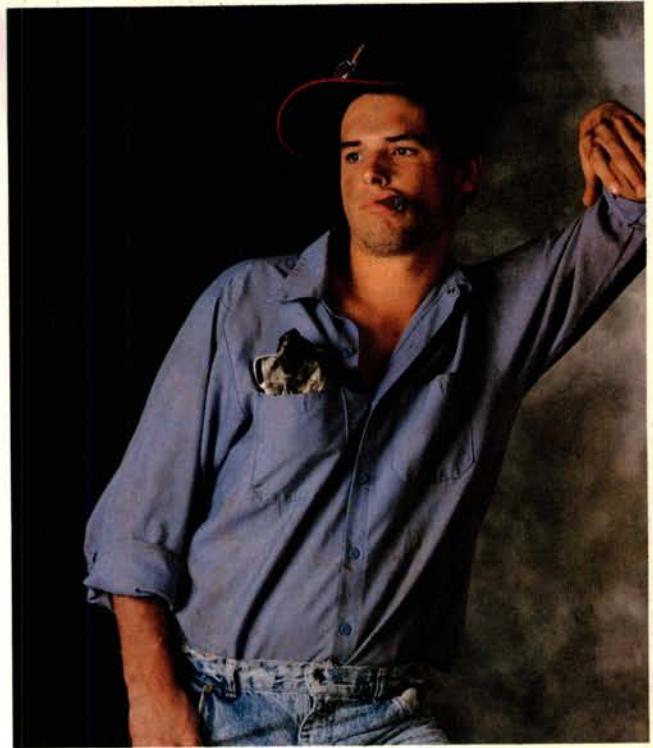
Before you decide that a follow-up program is too costly or too time consuming, consider the program I've recently started. It cost less than 20 dollars in material, and is less time consuming than I thought it would be.

Here's the list of items I used to get started:

1) A rubber "Follow-Up" stamp	\$10.00
2) A 30 day accordion file folder	9.00
Total investment	\$19.00

Now that's not a very large investment. Here's how the follow-up program works:

- 1) Each time we deliver a customer's car, we make a copy of the repair order.
- 2) We stamp it with our "Follow-Up" rubber stamp.
- 3) The accordion file we bought has a numbered separator for each day of the month. If our customer picks up his car on the tenth day of the month, we place the stamped copy in the slot for the seventeenth day of the month, or one week from the day the car was delivered.



- 4) We made our first call one week from the day the filing program started. Then we started to pull repair orders from the numbered slot that corresponded to the day of the month. That way, all the orders in the slot marked for the seventeenth were for cars delivered on the tenth, and so on for each day of the month.
- 5) If the customers we call are satisfied with their service, we thank them for their business, invite them to come back again, and file the order.
- 6) If the customer is not happy, we arrange to reschedule him as soon as possible. We make whatever arrangements are necessary to make his return visit under these less than ideal circumstances as pleasant as possible.
- 7) If I've assigned an employee to handle the calls, and the problem can't be solved by that employee, I handle the matter personally.

I've found that the average call takes one to two minutes if there is no problem. If there is a problem, the call will obviously take longer. But at least we have the chance to take corrective action before we have a more serious problem.

This follow-up program is new for us. But we have seen some really positive results already. The positive customer response the calls have generated is unbelievable.

A typical customer will say something like, "I'm really happy you thought enough of me to call!" And they mean it.

We talked with four other successful automotive import repair businessmen with similar programs.

Listen to what they have to say.

—By Steve Loudon



“It’s important to follow through with each and every customer.”

Craig Bohn
Owner
Import Service Center
Corpus Christi, Texas

Specialty: General Import Repair

“I do all the customer follow-ups myself. I think it’s very important to touch base and let the customers know that the owner is conscientious, and cares about them.

“I’ll take the day’s repair tickets, one by one, and alphabetize them. Then I’ll wait a week or so, go through the tickets, and make phone calls. I’ll ask the customer if everything is okay with his car. If it’s not okay, I’ll ask him to bring his car back as soon as he can—

immediately if possible.

“None of the tickets gets filed until I’ve gotten in touch with the customer. It’s important to follow through with each and every one.

“I’ve been doing these calls since the business started. Calls like these add a personal touch to your business. And they let you head off any problems before they begin to irritate your customers. When I call on customers, they realize that I’m concerned about them.

“Use the customer follow-up just to let your customers know that you care enough to check in and make sure they’re satisfied.

“Your calls will net very positive responses.”



“Most disgruntled customers don’t complain; they just don’t come back.”

August Crocker
Manager
Rising Sun, Inc.
Austin, Texas

Specialty: Japanese Vehicles

“The more you read, the more you realize that most disgruntled customers don’t complain. They just don’t come back. To keep your customers coming back, it’s important to do follow-ups. We make a photo copy of each repair order before we file it. Three days after the car is delivered, either the owner or myself will call each customer to make sure the repairs were done satisfactorily.

“If you can just get customers on the phone, you can find out whether or not they’re happy with your service. If they’re not, you can at least get them to come back. And many times, I’ve found that they’ll purchase additional work when they return.

“Follow-up calls also make comebacks a lot easier to handle. They give you the chance to talk with the customer, find out what the problem is, and set up an appointment. That way, you know in advance what’s coming in, and when.

“It takes courage for many customers to come back and complain. Sometimes, because they’re already nervous, they’ll come back and blow up, causing a scene in front of your other customers. Customer follow-ups let you solve those problems without an audience.

“We’ve gotten extremely good response from our follow-up program. Customers are usually overwhelmed that we care enough to call. They’re very appreciative, and that appreciation results in a lot of repeat business for us.”



“We use a three-part follow-up system that’s very successful.”

John Francis
Owner
Francis Automotive Services
West Chester, Pennsylvania

Specialty: General Import Repair

“We do a few different types of follow-ups. I think the telephone is probably best, because people really don’t expect a phone call. We call all our customers three to five days after they’ve been in. Cars are so complicated now, that you’ve got to make sure you’ve fixed them right. That’s especially true for those trouble cars—the ones you have to drive home yourself only to find that they’ll act up for the customer but not for you.

“In addition to phone calls, we have a computerized business management system that prints follow-up letters. These letters remind the customers about general maintenance

items. Customers actually look for these letters. If they don’t receive them, they’ll sometimes call and ask, “What happened? I didn’t get my letter.” Once you organize a follow-up system, you’ll find that customers really look forward to it.

“In addition to these maintenance reminder letters, we send out a letter, a questionnaire, and a brochure to each new customer. We ask them questions like:

- Were you treated courteously by our personnel?
- Were the repairs or service performed when promised?
- Was the work done to your satisfaction?
- Were additional services recommended?

“Our three-part customer follow-up program is very successful. We get quite a few nice letters from customers, and they always thank us for taking the time to follow up.”



“You can use a computer to capture and retain customers.”

Steve Beckley
Owner
Beckley Imports Ltd.
Des Moines, Iowa

Specialty: Mercedes, Volvo, and BMW

“I don’t do as much phone follow-up work as I’d like to. We see 10 to 12 cars a day, and we’re so busy that we’re scheduled a week to 10 days in advance. In addition, many of my customers are doctors and lawyers who are difficult to reach, and don’t want to be bothered.

“I’ve set up a system that uses phone follow-ups on a selective basis. If the repair is very difficult, costs \$300 or more, or if the customer is new, we call. When I do call customers, they’re very pleased. And the amazing thing to me is that almost 50 percent of my follow-up calls result in appointments being made to have more service done.

“I had one Volvo owner who had been all over town trying to get someone to fix his car. It wouldn’t run well when cold, and no one could fix it. I think he brought it to us as a test. We not only fixed it, but were sure enough of our work to make sure he was satisfied. Once we gained his confidence, he came

back for more service. That’s pretty typical.

“In addition to phone follow-ups, I use another system that I like even more. Since many of my customers are regulars, I had accumulated hard files on their cars that were so thick they were hard to handle. It became difficult to look up a vehicle’s repair history.

“Four years ago, I bought a computer and had a programmer design a service history program for me. The program cost me about \$500. Now I can call up a vehicle’s service history, and instantly show the customer what type of maintenance service his vehicle needs.

“This computer program has increased my business by about 30 percent. It lets me capture and keep customers, because I know what service they need, and when they need it. This saves the customers the trouble of keeping track of their maintenance schedule.

“They can drive their cars and enjoy them and I’ve got a great tool for retaining sales.”