

CAR SIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



Last month's **Car-side Manner** looked at a preventive maintenance program used by Paul Stock of Stock's Underhood Specialists in Belleville, Illinois. This month we'd like to list some of the bene-

fits to both customer and shop owner from a regular maintenance program.

A Win-Win Situation

Aside from the anticipated benefits to both the shop owner and the customer, it turned out that there were some unexpected—and pleasant—surprises for all involved:

- **Not one of the 200 members had to call for emergency road service last winter.** There were no dead batteries, flat tires, or no-starts to ruin somebody's Monday morning.
- **Customers with unused visits who bought a brand new car during the year were encouraged to transfer the membership to that new vehicle.** This kept them coming to Paul Stock's service center when they might have disappeared into the neighborhood dealer service bays.
- **Since each car had its own separate file history, with detailed records of maintenance service, the customers had no problem getting dealership cooperation on warranty matters.** Paul acted as a go-between and actually helped the dealers and his customers solve warranty-related problems.
- **Since the membership cars were kept clean and well-maintained, they were a lot easier to work on.** On an average, they ran better, with fewer unexpected problems, and were easier to repair when they did break down.
- **The lengthy diagnostic process became a learning experience for the customers.** It seemed that the more the customers became involved with their cars, the more they understood about them. The more they understood, the more they appreciated the shop's efforts, and the benefits of the program.
- **Customers with borderline problems were able to anticipate the costs of a coming repair, plan for the expense in advance, and avoid the dreaded annoyance of being stranded by the side of the road.**

Selling—The Right Way

Paul Stock was careful to stress the importance of selling as a part of service to the customer.

"We don't just sell to fatten the repair orders. We try to sell the customer only what he needs. If the customer's belts and hoses fall into that marginal category

between good and bad, we ask the customer how the car is being used. If it only makes short, local runs, we may suggest that those belts and hoses can go a while longer.

"But if the customer is about to load the car with kids and clothes and go on a long vacation, we'll suggest that the costs of replacing those belts and hoses are a small price to pay compared to a breakdown.

"We also spend the time to make the car look good. If the engine needs to be steam cleaned, we do it. And we also spend the time to take the customer on a tour under the hood. We make sure he knows about the attention to detail that makes us special."

Service is also important. If the customer needs a product or service that can't be provided in-house, arrangements are made to have the work done by a nearby specialist.

"I have working arrangements with a number of specialists who can do everything the customer needs, from wheel alignments to paint and upholstery repairs. These specialists are certified and carefully screened. They answer directly to me for the quality of work done. The customer doesn't have to run around town talking to a dozen different people. They only have to see me.

"Like the club memberships, this total service approach keeps the customer coming back, not just for good quality service, but for friendly, complete service."

What happens when things go wrong and the customer isn't satisfied? Does this program help?

Paul Stock chuckled at this one. "Sure things go wrong," he said. "One customer in particular had a car that seemed to wait until the day after a visit to do the unexpected. At first, the customer was a little angry. Unfortunately, the failures were the kind that drive shop owners crazy. They were totally unexpected, and impossible to predict.

"We stayed with it though. We did everything we could to minimize the amount of inconvenience caused. Then we spent a lot of time explaining the situation to the customer.

"When the time came to renew the membership, the customer paid the 90 dollars and said that he was reupping not because we were perfect, but because we'd stayed with him until his problems were solved."

Thank You

We'd like to thank Paul Stock for taking time to share his ideas with us. His friendly, down to earth manner and professional approach to doing business gave us hope that good guys still finish first when they add a little planning to their hard work.

If you're interested in learning more about the specifics of the preventive maintenance program, drop Paul a line at Stock's Underhood Specialists, 321 Centerville Avenue, Belleville, Illinois 62220-1909.

—By Ralph Birnbaum