

CAR SIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



We have had the pleasure of dealing with a number of quality repair shops over the past two years. But it's always a treat to walk into one of these shops during the day, and watch a real professional at

work behind the front desk.

Recently, during a visit to a local import specialist, we were impressed with his professionalism and the good working relationship he'd established with a long-time customer.

The customer in question had just taken her car on a long vacation. She had been forced to stop several times during the trip when the dashboard temperature gauge had flirted with the red "disaster" bar in the overheat zone. She was uneasy about letting strange people work on her car, but finally decided she had no choice but to get some help before starting her long return trip.

As she understood things, the repair garage in this distant town had replaced the fan clutch assembly, water pump, and drive belt. They assured her that the problem was fixed, took her money, and waved goodbye. She drove the car to the hotel, loaded a ton of luggage and her four children, turned on the air conditioner, and started for home. She didn't get to the next town before noticing that the temperature gauge was creeping higher and higher.

She finally made it home after repeated stops, and drove directly to our import specialist's door—screaming kids and all.

"Am I ever glad to see you," she beamed at my friend the shop owner as she placed her keys on the counter. Then she produced her copy of the repair order and gave a complete explanation of what had happened. I mean complete. She included some very specific information about the road speeds at which the overheating had occurred, the length of time it took for the gauge reading to climb to a dangerous level, and the load she'd been carrying.

"I never had this problem just running around town. The car never acted up before this trip."

She saw me standing near the desk, and realizing how long she'd gone on about the specifics of her problem, she added a comment for my benefit. "These guys have me trained."

"Did you tell the other shop about the symptoms?" the shop owner asked.

"I tried to, but they didn't seem interested."

The shop owner took notes as the customer talked. He also looked at the repair invoice from the other garage.

Then he took the customer and her car for a test drive. He placed a small piece of tape on the temper-

ature gauge so his technician wouldn't have to guess about the gauge reading. He also discussed the options with the customer and a proposed plan of attack.

When they returned to the shop, he called one of his technicians aside and gave him instructions.

- **"Pull the thermostat and check it.** Check the concentration of anti-freeze coolant in the cooling system. This invoice shows that she was charged for two gallons of anti-freeze, and the car has a 10 quart system. Let me know what you find.

- **"The gauge reading is marked with a strip of tape as usual.** You'll see how high it's been reading. Don't spend a lot of time checking the gauge itself, it's not lying to us. The car is definitely running too hot.

- **"While you're at it, check the tire pressures.** See if the condenser or the radiator is plugged with insects and dirt, and make sure none of the brakes are dragging."

Then the shop owner had the incredible good sense to give the lady's kids a few bucks and send them across the street for ice cream.

There was no thermostat in the car. The condenser and radiator fins were clear. The antifreeze concentration was about 90/10 and looked like syrup. The other shop hadn't fixed the original problem, they'd made a new problem and pocketed a thermostat for their efforts.

After installing a new thermostat and correcting the concentration of engine coolant-to-water, the car was driven again. The car still overheated above a certain speed at full load, but the shop owner wasn't surprised.

"It's a plugged radiator. It was probably the original problem, but this way I can assure the customer that we didn't just throw parts at the car. She's already been through that.

"We stock the radiator. Since we buy in volume, I can sell her a new radiator plus new hoses and clamps for what it would cost her to buy the radiator alone from anyone else in town. Plus, she doesn't have to wait for us to find a replacement. We stock five times as many hard parts for these vehicles as the largest dealer in town does. They buy parts from us."

The new radiator fixed the problem. The needle on the temperature gauge rested comfortably at half mast, even when subjected to high speed loads with the air conditioner running full blast.

The customer was a little short on cash after her vacation. The shop owner agreed to bill her for the balance in 30 days.

"She's always been a good customer. And she helped us eliminate a lot of wasted time by listing the symptoms so we could speed up the diagnosis.

"This way, we can get her car fixed and send her on her way so she can unpack.

"Besides," he chuckled, "the kids have finished their ice cream and I see they're headed this way."

—By Ralph Birnbaum