

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



This month's **Carside Manner** was written by two successful shop owners who have some good ideas about dealing with dissatisfied customers.

Charles Elliott is the 1989/90 NAPA/

ASE Technician of the Year. With his wife Ann, he owns and operates Elliott's Auto Service in Salem, Oregon. But Charles is already pretty famous. Let's give Mrs. Elliott a chance.

Never try to win an argument with a customer. Even better, do your best not to get into an argument in the first place. Arguing with a customer creates a situation you just can't win. Even if you're right and seem to win the argument on the surface, the customer probably won't come back, and neither will his friends.

Recently, a customer became upset about parts pricing on his invoice. After calling around for parts prices, he came to the decision that our prices were too high. We cheerfully refunded the difference between the original charges and what the customer thought was fair. Only then did we explain the reasoning behind our parts pricing—that the extra margin allowed us the flexibility to make a total service package available to our customers—and still stay profitable.

We also explained that we would be unable to do this on a regular basis. This was a one time effort to make the best of a potential misunderstanding. We gave the customer the benefit of the doubt, did what we could to satisfy him, and offered him the choice of selecting the service outlet that best fit his needs.

And we did it with no argument.

Even if the customer had chosen another repair facility, he had no bitter feelings to take with him. We have decided that it's better to lose a customer over an honest difference of opinion about price, than to damage our reputation for fairness and honesty.

The best advertising and promotional money you can spend in your business will be spent making little adjustments like this. Small rebates and adjustments with a personal touch can do a lot to convince your customers that you care about them.

Dan Shindler owns and operates the Swedish Solution in Orange Village, Ohio. He and his highly trained crew have been both helpers and friends when it comes to articles on the repair of Swedish made cars. The success of Swedish Solution I has prompted the opening of Swedish Solution II in Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

It's 4:45 on a Monday afternoon. Your office waiting area is filled with customers waiting to pick up their cars. Mr. and Mrs. Jones walk in. Their car was in your shop last week for an oil change service and front brakes.

Mr. Jones interrupts the conversation you're having with another customer, and states loudly enough for all to hear, "Ever since you serviced my car, it hasn't been the same. It's running rough, and there is fluid leaking from the front."

Oh happy days.

Even with the best planning, this will happen from time to time. So how do you handle this type of potentially disastrous situation?

1) Relax and stay calm. Take a deep breath and count to ten. Remember, when you're attacked by a customer, you want to be the one who's relaxed and in control. Take that verbal punch and never return fire. You need to act as a sounding board for the customer and give the impression that you are eager to help solve his problem.

2) Assume that the customer wants to be helped.

3) Get the irate customer out of the waiting area as soon as possible. Have a co-worker take care of the waiting customers. Then suggest that the customer take you outside to his car to show you his problem. A little privacy will reduce your own anxieties, and many customers get less vocal without an audience.

4) Don't be defensive. Listen attentively to the customer's complaint. Have feeling and appreciation for the customer's frustration—regardless of whether he's right or wrong.

5) Let the customer know in no uncertain terms that you are ready to take care of his problem. Thank him (yes, thank him) for telling you about his problem, and for giving you the chance to make things right. Even though he hasn't necessarily handled the situation in an adult way, he has at least given you the opportunity to deal with his dissatisfaction head on. He could have just bad-mouthed you to all his friends, a situation far more dangerous for you and your business.

If you are responsible for the customer's problem, admit it. Apologize to the customer for his inconvenience. That apology can help smooth things over. If there was no mistake on your part, your patience and control will turn virtually every one of these confrontations into a positive situation for all concerned.

You will end up a hero in the customer's eyes, increase customer loyalty, and make more money.