

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



It's been a while since we updated our list of customer catch phrases. They're the little key words that tip you off, and let you know the day may seem longer than it really is. Be on the lookout for these

clouds on the horizon. The cash you save may be your own.

"You people . . ." When a customer starts his sentence with these words, he usually uses a tone of voice your mother used with you as a kid when she discovered a pack of Lucky Strikes in your jacket pocket. You remember, she'd call you and use your middle name.

When she yelled "Ralph Henry Birnbaum III" at the top of her lungs, I knew it wasn't to discuss an increase in my allowance.

Same thing goes here. Be careful because you are about to be grouped with people who smoke cigars in elevators and track stars who leave their cars in parking spaces for the handicapped.

"Ever since you people worked on my car . . ." This is a variation on the first one, but equally dangerous. Have you ever seen the ads in magazines that suggest hypnosis as a route to heightened mental awareness? You know the ones, "Let us put you to sleep and put you in touch with your spirit!"

Save your money. Just have someone work on your car. Suddenly you'll hear noises, feel vibrations, and maybe even smell new smells as a result. These may be sounds, vibrations, and odors that were there all along. But you'll notice them now.

Works for most customers I ever knew.

"How much . . .?" This is normally said in a tone of voice that you'd use if the power company mistakenly sent you the electric bill for Candlestick Park. The customer is positioning himself to negotiate a lower price for the repair estimate on his car.

Many customers will then add a whining plea for compassion. If that doesn't work, they will repeat "How much?" in a voice one octave higher than before, and throw in a sorrowful shake of the head for good measure.

"But the guy down the street . . ." This sentence starter is a multi-purpose opener for the average wheeler dealer suffering from terminal cheapitis.

"But the guy down the street said it would only cost twenty bucks." Or, "The guy down the street said it was no big deal." You get the idea.

The guy down the street may have severely dilated pupils and breathe through his mouth, or he may be a figment of the customer's imagination caused by wishful thinking.

Just remember that if this guy down the street did exist, knew his stuff, and worked for free, the wheeler dealer would be down the street getting his car fixed instead of playing mind games with you.

"I used to be a mechanic . . ." Who didn't? If I had a nickel for every guy who ever uttered those words as he brought his car for service, I'd be able to pay cash for all of downtown Tokyo. It's a little like saying "I used to be able to ride a bike."

This opener is often followed by, ". . . but I just don't have the time any more." Why do so many people say this? I'm not really sure. It seems to be some form of male bonding that suggests a grudging admiration for people who can fix things, and a desire to be included in that select fraternity. Maybe we should start calling ASE Alpha Sigma Epsilon.

"But how can that be . . .?" These words are uttered with the same tone the customer used with the IRS examiner when he suggested that the customer surrender his Christmas bonus check to get his tax obligations current. Usually heard in response to bad news about the terminal condition of the customer's vehicle, this pained disbelief can also be expressed with the words "Say it ain't so."

You've heard it all and more before. Maybe a thousand times. These are the stories heard over a cold drink on a Friday night when the boys sit around and swap war stories.

Taking these annoyances to heart will make you hard and cynical. Laughing about them helps to a point. But you thinkers out there know that each and every one of these sentence starters is a foot in the door with the customer who used them. The customer is just doing a sloppy job of asking for help.

In every one of these cases, the customer is the one at a disadvantage. If he didn't need help, he wouldn't be talking to you. You are the one in charge. The customer is the one who's short on time, patience, and very often money. But most of all he's short on understanding.

The shop owners who've figured out how to use these situations are the ones laughing all the way to the bank.

—By Ralph Birnbaum