



How Not To Return A Car To A Customer

I know what you're thinking, "I fix cars, I don't need to read about how to return a car to a customer." But stop for a moment and think of yourself as a customer.

How would you feel if the dry cleaner returned your favorite silk tie wrapped in the paper from his lunchtime sub sandwich (with extra mayo)?

What if you took your wristwatch to the jeweler's to have the battery replaced and it was returned to you with a broken wrist band?

How would you feel if you took your car to the car wash, and the guy doing the vacuuming was dirtier than the floor mats he was trying to clean?

What would you think if the parking lot attendant returned your car with a blue cloud of cigar smoke hovering just below the headliner, mustard smeared all over the seats, and the radio volume turned up to

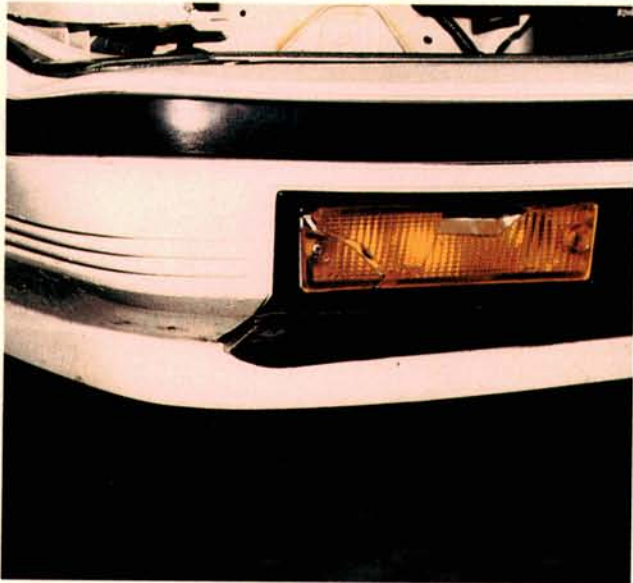
"stun"?

You were paying for a service in each of these obviously exaggerated examples. While we're not suggesting that any of our readers are guilty of this type of behavior, there are many smaller, but equally annoying ways to turn an otherwise successful repair job into a disappointing experience for your customer.

We'll give you a dozen quick tips on how—and how not—to return a car to a customer. These extra services will help form a positive impression of your business in your customer's mind.

He might not be able to pinpoint what it is he likes about your business, or why he thinks that you do a better job than the guy down the street. But if you stop doing the little things, he'll probably notice that they're missing.

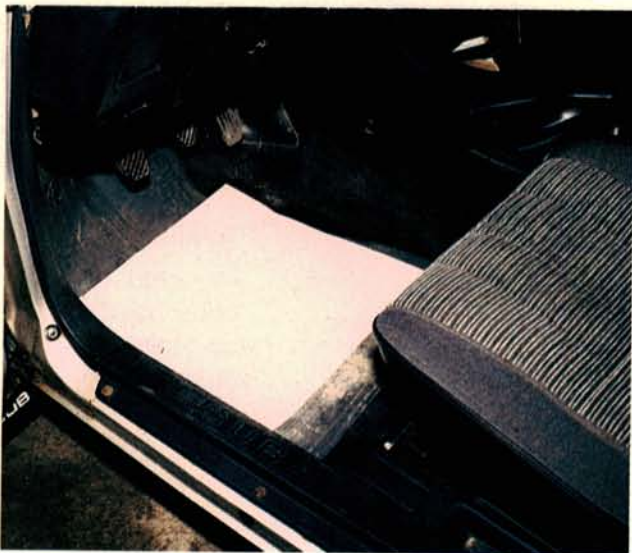
—By Karl Seyfert



Do a quick walk around and check the car for damage. If you notice something, mention it to the customer in a friendly way. You might say something like "Gee, did somebody just run into you?" If the car's really dirty, wash it before work is started. Lots of dents and scratches can hide under a coat of grime. Just so you're covered, note any existing damage on the repair order. Your customers will appreciate a car that's returned cleaner than when it was dropped off.



An I.D. tag similar to the one shown can be used to keep track of your customers' cars. The tag is hung on the rear view mirror bracket when the car is written up. The number at the top of the tag matches the repair order number and key tag. This makes it much easier to find the right car in the parking lot. As the car goes through the shop, each person signs the tag when his work is finished. A glance at the tag will tell you what's been completed and what work remains.



Giving a little extra service doesn't have to mean extra work. How much extra time does it take to make sure that hands, shoes, and clothing are clean before getting into the customer's car? Disposable seat and floor coverings can also be used to protect the interior. Place the protective covers in the car when the customer drops the car off and remove them as he leaves. It's easier to keep the interior from getting dirty than to clean it after it's soiled. Dirty rags in back pockets aren't in style this year.



Some states have laws which require repair shops to return all removed parts to the customer. Ask your customer when he brings his car in for service whether he wants to keep his old parts. If he does, make sure that all returned parts are carefully bagged to avoid soiling the car's interior. Give the customer the option even if your state doesn't have these regulations. The old parts can also be used to help answer questions your customer might have about the work that's been done on his car.



The position of the mirrors and seats shouldn't be changed. If either must be moved to road test the car, make sure they're returned to their original position before the car is returned to the customer. Radios are another sensitive subject. If the customer left his radio on, leave it tuned to his station and turn it off. Road tests are for listening for noises, not the Top Forty. A radio that's left turned on can provide an unpleasant surprise to the customer when he picks up his car.



I've come across a wide assortment of personal items in customers' cars. We had a guy who brought his car in for a wheel alignment with his trunk loaded with bowling balls. Then there was the fellow who kept a loaded .45 tucked under his seat. To avoid misunderstandings, ask your customers to remove their personal items so that you can safely work on their cars. Some customers have the location of every item in the car memorized, and will complain if things are moved around.



Make sure what works (and what doesn't) when the car is assigned to a technician. The time it takes to do a safety inspection will often pay dividends in additional service work. A safety inspection check list can be used to give the customer a written record of his car's condition. You've probably heard it before. "Ever since you worked on my car, my wipers quit working." Do a safety inspection and find out whether the wipers are broken, then let the owner know about it.



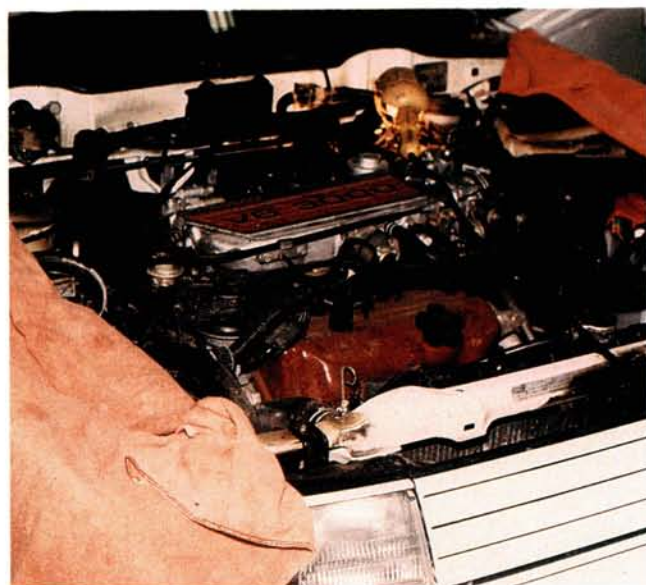
If you employ several technicians, consider having business cards printed with their names as well as the name of your business on them. The techs leave one of their cards in each car they work on. If the customer liked the job, he may request the same tech on his next visit. The cards have the added advantage of accountability. If the job's done right, there's no reason to be ashamed of who did it. If it's not, you'll have less trouble figuring out who was responsible.



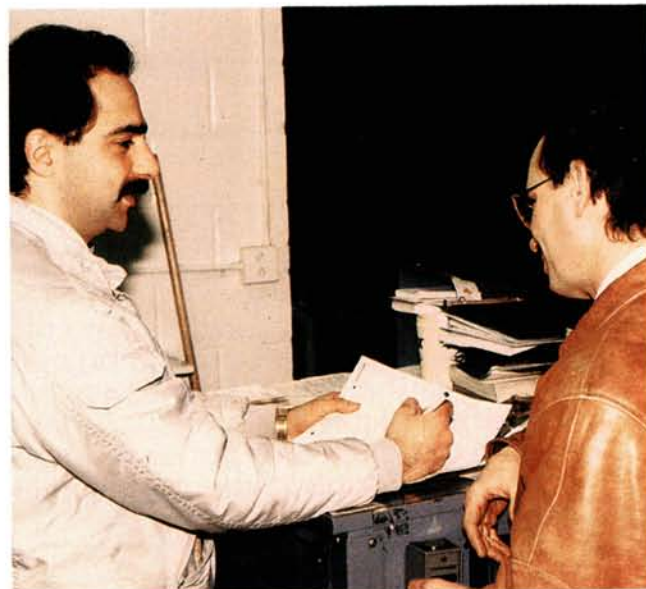
No car should be returned to the customer before it's been road tested at least twice (three times is even better). The first road test helps to identify the customer's complaint, as well as spot additional problems. It's easier to find problems if the car is driven the way your customer drives. You can make one of your employees a Quality Control Inspector. He should be the last person to road test each car before it's returned to the customer. The car isn't done until he says it's done.



Customers will occasionally ask to speak with the technician who's working on their car. Not all techs want to talk to customers. They figure it's time taken away from their real job—fixing cars. Some of the techs at one shop we know handle their own phone calls and questions from the owners of the cars they work on. Cutting the number of links in the communication chain can eliminate misunderstandings. Customers appreciate a tech who has time for them and will reward the extra attention with repeat business.



One final cleanliness tip. Never return the car to the customer with an exterior that's smudged with grease or dirt. Don't leave a fingerprint trail that shows which parts of the car have been worked on. Even if the car was washed before work was started, it may need a quick cleanup before it's returned to the customer. Grease and dirt on the outside of the car will make your customer wonder if a sloppy job was done under the hood too.



Don't let your customer leave until you've taken the time to explain the work that was done on his car. If he had any questions when he brought the car in, make sure that they're answered before he leaves. Review the repair order with the customer, then thank him for his business. Nobody likes to lay out hard-earned money if they aren't really sure what they're paying for. The customer may feel cheated if you rush him out the door as soon as you have his money.