

CAR SIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



Whether you realize it or not, every time you diagnose a problem with a car, your mind does something no computerized diagnostic tool can do. It takes in all the information it can get and then it

makes a theory. In science they call it a hypothesis, which is just a fancy word. That theory, or hypothesis, is based on your understanding of how certain events can lead to certain other events.

If this sounds kind of abstract, I'm sorry. But it's very important. A long, long time ago, I read a book called *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Sounds a little silly as titles go, but the book was then, and still is, one of my favorites.

At one point, the author suggested that "A motorcycle mechanic . . . who honks the horn to see if the battery works is informally conducting a true scientific experiment." However, "If the horn honks and the mechanic mistakenly assumes that the whole electrical system is working, he is in deep trouble."

And since customers are one of our biggest sources of information when we try to diagnose a problem, we need to learn to recognize the difference between information—and misinformation, or our theories will also be in deep trouble.

Let's look at two separate stories, very real stories. In the first case, the customer gave a small bit of information to a technician that led him astray. The information sounded good, because the technician had already chosen the wrong theory, and the misinformation supported that mistaken theory.

In the second case, I was the technician working with a customer's complaint that seemed illogical at first. It could have been easy to write him off as a nut case, but as things turned out, ignoring him would have cost me a good customer.

The Blown Hose

The first customer's car blew a top radiator hose at a bank teller window. Most of the engine compartment was drenched in coolant in an instant. The customer wisely pulled the car to the side of the parking lot, immediately turned off the engine, and called for a tow. Admirable.

At my friend's shop, the hose was repaired, the cooling system was refilled and bled. This was followed by a thorough clean up under the hood. The engine compartment was allowed to dry overnight. The next morning, the engine was started. But there seemed to be a slight miss at idle. You know the kind

of miss. Not a dead plug or hole in a piston miss. Just a tickle once in a while. A tough miss to find since it was so small and intermittent.

It was the occasional skip in the engine's heartbeat that might be caused by—*water*. Blown hose . . . cracked plug wire insulation . . . loose connection made worse by moisture . . . maybe a hint of morning dew in the distributor cap. A logical enough thought process under the circumstances.

My friend conscientiously called the customer and asked if the miss had been there before the hose had given its last full measure of devotion.

"Oh no," the customer said emphatically. No miss. Must be related to the coolant shower. Somehow.

Covering the basics started with a visual examination of the recently drenched ignition wiring and components. Nothing obviously wrong. But oddly enough, a power balance test seemed to lead to a cylinder far away from the blown hose. An oscilloscope confirmed it. There was a tiny little twist at the top of the secondary pattern on number six. Not all the time, just every so often. And the miss corresponded to that little twist. Next the compression test and leakdown test, both okay. And then the spark plug, spark plug wire, and injector swap tests.

The miss didn't move with any of the relocated components.

Right about now it's easy to raise your hands skyward, and mumble "Why me?" This is followed by ten minutes of deep thought over a steaming mug of coffee, and a rerun of all the events leading to this point.

But my friend is no dummy, and suddenly a light went on in his head.

The original theory was the problem, as logical as it seemed on the surface. The broken hose had nothing to do with this problem, and contrary to what the customer had said, the miss had been there all along.

It was decided that there was a mechanical problem on the engine's left bank. Maybe a sticking valve or valve deposit problem. Removal of the cam housing was a painstaking affair on this Porsche 928, but well worth the effort as things turned out. The inner valve spring on number six exhaust had broken into three pieces. A new spring eliminated the miss completely.

The customer later admitted that he hadn't even noticed the miss. He'd just gotten used to it.

The Case of the Mystery Static

Our second story is a little different. In this case, a customer returned with what seemed to be a totally illogical complaint. After a wheel bearing pack and tire rotation he said he now had static on his radio. But strange as it seems, this customer was right. There

was static on the radio, but like the ignition miss, had it been there all along? As things turned out, our shop had indeed caused the static with one careless slip of a hammer.

Like my friend with the Porsche, I went to the scene of the most recent repairs looking for a clue. As theories go, this was indeed a shaky proposition.

But as I removed the final road wheel and tire, I noticed that the grease cap had apparently been installed with a large hammer and a long swing. The cap was dented. I removed it, scraped away the grease, and saw a shiny spot where the cap and spindle had been rubbing.

At this point, I still hadn't made the association between the evidence and the crime. It was late, I was tired, and the guy who'd worked on the car was at home in front of the television. None of this improved my disposition, and certainly didn't promote my meager private eye instincts. Besides, the customer was tired too, and suggested returning in the morning. I agreed.

I started to lock up for the night as the customer pulled away, and as I walked toward my car, I saw him pulling back into the lot.

"What now?" I thought to myself.

But he was grinning ear to ear. "You fixed it."

"Sure I did . . . I DID?"

"It's gone completely. Thanks a lot."

Only later did I begin to realize that the contact between the grease cap and spindle had been pumping enough static electricity into the chassis to affect the radio.

Mind Over Matter

Maybe it's only fitting that we close with one more quote from the *Zen*. It's a great quote, and one every customer should read.

"An untrained observer will see only the physical labor and get the idea that physical labor is mainly what the mechanic does. Actually the physical labor is the smallest and easiest part of what the mechanic does. By far the greatest part of his work is careful observation and precise thinking."

And careful observation and precise thinking are best done with an open mind.

—By Ralph Birnbaum