

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



A few years ago, the study of body language was all the rage. Under the right circumstances, it can still be an interesting hobby. People can often say more about their true feelings with a pose or simple

gesture than they can ever say with words. Recently, I had the dubious honor of being trapped with 50 other unsuspecting Ohioans aboard the airplane flight from hell. During an absurd fiasco that staggered even the wildest imaginations in the group, we were literally beaten into total submission by an airline that couldn't seem to get us from Atlanta to Cleveland in less than two light years.

But that's another story. The interesting part was the way individual passengers handled the eleven hours of stress, annoyance, and fatigue that left us all silly at journey's end. While the crowd was generally well mannered and quiet during its trip through the Twilight Zone, there was a lot of body language thrown about—body language you might see at your own shop as you deal with customers.

Here are some examples:

- **The old chin in hand pose.** If you see someone in your waiting room, leaning forward, elbow on his knee and chin pressed into the palm of his hand until it makes him seem to pout, look out. This is boredom. This customer would rather be experiencing the joys of the dentist's chair than read one more copy of an automotive trade magazine. Boredom just doesn't wear well, especially if the car was promised two hours ago and is still six feet off the ground. Could be a scheduling problem. A TV in the waiting room is a temporary fix at best. This isn't a slow boil yet, but it's time to move the kettle off the fire.
- **The hands on the hips, loose tie, open sport coat pose.** This is a large, thunder-laden cloud on the horizon of customer relations. If the guy is peering over lowered eyeglasses at the same time, batten down the hatches, he's about to turn into a funnel cloud. This man is telling you that he has a problem, and wants it handled NOW.
- **The hands in the pants pockets, loose tie, open sport coat pose.** Same guy, but take his hands from his hips and put them in his pants pockets, and he's relaxed and ready. His biggest concern is whether or not he

can steal the last cup of five hour old coffee from your pot before he pays the bill and hits the road. Give him the coffee, thank him with all your heart for stopping, and ask him to come back real soon.

- **The ten finger comb job.** No, this customer isn't worried about the appearance of his wind blown hair as he rakes the top of his head with both hands, leaves his fingers embedded in his hair, and then tries to compress his skull by sheer brute force. He's just been informed that the hangnail he wanted fixed on his car turned into a triple by-pass operation. So much for the old budget. This is another potential funnel cloud, but quick action by a skilled service writer can save both the customer's attitude and his thinning hair. Careful here.

- **Arms folded across the chest, head lowered, eyebrows tied in a knot above the bridge of his nose pose (whew.)** This is another case where peering over eyeglasses adds a special emphasis. I think some men actually borrow glasses for this pose, since none of the glasses ever seem to fit well, and keep sliding down their noses. This guy isn't likely to blow his stack. He'd rather intimidate with the pose and an icy stare. If he does speak, it will be in a monotone with no facial expression whatsoever. Odds are you'll end up hearing about his brother the ambulance chasing attorney—the one who owes him a favor.

- **Folded hands on the countertop.** This is usually the pose taken by a man of great patience. This is the pose taken by a man with a pleasant smile, who speaks seldom and with care. Maybe he's resigned to the occasional storms of life, and has come to accept them with grace and dignity. Hopefully he's also relaxed because he has great faith in your business and personal skills. Treat this man well. As long as those fingers are intertwined on your service counter as in prayer, they can't find their way to his hips, his hair, or your throat.

I saw all of these poses and a few more. In this long day's journey into night, many were a response to a string of broken aircraft, broken promises, and meals left over from the Titanic's fatal voyage.

But it isn't always enough to talk with your customers. You can often learn as much about what they have to say by watching them before they speak. With a little practice, and careful observation, you can learn to separate the bitter from the better, and forecast which way the winds of customer satisfaction are blowing.

—By Ralph Birnbaum