

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



Ever watch those whodunnit mysteries on the tube? You know the ones. The lady mystery writer from Maine, and the cigar smoking detective in the trashed out trench coat who listen carefully for 58

minutes, and then solve the mystery in the dying moments before the last commercial?

If you love them as I do, you know that the answer to the puzzle is usually hiding in one little comment that gets overlooked by everyone but the master detective. When they do solve the puzzle, it looks like fun.

Very often, we need to do detective work to solve those mysterious, intermittent problems that frustrate all but the best of us.

Here's an example of sleuthing which solved a real mystery. Watch as the customer unwittingly provides the most important clue.

THE CASE OF THE OCCASIONAL QUIT

The car just died. Sometimes. It seemed to be a random problem.

What a classic scenario for the technician who loves a good mystery. He's seen this one before, but knows enough to look for the little twists that make each case different.

Trying to assemble enough clues to prove the case and catch the car in the act can be nearly impossible, especially if the car disguises itself as a mild mannered, cooperative suspect. But the situation is even tougher when you can't duplicate ALL of the circumstances leading up to the failure.

The search for clues began.

Even though the car was towed in, it started right up, first try. Then it ran and ran without complaint or problem.

A phone tap was ordered. The car was driven with fuel gauges, vacuum gauges, and voltmeters taped to the windshield, all tapped in to key points to monitor the engine's vital signs. The car was driven for days and miles without incident.

The car was returned to the customer with "Can not duplicate the problem at this time" written across the bottom of the repair order. The file was marked "Unsolved."

Two days later the car returned on the hook, and discrete mumbling started on both sides of the issue.

The customer mumbled, "Can't they fix the darn thing?"

Each technician mumbled, "But it won't do it for me!"

To make things worse, once the car was disconnected from the hook, it drove into the shop as if nothing had happened.

THE PLOT THICKENS

The car was making a fool of everyone, committing its evil deed, and then escaping again and again. The customer felt like an idiot, and any chuckling or eye rolling from the men in blue would only make things worse. But the techs didn't want to spend the rest of their lives driving a car that seemed to be just fine.

Then the customer did what any self-respecting, red blooded man would do under such pressure—he blamed his wife. "I think my wife is the problem. Car only dies when she's along for the ride."

Fair enough, let's take the little woman for a ride. The little woman was anything but little, and while she wasn't the source of the problem, her less than petite presence in the front seat did make the difference. Less than two miles from the shop, the car quit. She was asked to winch herself out of the passenger seat for a moment, and the car started.

The tech pulled back the carpeting on the passenger side ahead of the front seat, and discovered that the main wiring harness had been improperly installed at the factory. It was fastened to the floor just ahead of the passenger seat, and fastened again beneath the dash. There was a multipin connector in the middle. But the boys at the factory had pulled the wire so tight between the attachment points, that the weight of the lady's feet on the carpeting would pull at the connector. Not enough to unplug the plug. Just enough to break the connection until she got out of the car.

Then the plastic clip on the connector would pull the pins back together, and the car would start.

GIVING THE CUSTOMER CREDIT

At this point the customer was so relieved that he wasn't nuts, and that neither his car nor his wife were possessed by evil spirits, he forgot all the inconvenience and frustration of the past few weeks. He paid the bill cheerfully.

The shop owner was careful to give credit to the customer for having "broken" the case wide open with his keen observation. But it was good detective work of a shop owner who had listened carefully to his customer, and the attention to detail of an alert technician, that finally solved the case.

—By Ralph Birnbaum