

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



We receive calls at our office from techs who find themselves in the middle of a headache car that's turned into a migraine skull thumper. We try to help. Sometimes we're successful,

even though we aren't really set up as a hotline. We know how frustrating and distracting it can be to have a customer breathing down your neck when a car you promised to deliver in two hours is still sneering defiantly at your best efforts two days later. An unusual rash of calls in the past few weeks prompted a discussion the other night as two aging technicians turned editor-types sat around and discussed a few of our most recent calls for help. A long held belief of ours that "back to the basics fixes most cars" had been proven by the calls.

The cases we'll discuss are real. But before we start, we want to emphasize that no one in this office will ever poke fun at anybody struggling with a problem child. We too have made our share of mistakes, experienced our brain dead moments, and were more than happy to have a fresh mind, and even more importantly, a fresh perspective come to our rescue.

But we have only two choices in this business—we learn from our mistakes, or we repeat them.

The Two Day Vacuum Hose

The first problem child is a 1985 Nissan Sentra with a Hitachi chokeless carb. The car has no fast idle and no fast idle control. Maybe the vacuum switches are bad. New ones are a logical starting place.

New ones make no difference.

A new idle speed control actuator, vacuum control modulator, and vacuum cut solenoids are all possibilities, but none of these new parts makes a difference. The situation gets more and more annoying as none of the "logical possibles" work.

Now a new carb. The installation of a new carb is the choice of a human mind responding to frustration. The technician isn't at all surprised when the new carb works no better than the old one. He didn't really hang his hat on anything but hope with this move. But this added defeat makes him wonder if hope really does spring eternal from the human breast.

As fate would have it, our editor, Karl Seyfert had stopped to visit an old friend at the shop, and was

summoned to duty. Knowing that the vacuum sensing switches needed to be closed to activate the vacuum cut solenoids, he checked for continuity across the switches. They were open.

Then he did the logical thing and checked the vacuum source to the switches. No vacuum. He followed the vacuum hose to its source, carefully turning and inspecting the rubber. Near its source, he found the crack.

No vacuum, no switch action, no fast idle.

For two days, a cracked vacuum hose had hidden out of sight and out of mind as the pressures of getting the job done had clouded the troubleshooting section of the technician's mind.

No Pressure

"I've got a VW CIS in here. I hate this car. Had it for days now. Can't get any fuel pressure to the gauges when I check for pressure. The pump is humming and I have a new fuel distributor and control pressure regulator on the darned thing. Whattayathink?"

My response. "Is there any gas in the car?"

His response. "The gauge shows a full tank."

My response. "Never mind the gauge. The wire could be shorted. Is there any gas in the car?"

His response. "Hmmm."

My response. "Go back to the pump and pull the line between the tank and pump. Leave your cigar up in the office. Call back and tell me what you get out of the hose."

Twenty minutes later he called back.

"The darned tank is empty."

This Month's Issue

If it's true that 20 percent of your work consumes 80 percent of your time (and patience), there's a strong likelihood that fuel, electrical, and emissions problems are a big chunk of the your aggravation. This month, we spent most of our time looking at those repair topics, including articles on fuel injection, computer reference voltage, and a carburetor with a bad case of the stumbles.

We made every attempt to present this information as a useful reference tool for those times when the cracked vacuum hose, loose electrical connection, or even an empty gas tank won't fix the car. But our survey of recent calls confirms a concept both Karl and I have long accepted as the first rule of auto repair.

Keep it simple and cover the basics first.

—By Ralph Birnbaum