

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



There are few things more frustrating in my life than the bathroom at my house. It is in the bathroom—the room shared by all our family members on a very personal basis—that the simplest of

small bad habits become evil deeds. The ring around the tub wall, the toothpaste tube squeezed only from the top (never from the bottom as logic would dictate), the missing drinking glass—we all know the routine.

But the most telling aspect of this whole tub and tile experience, is the anger and frustration these mortal sins can elicit from other family members.

This month's question: Are you guilty of some small, but annoying habits in your customer's cars that seem insignificant to you, but annoy the daylights out of them? Let's make some comparisons to my bathroom (and yours if my guess is right) that might bring the point home.

Getting to the Point

Playing with the Radio: The customer dropped off his car this morning. The radio was set to a local college station that plays Bach and Beethoven, with the volume control somewhere between zero and one on a scale of ten.

When he starts his car he is greeted by ZZ Top's latest, with the volume knob set at 35 on the Richter scale.

This could be likened to—Leaving the shower knob in the "on" position: The last comedian to shower turned off the water, but left the shower head wide open. A quick twist on the "cold" knob drenches you and the surrounding area with a spine tingling spray of ice cold water that does more to exercise your heart rate than an hour of full court basketball.

No Gas in the Car: More than one customer over the years has picked up his car, and then been seen rapping his knuckles against the dashboard instrument cluster to get the gas gauge moving. His car was taken on numerous test drives to find an occasional problem, and now the needle on the gas gauge is buried out of sight to the wrong side of the "empty" mark. Even money says he gets to walk part of the way home.

This might be likened to—No bath towels in the rack, no toothpaste in the tube, no paper on the roll—nothing in the can of shaving cream but a last gasp of compressed air to tease you. The frequency of the

"use-it-up-but-don't-replace-it" mentality seems premeditated at times, and can lead to paranoia. You swear you hear the sound of a muffled laugh just outside the bathroom door, but realize the sound you hear is the direct result of grinding your teeth.

The car's not done: The customer drops off his car in the morning, fully expecting it to be completed when he returns. You got busy and forgot to call and warn him that his car wouldn't be done on time. Tired and weary from his own work, he arrives to find the car up in the air, and his transmission across the room on a bench.

This might be likened to—The drying panty hose: You're bushed. A warm shower and a few hummed verses of "Show Me the Way to Go Home" sound great. But as you enter the bathroom, you are horrified at the sight of an entire shower door draped with dripping panty hose.

The last clean, dry towels in captivity have been sacrificed as huge blotters. Like the customer whose car was promised but not delivered, you stand there staring blankly into space, wondering what evil deed from your past has brought this nightmare to your life.

Grease on the steering wheel: It's not a large gooey wad of bearing grease, just the dark traces of fingerprints embedded in the soft vinyl on the steering wheel. The customer's hands don't slide off the wheel, but when he gets home, he notices that his fingers look like they just changed a typewriter ribbon.

This might be likened to—Greasy soap on the faucet handles: This is where the old man gets even for the toilet paper and the panty hose. After completing an oil change on the lawn mower, good old Dad finds it easier to use the downstairs bath than the wash tub hidden away in a dark corner of the basement. Filling the palms of his hands with pumice-laden, gooey white hand soap, he looks over his shoulder, enters the bathroom and turns on the water. This of course applies large globs of the white stuff to the faucet handles.

With a fiendish smile, he makes a half-hearted attempt at rinsing his hands, and then carefully removes the soap from the top of the handles, being careful not to clean away the soap from the underside of each handle. Tee hee.

He then wipes his almost rinsed hands on the white, monogrammed guest towels, and leaves the house before anyone can hurt his body.

The difference between customers and those who use my bathroom, is that my family will always go back to our bathroom, no matter how annoying it can be at times.

—By Ralph Birnbaum