

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



Each and every Saturday morning, I glue my ear to our local PBS radio station like John Boy Walton listening to the latest episode of the Green Hornet, and wait for the Tappet Brothers to

brighten my day. These two guys are the Marx brothers of mechanicking. Click and Clack always send me away smiling.

So there I was last Saturday, grinning from ear to ear after the latest madcap excursion into the sometimes tense world of cars and consumers, when I ran into my old friend Louie. He wasn't smiling.

"Do you ever listen to those hacks the Tappet Brothers?"

"Love 'em," I said. "Try never to miss 'em."

The look on his face changed from one of gross stomach upset to one of pained disbelief. "You like those two bozos?"

"Sure, why not?" I asked.

"Well ... well, because they're not serious mechanics."

The word *serious* can go both ways in this particular instance, and Lou wasn't going to catch me napping. I was forced to ask for a clarification. Did he mean serious in the sense that technicians are supposed to be qualified and professional?

Or did he mean serious in the sense that when they go home at night, they hug their dogs and kick their wives?

Louie responded a lot faster to this one. "Both ... or neither. Take your choice. They spend more time laughing at car problems, joking with callers, and generally screwing around than they do helping the callers. Cars and customers are serious business."

"Why?" I asked.

(Now I've known Louie for a number of years. He's an intelligent, conscientious technician. Takes his business seriously—very seriously. With blood pressure like his, he should have had his veins and arteries installed by the guys who did the Alaska pipeline. The suddenly rosy hue of his cheeks, and the swelling veins in his neck told me that the Almighty's plumbing job was being tested to the max at the moment.)

He breathed deeply, fingers twitching in his pockets. It was clear that his pleas were falling on deaf ears. He decided to hit the ball over to my side of the net.

"Okay, Mr. Smart Guy. Why do you like them?"

"Because I like cars, they talk about cars, and they're having fun doing it. If they're NOT having fun, then they sure have me fooled. I hope I don't insult these auto advisors of the airwaves by saying this, but I don't think the word serious has a thing to do with their intentions.

"And even more importantly, the callers have fun. They get to laugh about an otherwise glum and costly part of their lives, and get some free advice that at least sends them off in the right general direction. Most importantly, it gives them the chance to vent their frustrations to a friendly listener."

"Louie," I said, "sustained seriousness is not good for your health."

Learning to Laugh

My wife had a similar experience this week, emphasizing what sustained seriousness can do to the human mind. A call was made to her office at the local university by an instructor who anticipated any number of problems, most of which weren't problems at all. The caller was obviously distraught, and had spent the better part of the previous sleepless night worrying, and the better part of the current day convincing himself that doom and gloom were a normal part of life.

"Where are my student's certificates. Who will deliver them? Will they be here on time? Can you guarantee that this will be handled correctly?" On and on.

The certificates in question weren't even scheduled for delivery for another two weeks, and all necessary groundwork had been done to insure their prompt delivery. But the caller persisted in searching for a total, unqualified reassurance that his fears were unfounded. One unhappy camper.

The caller finally hung up, and it was then that Mrs. B. noticed the title of the course he was teaching—"How to Become a Happier Person."

Say what you will about the lighthearted approach used by the Tappet Brothers, I thank them for at least helping keep things in perspective for a lot of people who would otherwise drown in the frustrations of vehicle ownership and maintenance. Adopting all of their habits is probably inappropriate for those of us who deal with customers. Being overly familiar and frivolous can ruin our credibility.

But there's no reason not to add a sense of humor and an attentive ear to our tool box of customer relations techniques.

—By Ralph Birnbaum