

CAR SIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



why we included an article that might be better suited for a machine shop owner or machinist/jobber. Your question would be well taken.

When it comes to dealing with a blown, or just plain tired motor, many of us have been inclined to treat the old engine like a wooden nickel—we pass it on. That leaves us with the following choices:

- **We call the salvage yard and order up a pig in a poke used engine.** (Many of you who've been through the used engine routine equate the experience to a blind date with a girl named Zelda.)
- **We let a local machine shop or rebuilder handle things, from inspection to repair.**
- **We get a price for a used engine from a mass supplier of used engines, or we get a price for a rebuilt engine from a mass rebuilder.**

Unfortunately, we only get to nibble at the margin of the job as a broker, and seldom get a really good bite of the profits. Most of the cash rushes through our fingers so quickly that it leaves burn marks.

But there is an alternative. We can increase our involvement in the teardown and inspection of the engine, do many of the rebuild operations in-house, and increase our profits. There are a number of advantages to increasing our involvement in the repair of internal engine damage:

- **We write a better estimate.** By doing the initial teardown and inspection, we know beyond a doubt what the engine needs, and whether repair or replacement is the better option.
- **We get a better understanding of why the engine failed in the first place.** We don't want to hang a string of pearls on a hog by bolting a different engine in a car that still has a plugged cooling system, worn accessory belts, or defective fuel, ignition, or emissions parts. This is especially important if overheating or oil contamination were prime causes of the engine failure. We sell a more complete—and lasting repair.
- **We decide which repairs are needed.** Adding to profitability, doesn't necessarily mean pumping up the cost of the job. There's no advantage to a big bill, if the money is spent on the wrong repairs, or if the lion's share of the profits go into the machinist's hip pocket. For example, we don't want to resurface a

cylinder head if it doesn't need it, or if it's already been machined beyond minimum specs. The only way for us to know for sure, is to check the engine for wear or damage.

- **We decide if repairs are worth the effort and cost.** Sometimes, our inspection tells us that the engine on the stand would be better off at the end of a chain keeping a small boat from going adrift. Even this has its advantage from a sales standpoint. When we approach the customer with the news that repairs to the old engine are not a logical option, we still have the used or rebuilt engine as an option. But we've eliminated one choice from the customer's confusing list of options—and we can move on to those other options and sell them with a clear conscience.

- **We add a potential profit option to our list of services offered for cash American.** You'll note we say "potential." Many of us shy away from engine repair as a high risk area of auto repair, feeling that profits on these big ticket repairs don't cover the added liabilities involved. This may be true with the abundance of mass rebuilding of traditional domestic engines. But the import market is a different matter. Here the choices are far more limited.

If you take the time to do a proper inspection; list the items needed; sublet only those machine shop repairs you can't do without a huge investment in equipment; and then charge labor time for final reassembly, the profit picture on import engines improves. Now add the profits you can take from gaskets, hoses, ignition parts, filters, and lubricants. Add installation time. Add the credibility you gain from being "full service."

- **We do a better job.** We make the decisions. We oversee final assembly and installation. And by knowing the nature of the repair, we reduce the potential for comebacks. Compare that to bolting in a boneyard special with a questionable history and then crossing your fingers—especially if you didn't get rich on the deal in the first place.

Not every job will warrant this approach. We all know there are times when the opportunities are limited by factors like the cost of a megabuck cylinder head or crankshaft damaged beyond repair. And there will always be Mr. Tightwad, wanting you to stick your neck out by offering a lifetime guarantee on a patch job.

But engine repair can be profitable and worthwhile in many cases where the cost of a good repair is justified by the overall value of the finished product.

Next month we'll look more closely at ways to evaluate engine repairs, ways to increase profits, and suggest a few selling techniques that'll help open more wallets.

—By Ralph Birnbaum