

# CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



Last month we listed good reasons for careful teardown and inspection of engines needing internal engine repair. This month we'd like to offer suggestions for making the time and effort worthwhile.

**1) Charge for teardown.** That's right. Somebody has to tear her down and make a list of needed repairs. One way to get paid for your time and expertise is to set a teardown rate. You can set a flat rate that makes you comfortable. Or you can figure removal time (based on vehicle type, accessories to be removed and accessibility to the engine), and add teardown and inspection times. Then multiply that times your hourly rate. Tell the customer that if he agrees to complete the repair either by repairing or replacing the engine, you'll apply that amount to the total cost of the repair.

If the customer bails out and decides to box the engine, throw it in the trunk (like our Cressida), and tow the remains to a ditch on a local backroad, you're covered for the inspection.

**2) Evaluate the entire vehicle.** In some sad cases, a boneyard engine is going to be worth more than the value of the entire vehicle—even in running condition. Unless the owner is half way through his third refinance of the scow, or has a strong emotional attachment to it, you may want to save all parties some grief and talk him out of the job completely.

In the case of our Cressida, the opposite was true. The car was worth whatever it took to do the job right. Why the previous owners got weak in the knees over the cost of repairing the engine is still a mystery to us. This car deserved a substantial investment, since replacement of a car in such superlative shape was a far more costly option.

**3) Don't oversell the job.** Talking the customer OUT of the sale can work to your advantage sometimes. I once tried my best to talk a customer out of an expensive engine job because the rest of the car was in such bad shape. To my surprise, he not only

okayed the engine job, but had me fix the brakes, exhaust, several dislocated suspension parts, and a junk list of other problems. On a resale basis, the car was still about as valuable as an album of assorted disco dance tunes, but it was roadworthy when we got through. And it was still a heck of a lot cheaper than a new ride.

**4) Use a checklist to keep track of all parts and sublet operations needed to do a thorough repair.**

A checklist will keep you from forgetting to order all the parts you need, including the nickel and dime miscellaneous shims, nuts, bolts, gaskets, and washers that can eat your profits like frogs eat flies.

A checklist will also help you keep track of all the related costs involved in making the repair a lasting one. Lubricants, filters, belts, hoses, clamps, even refrigerant for the air conditioner should be included in the estimate.

**5) Do what you want, but we suggest that you steer clear of the customer who wants bottom basement El Cheapo Grande repair special.** After all, the point of this entire exercise is additional profit. Please don't make the mistake of assuming that major engine repairs are automatically profitable just because the final ticket is a big one. We're looking for money that sticks to our bottom line too.

If the guy is obsessed with saving a buck, he'll haunt you 'til the Democrats get one of their own back in the White House, expecting you to "make it right" every time a part you told him to replace lets go.

**6) Be a picky shopper.** The lowest price won't always be the same thing as the best deal (a point customers also need to be reminded about on a regular basis). There are suppliers of quality parts who are willing to sell to you as a shop owner, instead of charging you as they would charge a weekend warrior who wandered in for a gizmo. Try to strike a deal with parts suppliers as well as sublet repair people who offer quality parts and services.

We hope these suggestions are helpful. And we hope the two part article on the repair of the Toyota engine has been useful. Look for follow up articles highlighting the timing belt installation on the 5M-GE, and a final article in this series offering engine installation tips.

—By Ralph Birnbaum