



Recently, I stopped at a local jobber to pick up a few items for a repair job. I needed brake pads and an oil filter, no big deal. But the nearest dealer was miles away, so I ventured into a local parts house for the first time. It was a fairly busy time of day, and I waited patiently for the crest of the wave at the counter to pass. Then finally, I had three counter men all to myself. What I didn't know was that they had already given their last full measure of devotion to the teeming throng pulling out of the parking lot.

To a man, they avoided any eye contact, and after a minute or so, I realized that no one was going to wait on me. Unnerved, I glanced downward at my shirt, pants, and shoes.

"No doubt about it," I thought, "I'm still visible."

With that reassurance, I became more bold and cleared my throat. (I've never, ever been good at the subtleties involved with throat clearing, and normally end up making a sound like a garbage disposal chewing on a steak knife.)

The look I got in return was obviously learned after careful study of every Clint Eastwood movie ever made. I was starting to think that waking a hibernating bear with a broom handle would be safer, and certainly more fun.

Realizing that my window of opportunity was a narrow one, I blurted, "I need brake pads and an oil filter for a 1987 BMW 325."

There was a laugh from the end of the counter. A second sign of life. Now if I could only get close enough to the third guy to hear him breathe, we could dispense with a call to the coroner.

"Did I say something funny?" I asked.

"Guys who drive BMWs don't change their own oil." Finally! The third guy was indeed alive under that cadaver disguise. Looks like he's a fun guy after all. I noticed that he had two name labels on his shirt, one above each pocket. The one on the left said Bubba, the one on the right was closed captioned for the reading impaired and said only "BUB."

So that's how it is. You guys want to play hardball, eh? No problem. I can be as forceful as the next guy, ya know what I mean?

At this point I shifted from throat clearing to another masterpiece in social behavior that I've honed to razor sharp perfection over the years—the nervous laugh.

"Heh, Heh. Well, okay. How about the brake pads?" The first guy shrugged. "I could probably get you a set, but we don't stock them."

"Don't hurt yourself," I thought as I turned and left.

A Tale of Two Problems

Forget about the fact that these guys need a course in social interaction and careful supervision when using sharp eating utensils. There are two other problems afoot here, one having to do with parts for imports, and the other having to do with the way people like me respond to this type of customer service.

Point One: Asking for parts for an import in some parts houses is viewed as an act of treason, stupidity, poor taste, or a combination of all three. The attitude often goes as follows: "Why can't you ask for a water pump for a small block Chevy? We still have a thousand in the back room and they're always on sale for \$13.95. We'll throw in a Richard Petty baseball cap and a coupon for one of those skunk shaped air fresheners if you buy two. But don't bother me with requests for exotic crap like filters and brake pads for a BMW."

Point Two: There are those of us who keep dreaming that someday we'll be able to go to the local jobber and expect coverage for the import cars we work on. Real coverage. Not just pieces parts, but parts that fit well and work right the first time. Dreamers like me will keep wandering back every year or so to see if anything has changed—just in case. In the meantime, we'll only stop at the local parts store when oil is on sale, or when we need a tube of sealer. Even hamster head counter men like the ones I encountered can't screw up sealed tubes and bottles.

Although in this particular case, with this particular store, a guy like me will never say a word—never complain. He just won't be back for anything, scented skunks notwithstanding.

Now before we all get too cocky about some of the bad service we've received from a few no brainers, let's remember that there are a lot of really good counter men out there. And let's also stop and ask ourselves if any of our own customers have simply stopped showing up.

Often, the best customers, the easiest ones to deal with are the first to leave silently.

—By Ralph Birnbaum