



A female customer entered a shop and approached the service counter. She and the owner of the shop had gone to high school together, and had remained close friends over the years. He looked up as she approached, smiled, and then greeted her with, "Hey good lookin'—how are you?"

She laughed, and after small talk, they proceeded to write up the repair order for her car. A young apprentice, awaiting orders for the day, watched with interest. In fact he studied the boss man's technique with great admiration.

A week later, the apprentice, manning the service desk in the boss's absence, tried a similarly familiar greeting with another female customer. Unfortunately, the apprentice and the lady had never met prior to that fateful moment.

After removing a 15 pound leather purse from his left ear, the groggy apprentice was properly contrite. With bells ringing in his head, he did his best to apologize for the indiscretion. As you might suspect, the boss heard about the story the moment he returned. His first temptation was to redden the remaining ear with a metal chair. But after having a heart-to-heart talk with his new man, he decided that the bludgeoning had had a favorable impact—so to speak—on the young man's attitude.

An Admittedly Unscientific Survey

Let's digress for a moment and discuss a relevant survey I've been conducting. It's not a very scientific survey, I grant you. In fact it's probably about as accurate as an exiting poll to determine political party preferences conducted during a kindergarten recess. But every time I look up at my rear view mirror, there's a young lady in a sporty little car glued to my rear bumper.

This leads me to believe that there are a lot of female drivers out there in their mid 20's driving new cars. Either that, or I'm being tailed.

The local car dealers must agree. A whole new set of radio spots has blossomed recently, aimed at the young female buyer. Unlike more traditional advertising approaches, the ads don't talk about cars. Instead the car dealers spend a lot of time and money discussing their own new-found appreciation for the personal needs of the female buyer.

And why not? More and more young women are shopping around, selecting vehicles of their own choice, and then writing checks for the costs involved in vehicle ownership.

The Lady or the Tiger?

If you have a young employee, maybe this is a good time to brief him on a some do's and don'ts for dealing with female customers. Here are a few:

Don't be overly familiar: There are a few buzz words which can turn the lady into a tiger in an instant. "Hey, Baby" or "Hey, Good Looking" are definitely taboo. And a reference to a female customer as a "Little Lady" may seem innocent on the surface, but grates with condescension. The "Little Lady" routine was last used successfully in a 1948 John Wayne movie.

Don't talk to her like a puppy being paper trained: Does she know anything about maintaining her car? Maybe, even probably, not. But that doesn't mean she wants to be talked to like an idiot. By the way, the heartbreak of idiocy strikes without regard to sex. If the customer—male or female—is an idiot, at least let him (or her) prove it first.

In many cases, the problem is not idiocy, but ignorance. Her father and brother who know everything there is to know about cars and car repair, have usually done nothing to inform her of the automotive facts of life. But ignorance is a treatable malady. She needs guidance and information in a form she can understand.

Take time to work out a maintenance plan *with*, not *for*, your female customer. Including her in the decision making process makes her feel like a valued customer.

Sending her away with comments like, "Maybe you should go get your dad or brother and come back," will only insult her. Besides, she probably doesn't want their interference any more than you do.

Don't get too technical: You can really fog her glasses by trying to impress her with a river of technical lingo. Keep things simple, but intelligent. Skilled service writers know how to cut through all the mumbo jumbo without going so far in the other direction that it comes out like "Look Spot, look. See Alice run."

Finally, forget about the old image of the woman running an errand for her husband. More and more often, the woman is the decision maker in the process. She's standing at your service counter because it's her car, and her idea to come to you for help.

Man or woman, a valued customer is a hard thing to come by. Woman or man, each deserves the best we can give in terms of polite, intelligent customer service.

—By Ralph Birnbaum