



My friend Greg owned an automotive machine shop for years, and now works as an automotive instructor teaching engine repair. His input on several articles has been thoughtful

and constructive, not only because of his technical skills, but also because he graduated with honors from the College of Hard Knocks. He was kind enough to look over this month's 626 top end article, with the understanding that he offer criticisms and suggestions about its technical content. I appreciate his input as always.

But we also spent a great deal of time hashing over another, equally important issue, namely: "Considering that few customers will write a blank check for a repair, where do you stop on a repair job and still have a reasonable expectation that it won't return to haunt you like Jacob Marley's ghost?"

Consider the following food for thought.

Customers look to us for advice.

Sounds simple enough on the surface, but the decisions we make about the completeness (or incompleteness) of a repair are every bit as important as the quality of the work we do. If we make the wrong decisions, then we fix the wrong things. Even though many customers are reluctant to admit it, they pay for our advice as well as our repair skill. It's up to us to tell them what the car needs.

The cost of the repair should never be the sole deciding factor in our decision making process.

These can be tough words to live by, especially in areas of the country where the economy is still hibernating. Even though customers look to us for advice, they don't always like what they hear. Many customers have a price in their heads when they enter the door. (Some will have a price ON their heads, but that's a different story.)

That price may be based on a similar repair done to a family member's car; it may be based solely on the fact that his anticipated bill is all he can afford; or it may be based on the same hereditary cheapness which has afflicted his family for generations.

Remember the child's game that starts "I'm thinking of a number between one and ten"? If you guess wrong with an adult playing this game, you'd better be able to justify why you're thinking in the low teens, while he's stuck somewhere between one and two.

Auto repair becomes a matter of compromise.

It's impossible to please everyone. It's darned near impossible to please MOST everyone. Magazines like ours and industry trainers try to promote quality repair by describing complete repairs. But you don't live in an ivory tower out there in the real world, do you? And we repeat, there are few blank checks crossing your palm.

"Just patch it together," the customer says, "I'm going to dump it." But he doesn't dump it. He drives it until the patch falls off, and brings it back again and again. Usually he wants some "consideration" based on the fact that you didn't fix it right the first time.

That brings us to the compromise, the middle ground between binder twine and bubble gum repairs, and the Diamond Jim Brady approach. Like it or not, we are often forced to make judgment calls which land on a middle ground between the two extremes. We need to decide which parts and repairs will give the customer the most bang for his buck, and more importantly, keep us off the liability hot seat.

Document your decisions.

If the customer refuses to take your best advice, your options become somewhat limited.

- You can suggest that he take the car elsewhere—as diplomatically as possible. This is a wise decision if the vehicle is so unsafe that it becomes a menace to society and he still refuses to bring it up to minimum safety standards.

For your own sake, document that information in writing on the repair order (diagnosis order if you didn't actually perform any repairs), and get him to sign a copy for your records.

- You can compromise on the compromise. With this approach, you get the customer to spend just a little more than he wanted to—but not as much as you think he should have. This is a lot easier to do if you leave yourself a reasonable amount of breathing room on the original estimate. Usually that means including items which you describe to yourself as "Nice but not absolutely needed."

Auto repair is an ongoing process of evaluation, judgments, and compromises. Even the best of us will make mistakes, guaranteed. We'll have to swallow hard at times to admit that our judgment wasn't flawless.

In a real world filled with compromises, however, it's hard enough living with your own mistakes, let alone paying for someone else's.

—By Ralph Birnbaum