



It happens. You are forced to deal with someone who can only be classified as a jerk. The following is a real story.

The customer entered the service department of an automobile dealership, and approached a service desk crowded with early morning customers. It was clear from the glazed look in his eyes, his clenched fists, and his curled

lip, that he was furiously angry. He walked to the counter, pushed his way past several startled customers, placed one hand on the countertop (for leverage, I suspect), and began to scream at the service writer at the top of his lungs.

"You have a problem, mister, a big, big problem. You blankety-blank so and so rip off artists...." At this point he really wound up and let fly with a drooling tirade, punctuated by an index finger which repeatedly found its way to the service writer's chest.

The service writer resisted an urge to bend the guy's finger back like the blade on a Swiss army knife. Instead, he stepped back and quickly stuffed a blank repair order into a clipboard. Then he asked another employee to continue writing repair orders. He quickly rounded the service desk and walked slowly, but deliberately past the towering inferno, toward the side exit door. He paused near the door, turned, and said, "I need to write an order out in the lot. Why don't you walk along and we'll discuss it."

• **Rule One: Get the bad apple out of the barrel.**

Once out in the lot, the writer walked briskly down the row of cars, hoping to tire the aggressor. A dozen cars down the row, he stopped, placed the clipboard beneath his arm, and turned. The irate customer had followed close on his heels, yelling, "Well, what are you gonna do?"

The service writer had paused at a small truck, and pointed to it. "See this truck?" he asked in a friendly manner.

The jerk frowned and nodded.

"That's my truck," said the service writer. "It starts every morning, stops on a dime, has a great stereo, and gets good gas mileage. I love it."

"So what's the point?" asked the jerk.

The service writer turned to face the jerk. "With all due respect, sir, I do not have a problem. My truck runs just fine. You, sir, have a problem, and we can probably help you with it, but your abuse is NOT accept-

able. I have never seen you before, don't know you at all, and can't for the life of me imagine how you expect to accomplish anything with your nastiness."

All of this was delivered in a firm, but even tone of voice.

• **Rule Two: Enough is enough. Verbal abuse is often a sad fact of life at the service desk—but physical abuse is NOT acceptable.**

Again, with a friendly smile, and in an even voice, the service writer then introduced himself, extended his hand, and asked the jerk for his hand and his name in exchange.

The jerk was suddenly less hostile. Wary? Yes. But the boil was off the kettle.

• **Rule Three: Stay cool.**

(I apologize to anyone with a "fuse" of even normal length who has resisted the urge to assault this type with a large battery, but lose your cool, and nobody wins.) If you can't embarrass someone by contrasting his own boorish behavior with your own class and self-control, then there's no hope for him anyway.

"Now, said the service writer, let's try this again. Do you have a copy of your repair order?"

The customer produced a repair order from a dealership two states away! The fact that we were also an authorized dealer for his type of car had led him to brand us as co-conspirators in the evil plot to drive him insane. The other dealer had held his car for three weeks waiting for a back ordered part, performed a lengthy warranty repair, and apparently botched the job.

• **Rule four: Now that you have the guy's attention, do what you can to help him. But stay in charge.**

He pointed to the car, which was dangling like a fresh-caught walleye from a tow truck winch. But now he was a different man. No longer screaming and ranting, he was asking for help. He recounted weeks of frustration followed by a now ruined business trip.

The service writer went on to explain that he had a big morning rush of customers, and that given the chance to clear the decks for action, he would give his undivided attention to the customer's plight. He returned with the customer to the service area, and made him as comfortable as possible. Then he handled his normal customers (who were duly impressed with the transformation of Hyde to Jekyll).

Ultimately, the problem was resolved. There were a few more tense moments along the way, a few more frictions generated by unavoidable circumstances. But the ground rules had been established. The service writer had defined the out of bounds markers.

For the rest of their business dealings, the customer made sure he kept both feet in bounds when he caught the ball.

—By Ralph Birnbaum