



Call it a mid-life crisis. Those near to me have suggested that that's the case. But I decided I wanted a new tool box. Twenty years in the shop have given the old one a sedimental value. It's clearly seen better days. Then reality sets in. Unless you've been in an Albanian prison for the last few years, you're aware that inflation has taken its toll on tool prices. The original

purchase price of the old box will now buy little more than the rubber drawer liners for the new one. I have already spent hours justifying the need for a new tool box, and have assembled a logical argument for the purchase so water tight that it could be used as a main hatch on a submarine.

What surprised me was the difficulty I had in shopping for one. Apparently the way many of us do business has also changed.

Contestant Number One

The great tool box hunt really gets rolling when I receive a press release for a new, racing red triple decker wall-to-wall tool chest. This sets my salivary glands to the full flow position. I call the manufacturer, identify myself, explain the situation, and ask for the Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Price.

To my surprise, the voice at the other end tells me that I'll have to ask my wagon jobber.

"No Ma'am," I say. "You don't seem to understand. I'm calling from *Import Service* magazine. We've received a press release about one of your tool boxes and I may be interested in buying one." I went on to explain that I'm usually at the shop at irregular times, which makes a call from the jobber a scheduled affair. I just need a price which will tell me if I'm close to budget. I'll take it from there.

"I'm afraid we can't help you, sir. We don't give that information over the phone." (General Schwarzkopf's battle plans would have been safe in these hands.)

Okay, so maybe I don't want that particular tool box as badly as I thought.

Contestant Number Two

Let's try another. There's a company not as well known as some of the big suppliers. They have no wagon jobber fleet, but they have nice stuff and their tools have served me well over the years. I call the

main plant, and ask if I might drive down and view their assortment of tools and tool boxes. I receive a similarly lackluster response.

"You'll have to contact one of our distributors. I can give you the name and address of the distributor closest to you, if you'd like." Turns out the distributor is two blocks from home. This sounds a lot more promising. Unfortunately, when I show up, the distributor has none of the boxes in stock. He's never stocked any for display purposes, and doesn't seem sure how to go about getting one for me—even if I plunk down a pile of greenbacks sight unseen.

I didn't really want that one either, I guess.

Contestant Number Three

Finally, I select a likely prospect from another catalog, and hop in the car, driving the 20 or so miles to their central distribution center. Now we're cookin'. After all, they must have tons of these tool boxes in the warehouse. Sure enough, there are mountains of them, all neatly stacked in huge cardboard boxes. The guy across the service counter is friendly and patient as I leaf through the catalog, pointing out several possible choices. One is out of stock, a second is standing in the lobby as a display. The display model is impressively built, but doesn't quite have the drawer sizes I need.

The one in the catalog which seems to meet my needs is a lot more expensive. Suddenly my original argument for laying out this much coin for a new box is looking a little ragged around the edges. It may take me another two to three minutes to talk myself into it, and two to three months to convince the Missus. But see it I must before taking the big leap.

"Could I take a look at this one?" I ask, pointing to the shiny catalog photo.

"I'm afraid that one is still in a box." This is said in a matter of fact tone which tells me that there is no room for discussion in this matter. It's in a box, it will stay in a box until cash stimulation is provided. That's that.

And the Winner Is....

The winner is you. At a time when American business is having a hard time doing any business at all, it may be a good time to pause and ask why. You have the opportunity to contrast yourself with the folks who don't seem to want to do business, by having an attitude that says "I want your business, and I want it NOW. I want to keep your business. I want to offer you prompt, courteous, professional service."

And if the guy was out pricing tool boxes recently, you can look good in a hurry.

For the rest of this month, I'll be repainting Old Red and buying him some new drawer liners. But next month we'll look at several suggestions to help you keep business in your shop once it passes through your door.

—By Ralph Birnbaum