

# CARSIDE MANNER



The customer came to you from out of the blue. Maybe he was just driving by and decided to stop. Maybe he was referred by a friend or relative who is already satisfied with your work. Maybe he's new to the area, and finds the location of your shop convenient. No matter what the reason, this is business that came to you.

Okay, the ball is in your court. What do you do? With some customers who have the patience and attention span of a four year old, your window of opportunity may slam shut in the twinkling of an eye. Here are a few suggestions for keeping that new business when it comes to you:

- **Greet the customer immediately.** Maybe you're tied up on the phone when the customer walks in. But don't make the guy wait for five minutes before acknowledging his presence. Interrupt your phone call long enough to greet the customer, and promise that you'll be right with him.

My associate, Karl Seyfert, was recently impressed with the parts man at a local motorcycle shop. When Karl entered, the parts man was on the phone with a supplier. He immediately excused himself and said he would call back after taking care of a customer. Karl told him that he could have finished his call, to which the parts man replied, "Without customers, I don't need suppliers."

- **Smile and greet the customer.** This is another mistake I see repeated over and over again. One local shop owner I know puts on his best deadpan face, and looks over his glasses at each customer, saying nothing. It's eerie. His look comes across the counter as "Yeah, what do you want?" The poor customers feel uneasy, and glance behind themselves, hoping that the icy gaze is aimed at someone else.

Another local shop owner smiles broadly at everyone, makes them feel right at home immediately, and asks how he can be of service. Guess where I send people.

- **Introduce yourself.** Few people I know identify themselves by name. But offering your name as a part of your greeting puts the conversation on a more personal basis. Most customers will offer theirs in return, and bingo, you're not total strangers anymore.

- **Gauge the customer.** This is a tough one, and it requires skill and experience. Customers will tell you a lot during the initial exchange of pleasantries. Some will send a message with their tone of voice and pose that says, "No small talk, I'm all business." Others will be more cordial, and may need a little small talk to loosen them up.

In either case, don't get overly familiar with a new customer. Stay friendly, but keep things professional.

- **Do some business.** You're in business, and he's here in need of your service. Pleasantries have been exchanged, and now it's time to exchange your service for some coin of the realm. Maybe the word "eager" is too strong for the attitude you should have at this point. Perhaps the word "interested" is better. Act as though you're interested in doing business.

- **Act like you know what you're doing.** Remember, this customer is sizing you up too. He has little to go on during this first encounter, and he wants to be reassured as soon as possible that you are not only willing, but competent. If you are familiar with his type of car, or specially equipped by training and equipment to handle a certain type of problem, mention that.

- **Be truthful.** If you don't know how to help the customer, or aren't especially familiar with his problem, admit it. But make it clear, that you know how to find the answer or solution, even though it isn't available at the moment. A simple, "I don't know, but I can find out in a hurry," sure beats handing him a Grimm Fairy Tale as a cover up and being forced to wiggle out of your own stew later on. At least you come across like an intelligent problem solver.

- **Never stop giving the impression that you are there to solve the customer's problem.** Here's one example. A shop owner charged a reasonable diagnosis fee to a customer, and determined that the car's automatic transmission was bad. But he didn't repair automatic transmissions. Instead of just sending the guy down the street, he offered to call a transmission specialist with a reputation for quality repairs, and set up an appointment for him. The customer was thankful for the recommendation and the introduction, and returned a few weeks later for some brake and suspension work.

Last month we mentioned our surprise at the way some companies do business at a time when "business as usual" isn't enough. We hope these suggestions help you move ahead of the pack in these hard times.

I'm smiling, honest.

—By Ralph Birnbaum