



Vince Fischelli and I were discussing this month's electrical article about schematics. At one point he shared an anecdote about a customer who had become very upset when Vince pulled out a wiring diagram to plan the repair. The customer's agitation increased as he watched Vince's finger trace the path of the circuit. Finally he asked why Vince

was spending time looking in a book instead of simply fixing the car.

"I don't need a guy working on my car who needs to look in the book," was his comment.

As Vince finished his story he could hear me laughing.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"I know this guy," I said. "He did the same thing to me a few years back."

In the next few days, I talked to several techs who specialize in electrical problems. It was amazing. They all knew this character. But the story became less humorous with each telling.

Piece of Cake

One of the toughest problems we face as technicians is our image. Most customers have no idea what it takes to be a truly skilled repair technician. Heck, they don't even know what it takes to be better than average, let alone what it takes to be a true master technician. Think of it. We're expected to understand the workings of the internal combustion engine, fuel delivery systems, the workings of electrical, and now electronic systems.

We're expected to have many of the skills of a qualified machinist: drilling, tapping, welding, and taking accurate measurements with a dial indicator or micrometer.

And we're expected to keep track of all the changes in design and production thrown at us by dozens of auto manufacturers. Mechanic, machinist, plumber, electrician, and human database.

Anybody can do it. Right?

What's Up Doc?

Let's stop here and drag out an old comparison we've used before. It's the comparison between a doctor and a technician.

1) If a doctor can't handle your ailment, he charges you for his time, and calls in his buddy Larry who specializes in ingrown toenails.

(This is called a consultation. No doctor ever apologizes for not knowing toenails.)

2) In tough cases, the doctor will never, ever commit himself to anything without running tests. He pokes and prods, has you pose for pictures, and takes a lot of your blood to show who's really in charge. Then he looks at the tests and the x-rays, frowns, and rubs his chin before saying anything.

(The chin rubbing serves two purposes. It allows the 'doctor to impress you with the gravity of the situation. It also allows the doctor to fret over that missed putt on the ninth hole last Friday.)

3) The same doctor attends splashy conventions to discuss new equipment and techniques, he gets free literature (and samples) from the drug companies, and he reads, reads, reads. He reads everything he can get his hands on, because he knows that his education never ends.

(Wait a minute! Didn't this guy go to medical school? What's with all the reading? I don't need a doctor who needs to look in the book.)

Education and the Image

Maybe the reason we keep coming back to the "doctor thing" is that it's becoming an increasingly apt analogy. So Mr. Customer, here are a few things to consider the next time you size up your technician:

1) Information is the key to success in our world. Information is not free. It costs a lot of money to purchase repair manuals and wiring schematics.

2) Admitting that you don't know something is not a sin. Having the intelligence, education, and tenacity to uncover the answer is what counts.

3) Your technician's education never stops. And without better than average reading and math skills, he can't hope to repair vehicles.

4) The wiring diagram in your technician's hands tells you a lot about him. (1) He was smart enough to buy it; (2) He's smart enough to use it (with the exception of exercise equipment, we seldom buy what we don't use); (3) He's smart enough to know when he doesn't know toenails. The consultation he's making with that silly book may actually be saving you money. There's no fee splitting with a schematic.

So there you have it, Mr. Customer. Now don't you feel bad?

—By Ralph Birnbaum