



## Great Expectations

My apologies to Mr. Dickens, but customer expectations for their new or nearly new cars seem to be at an all time high. On average, newer vehicles are more reliable and require less maintenance than ever before. In my grandfather's day, he often spent more time vul-

canizing patches on his tires than he did driving. After dark, he poured water on carbide to generate gas, and then lit it so he had headlamps which had a hard time illuminating the front bumper.

As recently as 30 years ago, it was not uncommon to need new shocks and tires on your Impala before 20 thousand miles. Ball joints and tie rod ends had grease fittings, and ignition points and condensers were still part of an annual tune up. Computers? They were a mysterious monster which filled an entire floor of an office building.

Today? Tires come with 50 or 60 thousand mile warranties, the grease gun may soon be relegated to a small corner of the Smithsonian, and ignition points have all but disappeared—even from lawn-mower engines.

Consumers have gotten spoiled by all these improvements. They expect their cars to last longer with less maintenance. (I know more than a few who expect them to last forever with NO maintenance at all.) New car manufacturers have flocked to J.D. Power stadium, hoping to win the World Series of customer loyalty based on the coveted number 1 position in the Customer Satisfaction Index. Their efforts have included free car washes, free loaners, fruit baskets, and a raft of other promotional efforts to schmooze Joe Public.

This may sound like bad news for independent repair shops, especially smaller shops on tight budgets. You don't have all that fancy special test equipment the dealer has, do you? And technical information is becoming more voluminous and harder to get every day.

## Is There Joy In Mudville?

So why do we keep getting calls and letters from consumers who are at wits end trying to get their cars

fixed by a dealer? At first we thought that the occasional consumer phone call or letter was an oddity. Then we received another—and another. Some of these folks saw our magazine in a waiting room, some were a friend or relative of one of our readers.

You may also find it interesting to note that very few of these callers fell into the “crackpot category.” On the contrary, most have been knowledgeable, intelligent people with a better than average understanding of their vehicles. Just the type of person you'd like to have as a customer.

Most had maintained their vehicles in accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations. Most gave us detailed, useful descriptions of their problems. All were frustrated that the dealer with all the fancy gizmos and testers couldn't fix their car, even after repeated attempts to do so.

We're not here to tar every dealership service department in the good old US of A with a wide black brush. In all fairness, people who are well satisfied with the service provided by their dealership don't write or call. And we want to doubly emphasize that there are a lot of great technicians working at the dealership level. But the shadow cast by the dealership service network has been blown up to bigger-than-life proportions by a lot of slick advertising, usually at the expense of independent repair shops.

Let's face it, it can be intimidating at times.

So what do you do the next time you glance down the street at the big shiny dealership and feel a twinge of insecurity? Please consider the following:

- **Not everyone loves the local new car dealer.**
- **The dealership network does not have the capacity to fix all the cars in this country.** It is doubtful that it ever will.
- **Vehicle manufacturer's don't always know the cure for every problem.** They are only human.
- **Fancy testers don't fix cars, skilled technicians do.** We've said this many, many times in this column, but it's truer today than ever before. The stuff between your ears is still your best diagnostic tool.
- **Cars are cars and people are people.** Dealing with the people who own the cars is an art form never to be duplicated by a piece of equipment. The best special treatment you can give your customers is still a quality repair with quality parts, completed in a timely fashion at a fair and reasonable price.

There are a lot of frustrated consumers calling us who need help with their problems. Maybe they should be calling you.

—By Ralph Birnbaum