



Say What?

What I'd like to know is whether or not the owners of automobiles in this country go to some type of ownership seminar to teach them what to say when their cars break. The word "conspiracy" comes to mind when I realize the predictable inanity of many comments which

crop up again and again at the service counter.

Here are a few examples of the strange things customers say, and a list of responses you wish you could use—but don't dare offer.

"I didn't think it would cost so much."

Okay, so how much did you think it was going to cost, partner? Just how much is "so much?" How about if your car stops "so much" better when the brakes aren't running metal to metal?

This character has no idea what the repair should cost when he says this. He knows what he wants it to cost, and the figure he has in mind falls somewhere between the price of two Big Macs and the cost of a movie ticket. Anything more will result in his experiencing shortness of breath and chest pain.

"So much" for this guy.

But keep the CPR manual handy, just in case.

"It never did this before."

This is a big, big help. If it DID do this before, and the customer kept track of when the problem occurred, and under what conditions it occurred, that would be a move in the right direction. But the fact that it never did this before falls into the category of "no help."

I suspect that this response is some deep seated psychological attempt by the customer to deny that there is a problem. Who knows, maybe he imagined the knocking noise in the engine. Maybe there's a chemical imbalance in his brain caused by his wife's first attempt to make chili. Maybe he can be declared financially not-responsible by reason of insanity.

The customer wants you to support these assumptions. He wants to know that it's all in his head. His health insurance pays for counseling, but not for a new set of rod bearings.

"My mechanic thinks it's the water pump."

This one is an all time favorite of mine. It conjures up a picture of a tiny mechanic who is kept in a hamster cage, fed, watered, and allowed to run around the basement on weekends. While darting in and out between the furnace and water heater, he offers astute suggestions about automotive problems.

My mechanic? If you have a mechanic, Mr. Customer, why are you here? I know, I know, you've been feeding your mechanic that nasty dry food again instead of the canned stuff, and he's not talking to you at the moment.

Oh well, at least you know you can rule out the water pump.

"Can you just get it going?"

You wish you could give an equally evasive response to this open ended plea. Here are some options:

"More or less..."

"For how long?"

"Do you live nearby?"

"Do you have a mobile phone, just in case?"

"I really don't want to spend any money on it."

Boy, am I surprised. I thought you'd just love to drop a grand into this slug, ol' buddy. I have a line of people out front with fistfulls of cold, hard cash, begging me to take as much as I want or more than I need—whichever comes first.

This guy goes one up on your average run-of-the-mill cheapskate. He's suggesting that any expense is too much. This response is a conditioned reflex caused by overexposure to extended new car warranties. It's an insidious addiction, and there doesn't seem to be a lasting cure.

"But the car's not paid for..."

A surprising comment, considering that they haven't imported Fiats for nearly a decade.

You'd love to tell the guy that the actual cash value of his financed treasure won't get him on a ride at Disneyland. Don't let his monetary ineptitude interfere with your need for profitability.

Okay, so you can't use any of this at the service counter. At least now you may not feel like the only one running a day care center for voting age drivers.

—By Ralph Birnbaum