

CAR SIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



Vince Fischelli's article this month about troubleshooting electrical short circuits deals with an area of automotive repair that probably causes more frustration than any other—automotive electricity.

But the frustrations involved with doing the repair can look easy compared to educating your customers about what it takes to fix 'em and fix 'em right, electrically speaking.

Real People

Here are a couple of real life examples:

The customer had already purchased and installed three sealed beams on the left side of his pickup truck. He'd also replaced every fuse and fusible link in the truck—twice. High beams or low, the headlight still burned so dimly that the parking lights overpowered it.

He asked us if we had any "good" sealed beams. He said he was tired of those junk bulbs he'd been buying.

We said we'd check it out.

I went to the book rack and pulled the wiring diagram for his truck.

"Oh great," he moaned. "That's all I need."

"Is there some problem, sir?"

"All I need is some pea brain working on my truck who needs to look in a book to fix something. I could look in the book."

Fortunately, it was one of those rare days when the sun was shining, I had an extra ten bucks in my pocket, and all was right with the world. I just smiled and located the ground circuit locations. Sure enough, the ground for the left headlight was hidden below the washer bottle where it could get doused with washer fluid on a regular basis.

I removed the bottle, and as soon as I touched the eyelet at the ground bolt, the beam came on bright and strong.

The customer didn't say a word.

After cleaning the connection, and installing a clean bolt, I realized that bad temper and all, the customer deserved an explanation. After all, by simple definition, he'd made himself look like a fool. He now had a lifetime supply of bulbs and fuses, and he'd been abusive with someone who was only doing his job. I didn't need to beat him up anymore.

But I did need to help him understand that he wasn't just being charged for what we did, but also

for what we knew. We had made the investment called time and experience. We'd also shelled out big bucks for those books.

He had to be politely and properly informed that there is no free lunch. Never was.

How Much To Replace A Bulb?

Similar situation. Everything on the car has been replaced. The battery, the alternator, all the fuses, and belts are new. But the battery keeps going dead. Several hundred dollars have disappeared from the customer's wallet. The people who installed the parts have given up trying to fix the problem, but the customer is still out the money.

So now it's your problem. You check, and there's no doubt about it. The charging system is out to lunch.

As you turn the key to the on position, you notice that the alternator light isn't coming on. Bingo. You inform the customer that it will take some more checking to determine whether or not there's a circuit problem, or just a burned out bulb.

He agrees to proceed.

It's the bulb. But when you inform the customer about what it's going to cost, he gets starchy.

"You're going to charge me that much to replace a stinking bulb?"

The same character who helped another garage owner send his kids to private school for a semester in exchange for a lot of unnecessary parts is unwilling to pay you for actually fixing the problem.

Let's hope it's one of those days when you're on top of things, because this is another case where the customer has one heck of a time understanding the intangibles that go with competent diagnosis and repair of his car. And his was a fairly simple problem. He'd lose his mind over an intermittent short circuit.

He can see the shiny new battery and alternator, and fresh black belts. Those are real. He can touch them and help to ease the pain in his bank account.

But paying you for knowing which bulb to replace is an incredibly hard concept for some people to swallow. They would much rather subsidize the parts changers of this world, than pay a fair price and actually get something fixed.

We have no magic cure for this problem. Sorry. It comes back, as it always does, to taking the time to explain to the customer that parts don't fix cars, competent technicians do; that it makes a lot more sense to look in the book than to tear an entire car apart searching for a ground connection; and that you're paid for fixing cars.

—By Ralph Birnbaum