

Complete Repairs Provide Value-Added Service to Customers

by David Brooks

Import car owners don't expect to spend a lot of time in repair shops. That's the main reason most of them bought an import vehicle in the first place. For many, their only service experience has been routine maintenance, often at the dealership or possibly the quickie oil change places. Now, they're out of warranty, need some work done and have selected your shop, probably because of a friend, co-worker or family member's recommendation.

Let's put ourselves in their place for a moment. What are their expectations and anxieties concerning the repair process?

There's no motorist left in America who hasn't seen one of the "20/20" or "60 Minutes"-type auto scam exposures. Book stores are full of titles such as, "What Auto Mechanics Don't Want You to Know," and "How to Avoid Getting Mugged by Mr. Goodwrench."

The "If You Can't Trust Sears, Who Can You Trust?" mentality is widespread. Millions listen to syndicated automotive talk shows such as "Car Talk," which although highly entertaining and informative, aren't exactly representative of the typical shop owner's approach to all things automotive.

In short, consumers don't automatically assume this will be a pleasant and hassle-free experience. Some will even anticipate that you will try to do work on their vehicle that isn't actually needed. For these customers, you are effectively guilty until proven otherwise. These are the cards you've been dealt. So, how do you best play them?

This can put you in an awkward position. You must balance the customer's need to have the work done competently (yet as cheaply and quickly as possible) with your professional need to see that all the work needed is properly done, in a reasonable amount

of time, using first line parts. And you must make a fair profit so you can continue to invest in the personnel, training and equipment that allows you to (1) fix it right the first time, (2) have a reasonable expectation that it will stay fixed and (3) build a "customer-for-life" relationship in the process. Or, as the coach told his pitcher when the league's best hitter came up to bat with the bases loaded, "don't walk him, but don't give him anything good to hit either."

The Wrenching Dilemma

In a perfect world, motorists would be able to describe their vehicle's symptoms exactly, would have complete knowledge of its previous maintenance and service records and would possess a degree of technical literacy enabling them to understand the complexities and "inter-relatedness" of modern automotive systems. On your end, you would be able to diagnose the exact cause of the problem at first glance, the cost of all necessary replacement parts, and exactly how long the repairs would take. This may happen in a parallel universe but not often in these woods.

More likely, the car is dropped off with little more explanation than the brakes have been squealing "for some time," or "there's been these little red or green or kinda yellowish-black splotches on the driveway," or maybe "the little red light in the middle started coming one a week ago and now it's pretty much on all the time."

These statements invariably end with "how much will it cost to fix and I really need it back this afternoon." You'd actually love to have them ask for a written estimate, because that means they'd stay around at least long enough for you to take a test drive or run some preliminary diagnostics.

In the real world you usually have to take an educated guess on both the problem and the estimated cost. Customers assume the parts are readily available, at least they do if it's their first import vehicle repair situation. So, they go back home or to the office, and both of you dread that follow-up call in a couple hours after you've had a chance to take a better look.

You might even start feeling a little guilty asking them to authorize

additional repairs for problems that couldn't jump up and scream, "FIX ME, FIX ME" while the customer was still in the shop. Come to think of it, that customer did look a lot like Mike Wallace, didn't he?

New and early-relationship customers might still be skeptical and wonder for just whose best interests you are looking out. This is where your work has been cut out with large, confrontationally-tipped scissors. Fortunately, most of your longer term customers trust your opinion and know that your primary interest is in restoring their vehicle's performance and level of safety.

There's nothing like a good track record to pave the road ahead. Here your risk is in not recommending additional repairs or a more frequent maintenance schedule. As the poet Ogden Nash pointed out, you're judged just as harshly for sins of omission as for sins of commission. The repairs you don't recommend could hurt you, and your customers. Losing the occasional customer because you insisted on doing the job right or not at all is just a cost of doing business. The saving grace is that at least it's the kind of cost that allows you to sleep at night.

The best advice I ever heard in this area was from a shop owner who said he approached every job as though it were his own money he was spending, but the vehicle would be driven by his wife or child. Not fixing it right wasn't an option, but keeping the costs reasonable was certainly a priority!

Customer Education

Effective communication requires a common body of knowledge. The more your customers know about their vehicles, the more they'll want to keep them in tip-top shape. The problem is that for many of your customers, what little automotive knowledge they have is based on 20-year-old technology.

Fuel injection, ABS, constant velocity joints, rack and pinion boots—you might as well be speaking Arabic. They're not even sure they have such parts on their car, much less that they could possibly need replacing. Or perhaps this might be their first import vehicle, and they aren't aware that parts for imports can sometimes cost a teensy

bit more. Sure the last fuel pump they bought cost \$19.95, but it was for a 1978 Granada.

Many parts manufacturers provide posters, brochures and counter mats that explain how all these parts work together. Consumer automotive awareness brochures, written in human-speak, are also available from associations such as the Car Care Council and the Motorist Assurance Program (MAP). Both groups are dedicated to strengthening consumer satisfaction with the automotive repair industry, by educating them as to what's going on under their hoods, behind the wheels and underneath the vehicle. If you don't already support these groups, shame on you!

Take the time to explain to the customer how all the parts in a system are related, and that they often must be replaced or repaired as a group. Use drawings, photos, scale models or actual parts to demonstrate. The folly of replacing pads without inspecting and often replacing brake hardware, or without turning or replacing the rotor is easy to demonstrate if you'll just take the time to gather the props.

If you do a lot of axle shaft or rack and pinion replacement, invest in a counter top cutaway of the actual assemblies. Remember the old spark plug posters showing different levels of electrode deterioration or colors and what that meant? It works just as well for showing plugged radiators or catalytic converters, fried clutches, cracked or swollen radiator hoses, or mangled timing belts. And double shame on you if you don't have a timing belt replacement interval chart on the wall somewhere. Given the opportunity, customers who care about their vehicles will sell themselves on getting additional work done.

Selling Up Is Not Selling Out

There are few good auto repair surprises as far as the customer is concerned. Yes, you're a genuine hero when you call and say that faulty fuel injection pressure regulator was actually a loose wire (take that, "60 Minutes"). The key is to prepare the customer for the worst possible scenario up front. Just reminding them that you'll be sure to save the defective parts goes a long

way. Don't give them the option of authorizing a partial repair. They'll conveniently forget this when, six weeks later something breaks that should have been replaced, but wasn't.

Some consumers expect you to sell repairs the same way they were sold the car. Rarely does it make sense to start with a low-ball "base price" and then add on the options. If you're replacing a water pump and the hoses need replacing, don't be afraid to quote a price based on doing the job right. If they still don't want to replace the hoses, get them to sign a "release" saying you advised them they were defective.

If you can be expected to give them a written estimate on the cost of repairs, it's not unreasonable for you to expect them to document their refusal to authorize a complete job. Does this give you any legal protection if they threaten to sue? Maybe not. Does it cause them to reconsider and quite often turn around and authorize the additional repairs? Darn tootin'!

Safety inspections are the best way to consistently develop add-on sales. If possible, every vehicle that comes in the shop should go on the rack for a look-see. This is why tire stores sell the majority of chassis parts. Their people are trained to look for worn ball joints, cracked bushings, torn or leaking boots, loose idler arms, etc., even during a simple tire rotation. To paraphrase Yogi, "You can sell a lot of things by looking."

If you're not comfortable with under car inspections, have your parts supplier get in touch with his chassis parts manufacturer and see what training materials are available. Chassis parts are probably the most undersold automotive parts simply because so many technicians don't take the time to hoist the vehicle up or haven't been trained to identify problem areas.

Customer Satisfaction

Related item or add-on sales are good for the customer if it legitimately might prevent a problem in the future. There is nothing wrong with recommending that worn parts be replaced before they break. It's only a problem when scare tactics, exaggeration or misinformation are used to sell the repairs. Again, the more you educate your cus-

tomers, the easier add-on sales become.

Adding value to a repair means giving the customer more than they expected. This could be as simple as a ticket for a free car wash, an ice scraper, or a print-out of the factory recommended service intervals for their vehicle. If there were kids in the car, it could be coupons for free soda at the local fast food franchise. It would be a half price oil change if the repair ticket reaches a certain price, or a coupon for a free pizza if the car wasn't ready on time.

Further, if the brake fluid is over two years old, you might flush and replace it for a minimal charge. Naturally, battery and fluid levels should always be checked, regardless of why the vehicle was in the shop. Paper floor and seat mats, or a cover to keep the steering wheel from getting greasy, is an added value from the customer's point of view. Check your computer or tech hotline service to see if there are any factory recalls on this vehicle. Adding value is more about common sense and compassion than additional register ringing ploys. But if you add it, they will come back!

Good shops in established areas often have more business than they can handle. In this case, the temptation might be to do only what the customer asked, even if it's obvious other problem areas are present. But this would be a disservice to the customer. You are the expert on the mechanical aspects of the vehicle. Your objective should always be to render the repair services the customer needs, which may be different than those he asks for. A complete repair should be just that—complete.

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