

CUSTOMER SERVICE AS MARKETING

When it comes to attracting and keeping clients, little things can make a big impression.



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The key to running a successful performance shop isn't doing good work. Seriously.

I'm not saying that doing good work isn't important. Doing good work is *essential*. But doing good work alone will not grow your business. It takes good marketing and good management, along with good work, to grow your business.

There's an old proverb that goes: "He who has a thing to sell and goes and whispers in a well is not so apt to get the dollars as he who climbs a tree and hollers." (Actually, I read it on the back of a sugar packet at a coffee shop. But the wisdom of the statement is true, despite the unusual source it came from.)

Unfortunately, often the sale doesn't go to the best technician, but to the best salesperson.

If your shop isn't growing, you're on thin ice. Customers come and customers go. It's a fact of business. And although you can reduce attrition (the number of customers going), you can't eliminate it entirely. People move and move on.

That's why you want to get more customers coming in the door than going out. To do that, you need to get the word out about your shop.

And, as you've probably heard it said, word-of-mouth is the best advertising. That's why it's important to build strong relationships with your customers and create the kind of over-the-top customer satisfaction that generates tons of referrals.

One way to do that is to look at customer service as marketing.

"Too many (shop owners and managers) are selling me right from the moment I get to the counter," says sales trainer and management consultant Orrin Rudolph of Vital-Life Communications (www.orrinrudolph.com). "And that is so off-putting... it's so irritating. Hear me first. Solve my problem. Show me you can solve my problem."

Then, by listening and helping, you'll earn that customer's trust and business.

Sell the Sizzle, Not the Steak

I don't have to tell you that a lot of the performance business is more about selling the sizzle than selling the steak. When you're adding a new intake, for instance, sometimes it's as much about how cool the intake looks as how well it performs.

Some of the seemingly minor things you do will influence your customers more than the actual quality of your workmanship. That's because they often cannot see or don't understand how to measure the quality of your workmanship. You're the expert, not them.

For example, a few months ago, Beth and I were discussing where we should go for an oil change on our family minivan. Since Beth drives the van, she usually takes responsibility for routine maintenance. She wanted to take the car to a shop several miles away in an industrial area. I suggested she try a shop a few blocks away instead.

"I like my shop," she said. "They vacuum the car when they're done."

"You want to take the car to a shop because they vacuum it?" I asked. "You can vacuum the car yourself for a buck at the gas station. Why don't you try the place over on North Avenue I told you about last time?"

"Why?" Beth asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I took my car there last month. It's close—and they have free popcorn and pop."



Don't start selling from the beginning. Greet customers and then take the time to listen to what they're saying. From there, customers will sell themselves—all you have to do is steer them in the right direction. (Photo by Jim Maxwell)

"So, you want me to take the car somewhere because they have free popcorn?" Beth retorted. "That's a better reason to choose a shop than because they vacuum your car when they're done?"

"But it's really good popcorn," I joked. "And don't forget the free pop, too..."

Point made. I've been providing advisory services to the aftermarket for over two decades, yet, when I get my own vehicle serviced it all boils down to the insignificant that sways me.

Actually, my decision seems foolishly based more on proximity and popcorn than on the quality of service provided. But, even if I stood under my vehicle with the technician, I have no idea what would make one oil change superior to another. And in all reality, neither do most other customers.

Now, a quick counter-side lesson in engine oils from the service writer might help educate a customer like me. But few shops I've been to take the time to discuss the benefits of something like molybdenum. And the average customer has no idea there are differences in engine oil.

"You don't want to start selling from the beginning," says Rudolph. "Ask questions. Get them talking. Engage them in conversation. If you do this, they won't feel sold, since they've done all the talking. They've sold themselves, but you've steered them."

I'm not encouraging you to vacuum every vehicle coming out of your shop and/or put a popcorn cart and soda fountain in your waiting room. (Although one performance outlet I know washes, buffs and vacuums every vehicle that comes through their shop!) I'm telling you to pay attention to the details that matter to the customer.

For example, general repair shops have found time and time again that having a neat and clean waiting room has an impact on a customer's impression of the shop, and therefore repeat business.

Customers and prospects are making decisions about you and your shop from the minute they walk in the door, says

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Customers and prospects are making decisions about you and your shop from the minute they walk in the door. Be sure that everything about your establishment creates the kind of impression you want to portray. (Photos by Jim Maxwell)



When possible, show customers what needs to be done to their vehicle and how you'll do it. You're the expert, so show-and-sell. (Photo by Beth Sasso)

Rudolph. Be sure that everything about your establishment creates the kind of impression you want to portray.

When you deliver the customer's car back to them, it should look and feel better than when they dropped it off to you.

Anticipate Problems

Avoiding comebacks is important in any shop, whether it does general repair or performance.

Obviously, part of avoiding comebacks is doing the job right the first time. Another part is knowing what a customer's expectations are beyond getting the job done. Again, this is where asking good questions can help.

"You want your customer to say to himself, 'Hey, this guy's listening to me. He's not just here to sell stuff. He's actually

heard me. I'm not just another number on his list,'" says Rudolph. "Ninety percent of a salesman's job is listening."

Years back, I took my car in for a brake job to a local franchise shop recently opened by two brothers. As I sat in the waiting room thumbing through automotive trade journals, I asked the owner at the counter what was the most important thing he'd learned at franchise school.

"Be sure the brakes don't squeak when the customer leaves the shop," he replied. "Pardon me?"

"You need to lubricate the brakes so they don't squeak," he reiterated.

"Why is that so important?" I asked.

"If their brakes squeak, they become a comeback—even if nothing else is wrong," he explained. "And once they become a comeback, chances are they won't come

back to have you service their vehicle again. Most people don't know what to look for after a brake job, so any sign things might be wrong worries them."

So, a squeaking brake isn't a technical issue, it's a marketing issue.

Bottom line, he learned in franchise school to look at every step in the service process from the marketing and customer service angle. Those brothers still have a successful shop today.

Try to look at your own service the way a customer looks at your service. Do the best job you can working on their vehicle and then be sure you also do the best job you can selling the quality of your workmanship.

Show-and-Sell

"You might say to a customer 'While we're doing this, here are few other things we can do while we're at it,'" says Rudolph. "You wrap it into a bundle. People are time-crunched. They don't want to have to come back again."

One way to cross-sell related services is to show your customers the benefit of the product or service you think they should get. Remember, many of your customers are not as mechanical as you are, says Rudolph. Try using analogies and visual aids to help communicate what you're suggesting to your customer.



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Popcorn or vacuuming? One way to market to customers is by offering a special added touch that helps them remember you and want to return. (Photo by Beth Sasso)



Last month, I took the car in to fix what I thought was a leaking water pump, only to be told it was a much bigger job than that. I needed to replace the head gasket. The technician showed me where it was obviously leaking from. I trusted him, so I gave the go-ahead.

The next day, the shop owner/technician called and asked me if I could stop by and see the vehicle on my way home from work. I thought to myself, "Uh-oh, here's where he tries to sell me an overhaul or a bunch of add-on services."

When I arrived, he showed me the disassembled engine, pulled out the blown head gasket and demonstrated the work he'd done on the head. He told me I didn't need a new serpentine belt as he originally thought and gave me his estimated time I could pick up the car the next day.

As I got into my minivan and was driving away, I was stunned. He hadn't tried

to sell me anything. Instead, he wanted me to understand how much work was going into the project. In doing that, he convinced me that he was honest and hardworking.

"Often, when you get a call from a garage, it's to sell you something," says Rudolph in his South African accent. That tends to put people on the defensive every time the shop calls.

He suggests you instead make the time to call customers to tell them things are going well. Much like my mechanic showing me his progress, it serves to build a bridge, rather than a wall, between you and your customer.

When I got home I called the shop owner and asked if he was planning to change my spark plugs. He said if I paid for new plugs he'd put them in at no charge.

In the end, he earned my respect, and likely my future business. By taking the time to show me what he was doing, he sold me on his value and his integrity.

Overall, if you listen to your customers you'll find that they will tell you what they want to be sold and how, says Rudolph. In essence, they'll tell you both what they want to buy and how they want to be treated.

Listen carefully to what they're saying. And ask good questions so you understand their expectations.

All in all, if you sell the sizzle, try to anticipate issues before they happen, and show-and-sell customers, then you'll have a happy customer that will tell all his or her friends about your shop.



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