

listen up

ASKING CUSTOMERS QUESTIONS — AND PAYING ATTENTION TO THEIR ANSWERS — CAN HELP IMPROVE YOUR BOTTOM LINE

BY SANDRA BECKWITH

It's important for Independent Service Center employees to have good listening skills, especially since many vehicle owners can't always describe their vehicle troubles in common automotive aftermarket lingo.

"It's easy for customers to get frustrated when trying to properly explain what's going on with their vehicles because many times they're not entirely sure what's going on," says Bill Stinnett, a sales consultant and founder/president of Sales Excellence Inc., an Evergreen, Colo.-based company that provides sales training and consulting services.

Stinnett compares the counterperson/customer relationship to that of a doctor and a patient. "Diagnose before you prescribe," he says. "If a doctor prescribed medication before he knew what was ailing you, you probably wouldn't have confidence that it would solve your health problem. The same thinking applies to vehicle repair."

Stinnett recommends starting with asking about the problem — just as a doctor would. It can be as simple as asking questions

like "How can I help you?" or "My calendar shows you're here for routine maintenance. Are you having any problems?"

Listen carefully to the answers and ask more questions if necessary. For example, if a customer says he or she would like new wiper blades installed, ask if they are having problems with the current blades. The explanation can help you determine if new wipers will really solve the problem or if the existing ones just need an adjustment.

Next, ask how they would like the problem resolved. Does your customer want the least expensive option or does he or she have another goal in mind? Understanding what the customer wants will help you select the right product or service for the job.

While asking questions may seem unnecessary for those who usually can diagnose a vehicle problem as soon as they hear a description of the symptoms, it is important to stay quiet and remain focused on what the customer is saying until he or she is done speaking.

A woman is shown from the chest up, looking out of a car window. She has a concerned expression. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor scene. The image is used as a background for the entire page.

6 ways to show customers you're listening

Meeting sales objectives starts with being a good listener. Below are a few easy and natural ways to reassure customers you are paying attention to what they are telling you.

- 1.** Maintain eye contact. Even if you have to look away to type the customer's comments into the computer, look up to show you are paying attention.
- 2.** Let the customer finish talking before you speak.
- 3.** Use sounds and words to show you're paying attention and understand the situation as presented by the customer.
- 4.** Ask questions to clarify what the problem is. For example, questions like "When did this start happening?" and "Have you tried to fix the problem?" help engage the customer to give you further information.
- 5.** Repeat back what the customer has told you.
- 6.** Finally, ask if there's anything else you should know. Sometimes, this question reveals the most important information.

Don't only use the customer's responses to diagnose the problem. Use them to cross sell and upsell, too. "Cross selling involves adding to the order, like suggesting the customer who is getting new wiper blades consider using a product that helps eliminate precipitation from your windshield," Stinnett explains. "Upselling is about selling a more expensive product that has more features or does a better job."

Training can help employees become better listeners. Stinnett suggests using role-playing scenarios with three-person teams — a customer, a technician and an observer. Rotate so everyone experiences the customer perspective.

He adds that leading by example is just as important as training. "Whenever a manager is at the counter, he or she should be modeling the proper listening behavior by showing how to do it," Stinnett says. "The payoff in improved listening skills is increasing your chances for more repeat customers and referrals — and a stronger business." ■