

## **Auto Repair Made Easy for the Customer**

*Understanding the typical automotive repair customer*

### **Learning Objective:**

On completing this chapter, you will have greater insight into the mindset of customers who are hesitant to spend money for a service they don't completely understand, didn't expect to need, and would prefer not to buy.

### **Overview**

Explaining to a customer what is wrong with their vehicle and what needs to be fixed is an important part of the service consulting process. Unfortunately, this step has many pitfalls for the Service Consultant.

In many cases, the problem is a communication breakdown that begins with how the Service Consultant describes the problem and explains its possible causes and solutions. We operate in a business that traditionally has a reputation for service providers who speak above the heads of their customers and thus, can't be trusted.



Role-playing exercises will lead us through the steps of effective communication with customers who have limited knowledge of what's "under the hood."

**A**uto repair shop employees have a tough row to hoe. The only personality in the automotive industry deemed less trustworthy is the used car salesman. This lack of trust stems primarily from our inability to “speak the language of the common man” (or woman) regarding automotive systems and their maintenance requirements.



At the critical information-conveying stage, when it’s imperative to inform a customer what needs to be done and why, we often fail. It needn’t be so.

The primary hurdle in customer education is transforming highly technical automotive repair information into language that is easily understood by the typical customer who has “zero” automotive knowledge. This means being able to explain a fueling mechanism or a cooling system to a customer who has never looked under the hood and probably never held a wrench.

Customers who are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with automotive technicalities and terminology are reluctant, suspicious buyers of automotive service. It requires special effort on our part to translate the information we need them to comprehend into terms he or she can easily understand.

### Customers are naturally hostile to the process

There are several reasons why a car repair transaction is an aggravating, inconvenient annoyance for most, if not all, of your customers:

- Having to take the car to the shop disrupts the normal daily routine.
- Being without a car, even for just a few hours, is problematic.
- Most car owners don’t do routine or preventative maintenance. As a result, most repairs are unplanned and unbudgeted.
- Most car owners have no technical automotive knowledge, which makes them dependent on the Service Consultant’s counsel. Being dependent makes many people uncomfortable.

The typical automotive repair customer is **not stupid or ignorant** – they’re simply uninformed and afraid of getting ripped off in a potentially expensive transaction they don’t completely understand.

## Plain talk is a winning formula for the public

Visit any bookstore and you will see an abundance of books devoted to explaining complex subject matter in down-to-earth language. Readers can learn everything from "Home Buying for Dummies" to "Football for Dummies" in this contemporary phenomenon of easy-read yet helpful books on just about every topic under the sun.

Deanna Sclar's contribution to the popular "Dummies" series, "Auto Repair for Dummies,"<sup>1</sup> was published in 1999. Since then, the book has sold upwards of one million copies. At a list price of \$22.00 a copy, that amounts to sales of \$22 million!

Why is it that people have spent more money than the gross national product of Honduras on a book outlining the basics of auto repair? Because people are tired of feeling like they are getting ripped off because they don't know a rotor from the motor. Because people want to understand their repair needs but can't decipher the technobabble of their owner's manual, the automotive technicians, or worse, JoeAuto's Service Consultants.



If a Service Consultant fails to explain the repair requirement and consequences in an easily understandable manner, the customer may presume that he or she is being ripped off. It is difficult to create a satisfied customer from one who is wondering how badly he or she is being taken advantage of.

It is imperative to take the time to properly **educate every customer on every repair**. Even if the customer is an ASC Master Certified Technician, the Service Consultant should make an effort at consumer education.

## Speaking the language of "Auto Repair Made Easy"

**Practice makes perfect** in this endeavor. Recognize the terms that will probably confuse your customer and find alternate ways to describe the system or the part and its function in the vehicle.

**Show respect.** Speak to the customer in a positive, helpful manner – not with arrogance. Your customer's lack of automotive knowledge is not a lack of intelligence. Even the brightest humanoid may experience confusion when presented with something entirely new. The customer who accidentally poured oil through the dipstick slot may, in fact, be a nuclear physicist. Do not be patronizing. Do not be condescending.

**Take time to understand the customer's needs.** The Service Consultant must be able to explain the probable cause and solution for the problem the customer has brought them. This requires remaining patient and listening

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<sup>1</sup> Auto Repair for Dummies, Deanna Sclar, IDG Books Worldwide Inc., ISBN: 0764550896

thoroughly in the information-gathering phase, whether it's in person or on the telephone. Ask questions; it's the only way to gain insight into the customer's concerns – insight that will allow follow-up explanations to be custom-crafted and based on the input dialogue.



**Know auto.** Service Consultants should be constantly expanding their automotive knowledge. The more familiar you are with a topic, especially the technical principles behind every repair, the better your ability to explain it.

**Don't explain a part with more parts.** It is not helpful to respond to the question, "What is a throttle?" with "The throttle consists of a throttle arm, located on the outside of the carburetor or throttle-body fuel injection system, and connected to the gas pedal, which activates a throttle butterfly valve at the base of the intake barrel, where it joins the intake manifold." It would be better to simply explain, "The throttle is a device that controls the power produced by the engine."

**Use pragmatic analogies** to which the customer can relate. A simple explanation is a good start, but it should be followed by a practical example. For example: "The throttle is a device that controls the power produced by the engine. It performs the same basic function as the faucet handle in your sink. You can turn it only a little and water will slowly drip, or you can turn it to allow a larger flow of water. The throttle opens and closes in much the same way."

**Keep ego out of it.** Customer interaction is not a time to show off your automotive knowledge. Service Consultants will know more about the subject than the typical customer, and this could create a dynamic that tempts you to flaunt your knowledge to the customer. Don't do it.

**Think About It** We will role-play typical repair situations and evaluate each other's responses as we learn to communicate effectively in Auto Repair Made Easy for the Customer language.

**JoeAuto Team Member:** \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Scenario</b>	<b>Comments</b>	<b>Rating 1-10</b> 1= Poor, 10 = Great
The customer asks: "Why do I have to get the tires rotated?"		
The vehicle's drive shaft is nearing failure. What do you tell its owner?		
The engine is bone dry – the oil plug has become dislodged and oil has been leaking for some time. How do you explain the problem?		
The rear brakes are completely worn out. You have explained this; the customer asks: "What is a caliper?"		
The electrical system has been failing sporadically. The battery has already been replaced; diagnosis reveals a bad alternator. Explain it.		
<b>AVERAGE SCORE</b>		

Now we will ask each participant to create five plausible repair scenarios and then role-play explaining them to a customer.

**JoeAuto Team Member:** \_\_\_\_\_

The Repair Scenario	How did they describe it?	Rating 1-10 1= Poor, 10 = Great
<b>AVERAGE SCORE</b>		