

CUSTOMER SERVICE

To deliver great service, set customers up with everything they'll need, explain the available options, and be as enthusiastic about their hobby as they are.

BY STEVE RELYEA

Most people who are selling performance parts, accessories, and related services got into this business because they were enthusiasts themselves.

Do you remember that enthusiasm, each time you deal with a customer? Even when there are two customers in front of you, and another on the phone? Do you tell customers about all the parts they'll need to complete the job, or why the cam they're asking for is too much cam for how they'll be using their car, or what makes one part different from another?

We asked three industry professionals for some tips about delivering great customer service.

"I have third-generation customers," said **Bob Lee**, owner of Bob's Speed Products, Fort Lauderdale, Fla. "I have the grandchildren, and I've taken care of their parents and their grandparents. That's not unusual at all. If somebody breaks something, they bring them in and they tell them I'll fix it and be reasonable for them.

"You try to give the customers everything they need. A set of heads that you've done a valve job on, should go out with a head gasket set. If you don't do that, you're losing money. He's going to get a head set from somebody, so it might as well be you.

"You're trying to do him a favor. 'You're going to need this. Have you already got it?' If he wants to buy a camshaft, you ask him if he needs lifters and springs. You ask these questions, and whether you sell it to him or not is immaterial. You need to stay on top of it, because maybe you will sell it. Most of the time, he'll say, 'Oh, you're right, I forgot about that.'

"Everybody wants more cam than they can use, *always*, so you try to

have them have enough faith in you that they take what you recommend. That goes through with the whole engine. It's just the way it is; everybody wants more than they can usually have. We have to kind of temper it to where we give them a motor that will go up and down the street every day. We do some race motors, but the bulk of what we do is street motors, so it has to be able to go from point A to point B, without having to stop by the racing gas station.

"You try to guide them along the right guidelines. There's only so much you can do, though, because they'll turn around and order from Summit or Jegs anyway. The people at Summit or Jegs are only taking orders, they're not necessarily able to judge what the customer is doing, because the vehicle is not there. The people that come to me mostly give me the program and let me dial it in. They come to me because they know I've been at it a long time.

"Of course, if you put your name on the door, there's always going to be something that somebody's not happy with. That's just the way it is, and you have to learn how to deal with that.

Some people you couldn't make happy if you paid them. Hopefully you don't get but a few of those, but you're going to get one once in a while. I don't care what you are — an electrician or whatever. They're going to plug the toaster in, the toaster burns up, and it must be your fault because you put a lightbulb in the outside light. That's just human nature. You were the last one to touch it, so it must be your fault.

"If there is a legitimate complaint, you take care of it. If it's not a legiti-

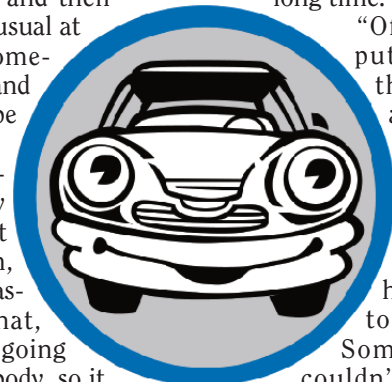
mate complaint, you talk to them and try to show them the error of their ways. You try to take care of it, just like you would want to be taken care of at their place of business. I do everything by the Golden Rule: I try to treat people the way I'd want to be treated."

"I have a pretty good customer base of people that buy on a regular basis," said **Jackie Mize**, owner of Jackie's Automotive, Lubbock, Texas. "I have a lot of repeat customers that come in on a pretty regular basis, and I have a lot of regular parts stores that buy the performance stuff from us on a regular basis. I also have a lot of walk-in customers that come in fairly often.

"A lot of the customers that are just getting started, only know what they've read in the magazines and different things. So, of course, I try to help them. They want advice, so I try to steer them in the right direction. If they're asking for too much cam or too big a carburetor, I'll try to tell them the pros and cons of that.

"Some of them, no matter what you tell them, think they know what it needs, so they do it the other way. I don't push that. You know, if they want to do that, that's fine. I used to not want to do that, but I thought, well, if they're buying the wrong product and I don't sell it to them, they're going to go down the street and buy it anyway if they're dead set on it. So even though I'm telling them that it might not work as well as it should, I'll go ahead and sell it to them if that's what they have to have. Somebody's going to sell it to them, so it might as well be me.

"I don't really *push* like I probably should, as far as add-on sales. I'll do it if it's something that I know that they definitely need to install the part that they're buying, but I don't really push a lot of stuff, like some people do. If they're buying a fuel pressure regulator, I'll tell them they need this fitting,



and the hose, and the clamps. But that's about the only time I ever recommend add-on stuff, is if it's something related to what they're buying. But if they ask for something else, then I'll try to steer them in the right direction.

"We have a lot of customers that are very knowledgeable. A lot of our regular customers know what we stock and what we don't. They will come in, walk right over to the shelf to get what they need, and bring it to the counter to pay for it. Then there are other customers that will ask for advice on, like, AN fittings or something that's kind of different, because they don't know exactly what works with what. And I really don't mind helping people at all.

"They'll also ask about the different between Edelbrocks and Holleys and Carters and Rochesters — stuff like that — and I can pretty well explain what the basic differences are in those. That happens quite a bit.

"Some people are stuck on brand names, and that's fine, and others will say, 'Do you have something similar to this in a less-expensive brand?' I keep different brands of different things, so if they want a less-expensive brand, I can give them basically the same thing in another brand. Most people are pretty happy with that. I try to keep something that's still a good quality, even though it's a lesser expensive brand. I don't try to sell them the real, real cheap stuff.

"Probably the main deal is to be, of course, courteous to everybody. I try to greet everybody when they come in. I've read articles and different things that say people like to be acknowledged when they walk through the door. I try to do that even when I'm really busy with something else. I'll let them know that I'm waiting on another customer and I'll be with them just as quick as I can. At least they know that I know they're there. Most people understand that it's busy, and they're pretty considerate about that. There are other people that want to get something and get right out, whether you're busy or not, and I understand that. But most of them will wait for me to get through with what I'm

doing. I have two phone lines, too, so I have to juggle those a lot of times."

"An emphasis of my Pinnacle Performance training is on what I call a

"Unless you're in a business where you only have to sell the customer once and never see them again, don't focus on closing the sale. Focus on opening the relationship, building trust and rapport, and creating a lifetime customer." — Steve Ferrante

'sales through service' model, meaning the better the retailer does at servicing the customer, the better they will do selling to the customer," said **Steve Ferrante**, CEO of Sale Away LLC, Windham, N.H., a provider of sales and customer service training specializing in the tire and auto service industry.

"Customer engagement is about engaging the customer. Ask yourself: Do your customers know how much you value their business? If not, why not? Too many consumers feel like a commodity themselves. Unless you're in a business where you only have to sell the customer once and never see them again, don't focus on closing the sale. Focus on opening the relationship, building trust and rapport, and creating a lifetime customer.

"What we see in tire and auto service and auto parts is, the customer comes to us. These customers are already in the market. In my training I say this arrangement is the equivalent of throwing you the basketball in a game. One of two things happen: you either score or miss. We have to make sure that, when the customer is coming to us, we are capable of engaging the customer and scoring.

"All too often, when a prospective customer calls into the store, we're not in control of that conversation. We're not engaging the customer. We might be giving prices and facts and figures and then hanging up the phone — and in many cases we don't even know who we were talking to.

"It's up to us, on this side of the phone, to engage the customer. First, we need to find out if they are a first-time or a returning customer. Then, if they are new, we welcome them to the business, or welcome them back if they are a returning customer. These simple steps go a long way towards

building the relationship."

Steve Ferrante has been the CEO of Sale Away LLC since 2006, and he has conducted the Pinnacle Performance training program for over 2,500 tire and auto service professionals. Among the events at which he has presented seminars are the SEMA Show, the Goodyear Dealer Conference, and numerous state and regional automotive aftermarket associations' conventions throughout

North America.

When asked about common questions he hears from those who attend his seminars, and the answers he gives, Ferrante shared this one: "How do we compete against 'big box' retailers that can offer a lower price? You sell value, not price. Big box retailers seldom take the time to get to know their customers. This provides a great opportunity for the independent to build value by getting to know the customer on a more personal level. When the customer can see, feel, and experience the value of doing business with you versus the 'big box' store, they're far more willing to pay more for it.

"There's only two reasons people buy anything: need and want," he added. "You sell needs differently than wants. If we look at the people that are coming in with vehicle problems, those are needs, and those people are in quote, unquote 'pain.' We deal with them by creating empathy and an understanding. I mean, how would you feel if your vehicle was out of commission, you had to deal with the inconvenience, plus have a new bill to pay associated with that?

"Wants are different. These people are coming in and spending good money to move to a happier place. A good example of that would be people that are buying wheels: They already have wheels, they don't need them, but they're buying them as an upgrade. The same is true of people that are buying lowering springs, performance exhaust, or engine upgrades. All that is fun stuff. When these people are going towards that happy place, the best thing you can do is go along with them by applying a positive attitude and your enthusiasm for their good fortune." **SAM**