

Customer Relations

Customer relations is often the least emphasized aspect of powersports shop operation. This is a shame. Customer relations isn't something you add to the business mix, like extended weekend hours. Instead, it's an attitude about people and how important they are to your business. Customer surveys have revealed a strong link between dealership loyalty and the attitude of the shop's staff. Therefore, customer service has a direct result on future store sales of both products and services. As a powersports technician, your responsibility doesn't end with the physical work of servicing vehicles. More than ever before in today's world, you have a responsibility to know and practice good customer relations. Following are guidelines for dealing with customers.

The Three Most Common Customer Complaints

Powersports manufacturers have identified three major customer relations problems. These are not fixing the vehicle right the first time, avoidable service delays, and disrespect to the customer.

Not Fixed Right the First Time

At the top of the customer's aggravations is having to return the vehicle to have a repair repeated. Nothing undermines the customer's confidence in your shop more. It creates a barrier that is almost impossible to remove. The first time it happens, statistics indicate that the customer is only 30% as likely to return to your store. After the third attempt, that drops to just 10%. It may seem a small matter to you, but it isn't to your customer. Don't be one of those technicians for whom there is never enough time to do the job right, but always enough to do it over.

Service Delays

After incorrect repairs, customers complain most about repair delays. Convenience is high on the list of today's customer expectations. It is anything but convenient when the vehicle isn't

ready when you promised. It's frustrating for the customer. It's even worse if the bill is more than he or she was expecting as well. This is a major mistake, and one we'll look at more closely in a moment. The promises you make to the customer *must* be kept. This is almost as important as doing the repair right the first time. Unexplained delays will eventually send your customer to your competitors. Delays are at times unavoidable, but minimize them where possible. Keep your customer informed of the repair's progress and any difficulties that arise. Communication with the customer can often result in understanding despite unforeseen delays.

Disrespect

The third thing the customer demands, after quality repairs and timely service, is respect. Without customers, you wouldn't have a business. Customers know how important they are to your business. And believe it, they are intuitively aware when *you* don't. Make eye contact, use a friendly voice, and don't forget to smile. Even if the customer has to wait a bit, acknowledge him or her. Let the customer know you are prepared to help them, just as soon as you can. Treat the customer with respect, interest, and empathy. Think of how you would like to be treated, and treat the customer accordingly.

Communication Opportunities

Most customer relations problems can be avoided through good communication. It seems obvious, but what exactly is good communication? Following are examples of communicating well with your customers. Each is an opportunity to communicate.

The R.O.

More miscommunications occur on repair orders than just about anywhere else in the powersports shop. Be as transparent as possible when writing an R.O.. Record the customer's comments, not your diagnosis. Let the servicing technician do the diagnosis. Keep this in mind. Every time the R.O. does not transparently communicate the customer's wishes about the problem, you have just created a problem.

Under-Sell, Over-Deliver

In many cases, miscommunication happens by default. Assumptions run rampant. At all costs, guard against inflating the customer's expectations. Don't make promises you can't keep, and watch out for those assumptions. Instead, give the customer a completion time that is slightly later than you think is likely. This is called **under-selling**. You know the job probably won't take that long. However, you have provided yourself a buffer in case it does. Just as importantly, since it usually won't take that long, you have already ensured a pleased customer. Another professional tactic is to estimate the cost of the repair slightly high. Some techs avoid doing this. They think it scares the customer off. However, the customer always accepts a high estimate at the *beginning* of the job better than at its *conclusion*. You can count on it! Assure the customer that you don't think it will go as high as the estimate. However, you would like to have that estimate on the R.O., "just in case." Then, when the job is finished, have the machine ready earlier than you predicted, and at a cost under the estimate. This is called **over-delivering**. And, as icing on the cake, *call* the customer instead of waiting for the customer to call you. This is a pleasurable experience for the customer. Together, under-selling and over-delivering are powerful customer relations tools. They build bridges of loyalty and confidence you can't buy with money.

Sell Benefits, Not Services

To spend money, the customer needs a reason. Give him or her one! Explain needed services in terms of their benefits. "*You should replace those sprockets with that chain,*" isn't the right approach. It doesn't address the benefits. "*Running your new chain on those old sprockets is just going to wear it out early. And the old sprockets might cause a chain failure.*" This is much better, because it offers the customer two benefits. These are money and safety. Other benefits of suggested services include convenience, prevention, and value.

The Dreaded Phone Call

One way to put an emphasis on communication is to use the most powerful communication tool you have – the telephone. These days, we could add the email address to that also. Once the job is under way, extra areas of needed service often appear. Many times, these areas must be addressed before the work the customer has authorized can be effective. Call or email the customer. But be careful. No customer likes being told there is going to be more expense and a longer wait. This is a really touchy area for most customers. They surely will want to know about things the machine needs they weren't aware of. However, it is hard for the customer to escape the feeling that he or she is being taken advantage of. Approach this stage with this in mind. Tread gently and with caution. That's the most important thing. Next to that, be sure you have found all the additional work the machine needs. You definitely don't want to have to evaluate the job *a third time*. Even the most understanding customer will be highly skeptical. The credibility of the service department will suffer. Just as in the service itself, do it right the first time! Here's how to handle the dreaded phone call.

- First, make sure you are talking to the owner of the vehicle. His or her friend or relative cannot authorize the shop to do more work.
- Explain the exact condition, how it was determined, and why it was missed during the original estimate.
- Explain any safety issues involved.
- Describe the consequences if the condition is not corrected.
- There are usually cost savings by having the service performed while the vehicle is already in the shop. Make an effort to find them, or create them if necessary. Remember, your customer is coming from a position of skepticism. Make the situation as easy to accept as possible.
- Make sure the customer knows both the added costs, and the new total cost.
- Make sure the customer knows of any added delays, if there will be any.

Once authorization is obtained, it must be properly recorded. Document it. If the customer is in the store, have him or her sign the authorization on the work order. If the customer is on the phone, record the date and time on the work order. Then put *your* initials next to it. An email can

simply be printed out and attached to the R.O.. In any case, you *must* document the conversation to prevent disputes later about whether the additional work was authorized.

Handling Customer Complaints

To some extent, complaints will be unavoidable. Therefore, you must prepare for them, and learn how to deal with them. The customer with a complaint is the real test of your people skills. Dealing with him or her requires the maximum extension of all the skills just mentioned, plus a few new tactics to consider. Here are seven complaint handling skills.

Prevent Comebacks

When a powersports customer returns with a complaint, this is called a “comeback.” The best comeback cure is prevention. There are two ways to prevent a comeback. First, as already mentioned, fix it right the first time. As a tech, this is your ultimate responsibility. Second, the shop should have a quality control system. This will catch potential comebacks before the bike is delivered to the customer. In most shops, the service manager is the quality control (QC) person. Things go wrong in even the best-run shops. A QC system can identify and correct the causes of problems when they occur so they won't happen again. However, remember that *people* make these systems work. Employees ensure good customer satisfaction, or cause customer dissatisfaction. Therefore, the staff must understand the importance of customer satisfaction. We're all in customer relations.

Fix the Customer First

A complaining customer wants something, naturally. But what he or she wants *most* isn't the remedy of the problem. Specifically, he or she wants *three* things. First, most of all, he or she wants to be heard. Don't underestimate the importance of this. Surveys indicate that fully 20% of your customers will stay loyal if they are just listened to when they complain. That's with no other action, just listening! Second, the complaining customer wants an apology. His or her trust has been broken, and it must be mended. This is not a little thing. Take it seriously, and if

necessary, take the blame. Saying “I’m sorry” and meaning it goes a long way. Third and last, the customer wants corrective action. Believe it or not, the fix isn’t the most important thing to the customer. His or her feelings are so much more important that they must be dealt with first. Deal with the first two expectations first. Fix the customer. The third – fixing the situation -- will then be far, far easier.

Steps for Defusing the Angry Customer

Following are seven steps for dealing with the angry customer. First, do not avoid him or her. That will only reinforce in the customer’s mind the store’s guilt. That won’t help you later when it comes time to negotiate a resolution. Make it a priority to respond to the customer. Second, prepare yourself mentally and positively. Imagine you’re someplace where you always feel calm and relaxed. Control your own tension. A comeback can make you defensive. Have the attitude that here is an opportunity to win an extra loyal customer. It’s a fact -- customers whose complaints are well handled tend to be more loyal than average. Therefore, show concern. Third, get the customer and yourself away from the hubbub, to a quiet place. This may be an unused office, or anywhere where you will not be disturbed while you concentrate on the customer. Fourth, hear the customer out, without interrupting. But don’t do it indifferently or distractedly. Let the customer vent, and serve him or her by giving the one thing the customer wants most – a hearing. Fifth, do not assume a defensive attitude. Watch your body language. Arms folded in front of you communicate defensiveness. Hands in pockets hints at powerlessness or indifference. Keep your hands in front of you and your eyes and ears on the customer. Listen, not just to the words, but just as importantly, to the emotions. There will be a lot of them -- frustration, anger, worry, disappointment, and disillusionment. Make an effort to respond, in turn, to these emotions. And above all, do not argue with the customer. That will be pouring gasoline on the fire. Sixth, ask questions to get more information. This will also allow the customer to see that you are thinking about the problem. Confirm with the customer your understanding of the problem. Tell it back to him or her in your own words. Finally, seventh, when the customer’s anger begins to subside, remember the customer’s emotion. Communicate

understanding of the customer's feelings. Find points of agreement, no matter how small, with the customer's point of view. Start building the bridge of understanding.

Customer Relations Policy

Every store needs a customer relations policy. This is a written policy that all of the staff agrees to. It spells out remedies for customer dissatisfaction, and empowers staff to make decisions to retain customer loyalty. Every successful company has a customer relations policy. You have benefited from one if you have ever complained about a product or service. An example of how this policy might be used is a scratched fuel tank. The customer claims the technician scratched the tank during a service. Avoid disputes such as this by noting any damage on the R.O. when the machine is left for service. Failing that, you are left with a customer relations situation. You cannot badger the customer and force him or her to admit the scratch was already there. It will never happen. You will lose that argument. Worse, you will lose that customer, for good. A customer relations policy allows a certain amount of money per business quarter to meet these situations. The money will be well spent. A good QC system will prevent the money from having to be used often. However, the money must be there, because you are going to encounter this situation sooner or later. No matter how good your shop is, customer situations happen.

The Resolution

After helping the customer calm down, hearing him or her out, apologizing for the breach of trust, and empathizing, negotiate the resolution. However, don't do this until you have dealt with the anger. Remember, never attempt to fix the problem until you have fixed the customer. That after all is what the customer wants most. Keep that in mind and you will have more success in reaching a resolution. Finding the resolution will probably mean reviewing the R.O.. Discuss the document and the work with the customer. Determine where the customer feels his or her expectations were not met. If the shop did something wrong, admit it, and tell the customer what you will do to correct it. Even if the shop did nothing wrong, apologize for the misunderstanding.

Then look for a way to soften the message that the problem is really his or hers. You might want to give the customer a discount on a future service, or offer some other token of friendship. These convey the message that the customer is important. However, don't do it condescendingly, as it will backfire. And how! The customer will, instead of receiving the message of their own mistake with grace, feel manipulated and resentful. Leave a way for the customer whose expectations were unrealistic to save face. He or she will honor you for it. The customer isn't always right, but he or she is always the customer, and don't you forget it! You need him or her.

Follow Through

Once you and the customer have agreed on a resolution, do not make the mistake of getting back to business as usual. Follow through! Make it a priority to bring closure to the incident as quickly as possible. Act on your decision immediately. Any delay at this point will undo all that you have accomplished thus far. As with the listening part of this scenario, the speed of the follow through is very important. It will impress the customer more than the solution itself.

Follow Up

But even after the storm blows over and all is calm again, you're not done. Follow up! Call the customer after a week or so to be sure they are satisfied. This lets the customer know that you really do care and appreciate his or her business. Don't assume that "no news is good news." This ignores the way most people really think and act. In many cases a customer decides never to go back to a store. Every customer saved is a bonus. He or she doesn't have to be brought in by advertising or other means. And he or she is usually the most loyal kind you can have.