



Up To Standards

By Mike Weinberg
Contributing Editor

Every month on these pages, I write an article about the finer points of standard-transmission repair. Since this is the management issue, we will talk about selling gearbox repairs profitably, for if the shop can't sell the repair work, there is no need to know how to fix the transmission.

I talk daily with shop owners, service writers and technicians from across the country. I hear the same complaint over and over: "It is hard to sell people stick-shift repairs," or "I can't make any money fixing sticks." In many cases the customer is quoted on a manual-trans repair and the shop loses the rebuild to a junkyard unit furnished by that same customer.

This bothers me greatly, and I have spent a lot of time and effort examining the sales process, trying to find where the shop loses control of the sale. Admittedly, when a standard trans is torn up the estimate will be high, because every part in a manual gearbox is a "hard part." What defies logic to me is why service writers believe that only stick repairs are expensive. Every transmission repair, standard or automatic, is expensive – extremely expensive. New cars are extremely expensive, insurance is extremely expensive, college tuition is brutally expensive, TV repair is extremely expensive, plumbers and electricians are extremely expensive – and don't forget about health care. Back in the '70s we were rebuilding the average rear-wheel-drive

A Transmission Is A Transmission

So Why Is It Hard To Sell Standard-Transmission Repair?



automatic transmission for \$250, installed with a rebuilt torque converter. In 1997, we routinely sell transmission repairs for \$1,000 to \$2,500. The public is used to the high cost of modern vehicles and their repairs, and shops sell automatic work without blinking an eye, so why are sticks treated differently? ONLY because the service writer perceives them to be. In reality, there is no difference between one and the other. The customer certainly isn't aware of a price differential.

The secret to selling anything is CONTROL. The customer has a need – his car is not functioning properly, and he must fix it or buy another one. We know our indus-

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try is cost effective, because if it weren't we would not exist. The big question here is whether you will get the job fixing the trans or lose it to another shop or a customer-provided unit from the local junkyard. Control of the sale and the customer begins with the shop owner and/or the service writer. The easiest way to critique the shop and the way repair work is sold and performed is to view the whole process through the eyes of your customer.

Is your shop clean and professional looking, or is it a greasy, dirty cave with six inches of oil-soaked Speedy Dry on the floor?

You don't need to have a new building for it to be clean and neatly laid out. If the average new car costs \$20,000, is your shop's appearance good enough to make your customer feel good about leaving his pride and joy in your hands? Remember the adage, "You never get a second chance to make a good first impression."

Is your staff dressed in clean, identical uniforms? Are the front men and technicians neatly groomed and professional in appearance and manners? Is your shop a place where you would feel comfortable having your wife and children? Is the phone answered correctly with the shop name, the name of the person answering the phone and "How may I help you?" If you call a business and the person answering the phone gives you the impression that you are interrupting his busy day, would that inspire you to do business with that company? Controlling the sale and the customer begins with the very first contact – in most cases, a phone call.

The shop owner or service writer usually handles most customer contacts. In order for the shop to prosper, all customer contacts must make that potential buyer feel that the shop is happy that he has brought his problem here and that the shop's only goal is to do a thorough, professional repair to the vehicle that is entrusted to its care. Customers must be made to feel that they will be treated with honesty and the highest professional ethics. In other words, the customer expects to be treated just

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as we wish to be treated when we are the customer. Establishing trust is the first step in controlling the sales process.

In this day and age of educated consumers, the shop must be capable of working up a professional-looking estimate that itemizes all parts and labor. A computer-generated work order and estimate do wonders for your price quotation, for the public seems to have greater faith in what machines have to say. Do some research before quoting the customer. Any time you dash into a situation without a game plan, you are destined to fail. Once you know what is wrong with the unit and how much you will charge to fix it, become the customer. Call a few local junkyards and get prices and availability on the unit in question. Then call the appropriate dealer and get prices on new and reman units (with core charges) and availability and warranty terms. You are now in a position to quote the customer and sell the repair. Put some thought into how the customer perceives the situation. He or she is not happy. They are inconvenienced, and this car problem is disturbing their normal lifestyle and undoubtedly is going to cost a lot. Then there is the unknown, the worst enemy of all. The average driver has never had to have a transmission repaired. He or she undoubtedly has heard a few horror stories from loud-mouth, know-it-all Uncle Max. Being the social animals that we are, people will seek the counsel and advice of a variety of automotive experts including a brother, a father, an uncle or the most highly regarded transmission expert of all, the brother-in-law.

Your control over the customer and the sale obviously must extend beyond your conversation and sales pitch. In order to be successful you must do your homework. By anticipating the questions and doubts your cus-

tommer has and making answers and choices available to them, you maintain control and create greater trust. Explain the damage and the cost to repair along with the terms of your warranty. Now you provide the cost and availability of a new or reman factory unit. Follow up with prices of junkyard units and emphasize the lack of warranty and the fact that if the used unit does not work properly there will be an additional charge for removing and replacing the bad unit.

What have you accomplished at this point? The customer is armed with good information and choices that enable them to make an intelligent decision. You have answered in advance the questions they inevitably will ask other sources the minute they hang up after your quote. If you have given them good information and they call to verify your prices and get the same general answers, this serves only to reinforce their faith in you, and it completes your control of the sale. No matter which option your customer chooses, your shop still is in position to profit from the repair.

The cost of any transmission repair is high. If the service writer has any doubt about the cost relative to the value of the job being quoted and communicates that to the customer, all is lost. Maintain your control of the situation by anticipating the customer's questions and fears and provide honest, beneficial choices that will be profitable for the shop and cost effective for the car owner.

In every human relationship your understanding and awareness of the other person's situation will be enhanced if you walk awhile in their shoes. **TD**

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