

Stand Face to Face with Comebacks



by Deanna Utroske

About the Author

Deanna Utroske is a second-year automotive technology student at Montana State University – Billings, College of Technology, and will graduate in May with an Associate of Science degree in auto tech. Her intention is to pursue a career as an automotive technician, and as a writer of technical magazine articles. She also intends to pursue both a BS degree in automotive technology, and eventually an engineering degree. Deanna indicated that of her studies so far, she has most enjoyed learning about automatic transmissions, their planetary gear trains, and their electronic and hydraulic controls.

Few things can have a greater effect on the success or failure of your business than comebacks. Comebacks translate into lost revenues, which are easy to track. But tracking lost dollars doesn't necessarily help eliminate them.

Your technicians and your customers give faces to comebacks... faces that determine the ultimate impact comebacks have on your business. Since technicians and customers can't be processed through bookkeeping the way the cost of comebacks can, you must use genuine management and customer service skills to establish your level of success in the face of comebacks.

Management Skills

A primary aspect of your job as a shop owner or manager is to oversee the work and schedules of your employees. But your management skills must go beyond simple supervision to keep comeback levels as low as possible. Your ultimate goal as a manager is to maximize your shop's work efficiency, which translates into profit. Meeting these four management objectives is the best way to achieve such efficiency:

- Education
- Organization

- Direction
- Emotion

Let's look at each of these objectives, and see how they work toward reducing shop comebacks.

Education

Education always includes training on new transmission and transaxle models, plus exposure to technical service bulletins. But education also means approaching each comeback as an opportunity to educate your technicians. Each comeback is an instructional tool for your technicians and possibly even yourself. From each comeback, it's important to learn the cause of the failure, and what technical, mechanical, or practical steps could have been taken to avoid it. This will prevent similar comebacks from recurring in the future.

As the transmission repair and rebuilding industry progresses, you and your staff must progress right along with it to maintain a profitable business. Using comebacks to educate gives your shop one more profit advantage.

Organization

Organize your technicians' time and efforts. This reduces the number of comebacks due to frustration and chaos.

Compare the parts you keep on hand with the parts you use most often: The lists should be almost identical. Responsible parts stocking reduces lost time waiting for parts deliveries, and promotes an effective job flow through your shop.

This flow should also be maintained by a time schedule, detailing the jobs to be completed in a given time-frame. Regardless of flat-rate limitations or production goals, each technician should know what job he'll be working on at least one job ahead. This allows your technicians to prepare for the next job mentally, which makes it easier for them to go from one job to the next.

You work to keep your shop running smoothly. Taking practical control of your shop's inventory and technicians' time are two ways you can improve shop efficiency, and help reduce lost time and comebacks.

Direction

Direct your technicians' performance. Supervision must go beyond simply checking your technicians' benches to make sure they're working. As a manager, your job includes providing input. Instruct, compliment, encourage and discuss your technicians' work.

They need your observations to improve their skills.

Technicians must also be monitored for distractions, boredom and laziness. Your frequent presence at their benches and encouraging words will help keep them working at peak efficiency. Working alongside your technicians allows you to learn who they are and how they work. Knowing these things, you will be better able to schedule jobs and offer assistance in ways that are valuable to each technician.

Taking your job beyond the simple oversight of staff to participate in their daily work enables you to direct and upgrade their skills.

Emotion

Work with the emotions of your technicians. Comebacks are upsetting to the original repair technician and to the rest of your shop's staff. While younger technicians are more likely to let their emotional response impact the quality of their work than those with more experience, how you handle their emotional response to a comeback is crucial. No matter how subtle a technician's response is, it will impact his work. Acknowledge that your technician is upset and what he is upset about — be it disappointing the shop, the customer, or himself. Move on from there. Use the educational approach: Show your technician you only want to improve his skills and satisfy the customer. Work with your staff to overcome each comeback as it happens.

Never ignore or discount the emotions of your technicians. To improve the overall quality of your shop's work, validate your technician's response and act to get the repair done.

No one wants to be responsible for repair comebacks. Incorporating these management techniques will allow you to maximize your shop's efficiency. This will reduce the number of comebacks, so you can focus on serving customers.

Customer Service Skills

Customer service is a full-time job in every transmission shop. Comeback customer service is of chief importance. There are 4 aspects of this serv-

ice that must become part of your business, to establish, satisfy, and maintain your customer base:

- Generosity
- Trustworthy Sales
- Empathy
- Respectability

Generosity

Serve your customers generously to establish a profitable customer base. The public's overall distrust of the auto industry — justified or not — forces you to offer better quality service than that given in most comparable industries. Generous service means choosing to absorb the cost of driver abuse comebacks, and to repair failures unrelated to the work your shop did initially.

Minimize abuse comebacks by explaining the damage their driving habits can cause. This requires tact. Educate your more reasonable customers up front; with others you'll have to be subtle. List possible ways the failure could have occurred, perhaps stressing the abuse that occurred. Even if your customers never admit to an abusive driving practice, there's a chance they'll recognize it and avoid it in the future.

Offering generous service means repairing unrelated failures — within reason — to keep customers pleased with your work. It means repairing driver abuse comebacks and offering explanation and education about the failure. This generous service helps establish and strengthen your customer base.

Trustworthy Sales

The term "trustworthy sales" means identifying and diagnosing the customer's complaint

accurately, and selling the repairs necessary to address those specific problems. The first step in this procedure is to identify the problem or complaint accurately. One of the best ways to do this is by test driving the vehicle with the owner. This allows the customer to verify the exact problem that he or she is experiencing. And your additional comments may result in add-on repair sales. If your customer agrees that a problem you point out ought to be fixed, chances are very good that your shop will get to do that repair.

Bench selling is another dependable sales technique. Bench selling involves bringing the customer into the work area and letting your technician show the customer which parts were replaced and briefly explain the particular diagnosis and repair. As a rule, customers are much more trusting of an individual technician than they are of a counter person. So bench selling demonstrates your shop's honesty and respect for customers.

Using the responsible sales techniques, such as identifying the complaint properly and bench sales go a long way toward satisfying your customers.

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Empathy

Provide your customers with emotional understanding, just as you do your technicians. The first person in your shop to be in contact with a comeback customer needs to be empathetic to his situation. Once your customer knows the comeback repair won't be a struggle, your job is simply to solve the problem quickly. Gather all necessary information from the customer right away. Pull the work order from the original repair. Get the shop foreman or manager speaking with the customer immediately. Working to repair the comeback without delay shows your customer how concerned you really are about the failure and his particular situation.

Use empathy before a comeback occurs. Call your customers a few days after an initial repair to inquire how the vehicle is running. Or simply say as your customer leaves, "Let us know if you have any problems." These gestures show your customers that you understand their uneasiness about spending their money and having to trust your repair work.

Being empathetic to your customers' emotions during vehicle delivery and in the event of comeback repairs shows them that you care about the results of your work and their satisfaction. This kind of empathy makes it easier for your shop to provide customers with the mechanical repair service they require.

Respectability

Secure your customers' confidence and respect. How you deal with comebacks will determine whether that customer returns for work in the future or looks elsewhere for service. And it will have a direct impact on whether they refer others to you, or recommend that they avoid your shop altogether.

Lost confidence caused by poorly handled comebacks is a large part of the expense of comebacks. And the confidence loss is even greater when the customer had no foundation for trust in your shop, such as a recommendation or your local reputation. You need to take every precaution to avoid comebacks and the resulting confidence loss.

When comebacks do happen, be ready to provide better-than-usual service. If you handle a comeback customer with the priority and interest he warrants, you can actually build a lifelong customer. Too few shops stand behind their work. If you take the extra effort with comebacks, you'll retain the respect of those customers... and you'll remain in a potentially profitable position.

Simply understanding the extent to which customer confidence is lost through comebacks and the repercussions this has on your business should encourage you to secure that confidence every chance you get. This will in turn strengthen your respectability and maintain your customer base.

Face the People

Two groups of people need extra attention during every comeback: your employees and your customers. In both cases your role as manager, foreman, or even shop owner is more pronounced than it is for a first-time repair. The human element of comebacks must be addressed through well-planned management and equally well thought-out customer service.

Manage

By employing your best management skills at the time of a comeback, you can improve your technician's skills, and in so doing, improve your shop's overall efficiency and reduce comebacks. This means focusing on the technicians involved in your comebacks. Use every comeback to educate your technicians. Organize the workflow in your shop. Direct your technicians' progress and skills. Handle the emotional response to comebacks maturely and show your technicians how to do the same.

These management objectives aren't entirely new. But, if you sincerely want to have an effective and efficient operation, you must do more than understand good management; you need to *practice* it. Saying that you encourage and educate your technicians is one thing, but taking the time to mold them into better technicians gives you a more talented and informed staff. Being

surrounded by such hard-working, effective technicians makes your job of orchestration smooth and your shop's work efficiency greater. Choose to be a successful manager everyday.

Serve

Giving excellent customer service to all of your customers — especially comeback customers — allows your shop to maintain a trusting, profitable customer base.

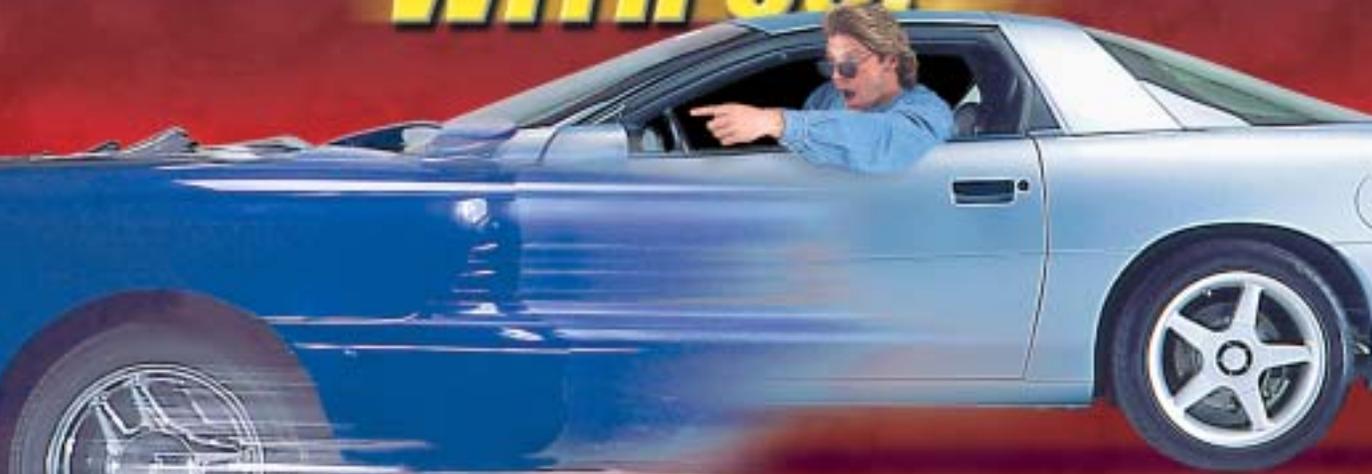
- Provide generous service to overcome public distrust of the industry.
- Diagnose each complaint accurately and completely. Do this both during a test drive and bench sell if at all possible.
- Be empathetic to the situation a comeback customer is in, and to the concerns your customers have about the expense and quality of an initial repair.
- Consider the lost confidence comeback customers have in your shop, and offer them the service it takes to make sure they respect and trust your shop from that repair forward, despite the original failure.

Every shop has comebacks; just wanting them to go away isn't enough. Face each comeback customer and repair directly. Standing back from a comeback or dealing with it halfway isn't good for your customer or your business. Don't turn away from your comeback customers; face them.

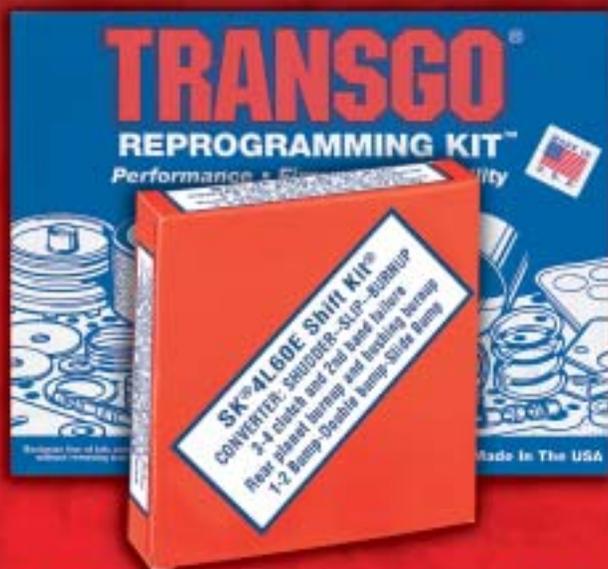
If some of the practices in this article sound out of reach, you may not have made an honest effort to incorporate them in your everyday dealings. Give them a try. Use good management and customer service so you and your shop can stand face to face comfortably with the people involved in your comebacks. When you treat your employees and customers with respect and concern, your benefits will be obvious. And every aspect of your comebacks will be easier to face.



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