

It Pays to Shop Around

I have always struggled with the question of loyalty to a storekeeper or service provider, as opposed to shopping around for the best price. Growing up, we always bought our groceries from the same grocery store (Mr. Rosenbaum), our pharmacy needs from the same pharmacy (Mr. Sheinman), our meat from the same butcher (Mr. Margolis), and for our dry cleaning, we always went to Mr. Handwerger. It never occurred to us to go elsewhere. They were our neighborhood storekeepers.

Then in came the A and P. I have already written about the heart-wrenching decision that my mother made to no longer buy her meat from Mr. Margolis and her groceries from Mr. Rosenbaum. The forties saw a great many changes taking place. And the changes continued through the decades. Soon there were no more friendly, neighborhood storekeepers. They were replaced by supermarkets, and now it seems that some supermarkets are being replaced by “big box” stores.

I have also prided myself on being a smart shopper, but I concluded that this approach does not apply to the servicing of my automobile. I established a relationship with my neighborhood service station, and placed the servicing and repair of my car in their capable hands. I realized that they charged a little more, but I became their steady customer. I knew them and they knew me. They would not let anything bad happen to my car. When I had a problem, I would call their head mechanic and he would take care of me.

A few months ago, I heard a squeak when I applied the brakes. I called my friend, the head mechanic, and he told me to bring the car in. He pulled off the tires, looked at the brakes and shook his head and said I need to get the brakes relined and I also need to get two new tires. My response: if he says so, it must be so. How much? \$950. Wow. That's a lot of money! He made it clear to me, that if I did not take care of it soon, there could be a problem. If he says so.. I knew that there are lots of other places that do brakes, and still more places where I can buy tires, but this is my friendly neighborhood service station, and I have been coming here for years. I now have new brakes and new tires. (And a gnawing feeling that I overspent by a couple hundred dollars.)

A few weeks ago, the side view mirror was damaged and I brought it to my friend to find out what could be done. He looked at it, shook his head and made a phone call. When he got off the phone he told me it would cost \$430 to replace it. I thought that was a lot of money. He said that that is the cost of a replacement mirror that matches the car. We could save a few dollars for a black replacement mirror, but it would not look good on a silver car. I told him I would think about it.

While I was thinking about it, I got some duct tape and reattached the mirror. It did not look great but it served the purpose. Unfortunately, after a while, the mirror came off. It is not true that everything in the world can be fixed with either WD 40 or duct tape. Another observation: everything you need, can be found on Google. I Googled side view mirror, 2007 Toyota Camry, and up came hundreds of places where I could get one. The prices ranged from \$20 up. I called a few of them, and settled on a Kool Vue mirror from Discount Auto Mirrors for \$35.07 plus \$10 shipping.

Now, how was I going to have it installed? I found a video on Google which gave me a step-by-step lesson in attaching the mirror. Forget it. I decided to go to a few of the neighborhood service stations that I don't patronize, to ask them how much it would cost to install. The first said \$94. The second said \$90. That must be the going rate. I figured \$45 plus \$90 is less than \$430.

I then decided to call my friendly, neighborhood body shop, figuring these guys do this sort of thing all the time. Since we have had a lot of body work done over the years, the owner knows me. I asked him how much he would charge to attach the mirror. He thought for a few minutes and said \$20. That is a lot less than \$90. I told him as soon as the mirror arrives, I'll be over. When the mirror came, I came over. He gave the job to one of his workers who completed it in less than 15 minutes. When I went to pay the owner, he told me to give the \$20 to the worker. A magnanimous gesture. I did, along with a tip.

I am beginning to have second thoughts about my friendly neighborhood service station. The job for which he was going to charge me \$430, ended up costing me \$70. I hope this has not been the case all these years.

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