

Auto Repair For Women Demanding Respect In A Male-Dominated Industry

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Lori Johnson talks tires. Johnson's business, to educate women about the ways of automobile repair, is called [Ladies Start Your Engines](#) and is a traveling show put on in partnership with dealerships.

"How many people have changed a tire?" instructor Lori Johnson asked the dozen women gathered in a residential Philadelphia driveway around a brand-new Volkswagen Passat.

"It makes no sense to be waiting an hour for AAA to come," after getting a flat on the highway, Johnson said.

Johnson, the petite, spiky-haired entrepreneur behind start-up, Ladies Start Your Engines, used to work in an auto-dealer service department. She started her instructional service for women this year because of what she often witnessed from her fellow, male wrench turners: condescension toward, and sometimes exploitation of, female customers.

Representing half of all new car buyers and wielding increasing economic clout, women are commanding more respect from automakers, car dealers, and their service departments - but experts say there is plenty of room for improvement. And services, Web sites and magazines are sprouting up to help women demand it.

"We do not feel respected" by the male-dominated industry, said Jody DeVere, president of [AskPatty.com](#), a Web site about cars, geared toward women.

The site says it offers "a safe place for women to get advice on car purchases, maintenance and other automotive related topics," through interactive e-mail, blogs and "Womanars," Web-based seminars delivered by female automotive experts.

DeVere said she was confronted all the time with the question "Why do women need a special Web site, special marketing, etc. - cars are cars, right?"

She insists, "I'm not a screaming feminist," but says the sexes have different preferred modes of communication, and differing perceptions of what makes a good car.

Women spend more time on the Internet researching cars, for instance, preferring to avoid the high-pressure, confrontational experience of a dealership until they are armed with information, said Courtney Caldwell, publisher of [Road & Travel Magazine](#).

"Women and men want the same things from a car, but they prioritize them differently," said Caldwell, whose online magazine content is oriented toward female readers.

For women, a vehicle's safety is the top priority. For men, performance and styling are high priority with safety an afterthought.

One of the top drivers of traffic to the female-oriented sites and Johnson's class is discomfort with dealers - inappropriate sexual comments, a "bring your husband back when you're ready to buy" attitude, and the suspicion of being ripped off get mentioned often. Everyone, including dealers, says that is bad business. According to some estimates, 85 percent of the "customer satisfaction index" forms that consumers fill out after a car purchase or repair are filled out by women.

"They are more likely to complete those forms, because they tend to be less confrontational," DeVere said.

Those forms are sent to car manufacturers and inform the companies as they decide how to allocate corporate goodies, such as advertising money and the most desirable vehicles, to dealers.

"In general, it's a male-based industry," said Karen Riveros, a regional service manager for Volkswagen of America Inc. whose job it is to make sure local dealers are keeping customers happy.

Part of that, she and others said, will come from having more women auto executives, engineers, designers, mechanics, service managers and dealership owners.

Progress has been slow but steady, Riveros, for instance, is one of a handful of females in her position nationwide, out of about 50.

Caldwell recalled that when she approached advertisers in 1989 with the idea of a car and travel magazine for women, "there was a lot of laughing at me."

Today the magazine, which several years ago went to an online-only format, is flush with ads and expects to log 10 million page views this year.

Volvo took the unusual, but well-received, step of handing over the drafting of its “Your Concept Car” to an all-female design team, unveiling it in 2004. The nonproduction car included fingernail-friendly capless fuel and washer fluid doors, swappable interior fabrics, and gullwing doors for easier entry and exit.

Kevin Mazzucola, executive director of the [Automobile Dealers Association of Greater Philadelphia](#), said that today’s dealers knew that “the days of, ‘look at that vanity mirror’ are long gone,” when it comes to marketing cars to women.

While the dealer’s group has not launched any specific outreach efforts toward women, he said the group had designed its advertising buying to lure female attendees to the association-produced Philadelphia Auto Show.

Johnson, of [Ladies Start Your Engines](#), thinks the answer lies in empowering female consumers to see through any bull they may encounter when taking their car to the shop.

In one segment of her lesson, she showed attendees how to change their car’s brake pads themselves - and how to recognize a puffed-up repair estimate.

If, she said, after a simple brake-pad job the mechanic says, “Oh, you need new calipers, new rotors,” beware.

“Does it happen, yes. But do you need a new caliper every time you go in? No way.”

For now, Johnson’s class is a traveling show - put on in partnership with such groups as Mount Airy Learning Tree or local dealerships. Next Friday, Smith VW in Wilmington will hold one of the two-hour sessions.

“I can’t train someone to be a technician,” Johnson said. “This is for you to know what they’re talking about.”

By The Numbers

The top complaint women have with dealerships is their treatment as customers, and yet:

50% of new-vehicle purchases are made by women.

80% of vehicle purchases are “influenced” by women.

7% of the nation’s 20,000 franchised new-vehicle dealerships are owned by women, compared with 2.9 percent in 1990.

3 is the average number of dealerships female buyers shop at for best price and treatment.

17 weeks: Time female buyers spend in the purchasing process.

15 weeks: Time male buyers spend in the purchasing process.

Features: Safety, dependability, functionality and economic factors are high on the list of importance for female buyers. Style and performance, ranked highest by men, rank last in most women’s buying consideration.

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