

## Finding a Good Mechanic

Trial and error is not the way to get a good repair.

by Peter D. duPre

Buying a new vehicle and keeping it running properly takes a major chunk of most people's budget. The average price of a new car is hovering around \$25,000 and repair costs range anywhere from \$60-\$120 an hour — plus parts! On top of that, there is the annual cost of license plates, insurance and fuel.

Yes, owning a vehicle is an expensive proposition, but it can be difficult to get along without one. Most of us need a car just to get to and from work, go grocery shopping and to do other vital chores. Our vehicles have to be dependable, and because they are complicated most of us are not qualified to do repair work on them. We rely on professionals.

Finding a good automotive professional can be difficult and many people end up using the trial-and-error method. Taking your vehicle from one shop to the next until you find a quality repair shop is not only time consuming, it's expensive. But don't despair, it is possible to find a good mechanic without a lot of cost or hassle simply by doing a little homework first. Here are a few tips to help you make sure the next mechanic you choose is your last:

**Talk to your friends:** Ask your friends and business associates where they get their vehicles repaired. Get more than one or two opinions; consensus is a lot more reliable than simply looking in the phone book.

**Check with the Better Business Bureau:** Once you have the names of a few repair shops, call the Better Business Bureau (BBB) or other local/state consumer regulatory agency and inquire about the reputation of the business. The BBB and other agencies won't recommend a shop, but they will tell you if they have any outstanding, unresolved complaints against a business.

**Look for certification:** Visit the prospective shops to see how they do business. A repair shop should be organized and run with an air of professionalism. Check for endorsements and certification. Ask if the mechanics or repair technicians are certified by the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE). This organization determines the competency of repair technicians by means of written testing. Technicians voluntarily take these tough tests in various areas of automotive repair, such as engine repair, transmission overhaul, brakes or front end. Those who pass are awarded ASE credentials and entitled to wear a patch on their coveralls. ASE certification helps ensure that the technician is knowledgeable in the service you need.

Be aware that no system is perfect and an ASE certification sign on a shop can be misleading. For example, if one technician in a shop employing 10 has passed areas of ASE testing, the shop can hang a sign out front stating this. However,

you are not guaranteed that the ASE-certified technician is the person who will be working on your vehicle. Look for multiple certificates in different areas of certification and for a variety of mechanics. Request that the work on your vehicle be done by a technician who is certified in that service area.

Another thing to look for is whether the shop is approved by the American Automobile Association. This national organization of vehicle owners has set standards that shops must meet in order to be approved. According to the Washington state AAA, an approved facility must have "at least one ASE certified technician in each service area the shop offers." Additionally, an AAA-approved shop must have proper tools, meet cleanliness standards, have good community relations and a good rating with the BBB.

Away from home: If your vehicle breaks down away from home, AAA approval and ASE certification are even more important, but finding local shops and getting quality referrals may be difficult. Try checking with the local Chamber of Commerce, store clerks and counter personnel at local auto parts store and ask who they think does the best repairs.

Get a written estimate: Any good shop should be able to give you a written repair estimate after looking at the vehicle before they start work. The shop should notify you beforehand if there is a 10 percent or more discrepancy between their estimate and the actual cost of repairing the vehicle. It is also a good idea to request that the shop save any replaced parts so you can examine them. In most states, it is the law that the shop saves all parts for consumer examination if they request it before hand.

Take a test drive: Before paying the bill, make sure you check the repair to see that it has actually been made and that the vehicle is running properly. For anything more than a minor repair, I suggest taking a test ride with the mechanic to be sure the vehicle has been properly repaired.

Ask about warranty: Reputable repair shops will warrantee their work for a specific amount of time. Different repairs may have different warranties, so make sure you get the details about what is covered and for how long.

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