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### **Where to Turn for a Better Car Mechanic**

Finding a good auto mechanic just got harder.

The reason: The ranks of auto-repair specialists have plummeted. There were 88,000 fewer auto-care workers in 2001 than five years earlier, a 10% decline, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Many workers who have the computer skills needed to fix today's cars have been lured away to higher-paying jobs. At the same time, American roads are jammed with 8.3% more cars and light trucks than in 1997. Making things worse, garages aren't expanding to handle the new wheels. Lang Marketing Resources, a Wycoff, N.J., research firm, says the number of service bays at auto garages has fallen 4% since 1991.

Complaints persist about service quality. California's Bureau of Automotive Repair found that 40% of drivers who took their cars to California auto-body shops experienced some sort of overcharge. The average overcharge was around \$750.

The government expects that in 10 years there will be a need for 991,000 auto technicians, a 20%-plus increase from today. But 349,000 of the current mechanics are expected to retire in that time period. So unless fixing cars becomes very popular, very fast, consumers will have to work even harder to find a good repair shop. What can you do to help yourself? Try these tactics.

Get a second opinion. Gerald Conrad, a 33-year-old from Boston, took his 1995 Honda Accord to a dealer garage when the air conditioning quit. The dealer's estimate was \$1,200 to replace the system. Unwilling to pay so much to stay cool for the last three weeks of summer, Mr. Conrad kept looking. Co-workers suggested a garage known around town for honest service. That garage diagnosed the same problem as the first mechanic, but also did a little research that saved Mr. Conrad a bundle. The problem with his car was subject to a "product update" from the manufacturer -- so Honda picked up the tab. "Had I not looked into it and gotten a second opinion, [the first garage] would have charged me \$1,200," Mr. Conrad says.

Don't wait for a breakdown. "Find a quality repair facility before you need one," says John Nielsen, director of auto repair at AAA, the national automobile service and lobbying group. "When your car breaks down, you don't have the luxury of shopping around."

Grease the wheels. The AAA's Mr. Nielsen suggests taking your vehicle to the same shop for routine items such as oil changes and tune-ups, to build a sense of familiarity and loyalty. "You get to know them, they get to know the car," he says.

Ask around for leads. "Getting referrals from friends and informal networking is a great way" to find a repair shop, says Mary Butler, senior editor at **Cars.com**. She suggests checking with your local consumer agency to weed out mechanics with a history of problems. "It's easier to rule out bad service providers than point out good ones," she says. In some places, the state attorney general's office or department of consumer affairs have complaint records on file. Or try a call to the local Better Business Bureau.

Look around, quiz attendants. Once you're in the garage, evaluate the business as you would any other. Is the shop well organized and clean? Is there a warranty on parts and labor? Is the mechanic upfront about diagnostic fees, and do you get an estimate in writing?

Consider the independents. A common dilemma is whether to get your car fixed at a dealer garage or an independent service station. Some experts say go where you feel comfortable. After all, there are good dealers and bad dealers, good independent garages and bad ones.

Overall, though, "independent repair shops tend to have more satisfied customers than dealers do," says Robert Krughoff, president of the Center for the Study of Services, a consumer research group in Washington, D.C. His group publishes a magazine called Consumers' Checkbook that evaluates local businesses in service areas such as car repair, health care and banking. Adding to the independents' cause, auto makers announced Thursday that they will provide the same service and training information to independent garages that they do to dealers.

Don't mistake price for quality. A Consumers' Checkbook study of car mechanics in the Washington, D.C. area found that not only were consumers less satisfied with the workmanship of dealer shops, but they also tended to pay more for the same work than at nondealer shops. One component of cost -- the average hourly labor rate -- was \$72 at dealers, \$61 at nondealers.

Check for certification. Some car owners look for professional certification. The National Institute of Automotive Service Excellence, or ASE, is the largest such program, with more than 431,000 certified mechanics. Mechanics must pass a test and have two years' experience to be considered certified in a specific field of auto mechanics, such as brakes or engine work. AAA recommends looking for mechanics with the ASE symbol. While ASE certification may prove a mechanic is capable, it doesn't mean he or she will do a good job. "There's just so many other things in repair work," says Mr. Krughoff -- notably conscientiousness, prompt service and good communication skills.

Note that ASE is not a consumer organization. Martin Lawson, an ASE spokesman, says the group is not equipped to handle customer complaints. "It's a testing and certification organization," he says.

See if there's a AAA sign. AAA has its own garage-assessment program with around 7,600 shops in the U.S. and Canada. Each "approved" shop is monitored by AAA and has to abide by certain procedures, such as offering a year warranty on most services and parts. And AAA members can use the program's arbitration mechanism to resolve complaints with AAA garages.

Communicate like crazy. AAA says lots of car-repair conflicts -- 78% in one study -- arise from poor communications. Ms. Butler of **Cars.com** agrees: "If a mechanic isn't going to tell you what's wrong -- or says you won't understand --that's a mechanic probably not to go to."

But communication is a two-way street. Be sure your car's problem is clearly stated on the service order. If your auto won't back up, say so, and make sure the counter attendant writes that down. Mr. Nielsen of AAA suggests learning just enough about cars to understand the terminology. Some local AAA clubs, community colleges and adult-education programs teach basic car-repair knowledge.