



Are you charging your customers for diagnosis? If you aren't, maybe it's time you rethink the issue. There are a lot of good reasons to charge for diagnosis—not to mention profit.

Whether or not anyone realizes it or wants to admit it, the skilled diagnostician may soon be the most

valued man in the shop.

Consider the following:

Twenty-five years ago, a manufacturer could fit the entire wiring diagram for a vehicle on two pages of a repair manual. A typical car might have had half a dozen fuses and maybe even a relay, or two.

Cars didn't have computers in them. Anti-theft systems, digital dashboards and climate control units, power sunroofs, central locking systems, emission control systems, anti-lock brakes, electrically controlled suspensions and the like, were either unheard of, in the planning stages, or only available on the most expensive luxury cars.

The miniaturization of the computer has changed all that. Wiring diagrams now fill books—not two pages. The wiring for a fuel system alone can take up as much space as an entire vehicle wiring diagram used to.

And while the different systems that make an automobile have always been *interrelated* to one degree

or another, many of them are now actually *interdependent*. Computers keep tabs on everything from coolant temperature to vehicle speed and make decisions about fuel/air ratios, when to shift an automatic transmission, how often an air conditioning compressor should cycle, and on and on.

It's no longer possible to do a specific repair without thinking about how that component's failure may have caused a problem in another, seemingly unrelated, system. The old cause-and-effect approach to diagnosing problems is now as often a matter of causes-and-effects.

Proper diagnosis of problems is more complicated than ever, especially when it involves intermittent problems.

"If a customer pulls up to your shop and wants a quick diagnosis, don't just run out to the lot and open the hood. Write a proper repair order, inform the customer of the diagnostic charge, and take the car inside the building where the equipment is. It looks more professional."

James German
Coastal Machine
Teaticket, Mass.

"On the newer cars the repairs are often simpler. It's finding the problem that sometimes takes the time. You end up with a \$35 labor charge to replace a thirty cent part."

David Foley
Bavarian Motor Service
Mandeville, LA

"We charge for diagnosis and inform the customer that we will do one of three things:

- Find the problem and just fix it if it isn't something major.
- Use the diagnosis time to make an estimate of the repairs needed if the repairs required are more extensive.
- Determine if the needed repairs are something we aren't equipped to handle, are the type of repair we do not choose to do, or are covered by a manufacturer's or an emissions warranty.

"We also have some very specific guidelines and written procedures for most major areas of automotive diagnosis. This makes us do a thorough check-out of a system instead of fixing the first thing we find wrong and just stopping there. These procedures are on the shop's computer and include:

- Charging system diagnosis
- No start cold
- Start cold but stall

- Electrical/ ignition system
- Emissions diagnosis
- Engine (mechanical) diagnosis

"Charging for diagnosis won't work over a long period of time without fixed and correct procedures."

Ed Heinrich
Heinrich Automotive Inc.
Toyota Specialists
Chicago, Illinois

"We charge the customer a \$35 minimum check-out fee. If the customer agrees with our diagnosis and goes ahead with the work, we'll reimburse half that fee for jobs under \$100 and all of it for jobs over \$100. The point is that we're covered for the diagnostic time and administrative costs for running the car through the shop even if the customer doesn't get the work done."

Tony Ritz
Sports Car Service Center
Tempe, Arizona

"The important thing is to tell customers about the charge up front, so they know what to expect. You have to be up front and honest when informing the customer."

Kent Follansbee
Auto Life Center
Santa Rosa, CA

"People go to a doctor's office and expect to pay just to make the appointment. People ask me for information and advice all the time and some don't even say thank you."

Freddy Pate
Calhoun Car Clinic
Calhoun, Ga.

Instant Gratification

Many customers are still reluctant to pay a technician for what he knows. Some people are only impressed with the "number" of parts replaced, instead of valuing the ability of a skilled technician to evaluate a job and to correctly replace the parts, the correct parts, and nothing but the correct parts.

Many customers are still the victims of the \$29.95 syndrome, the one-size-fits-all syndrome, or the "guaranteed for the life of your car" syndrome. They want fast, easy answers to their problems and questions, often wanting an accurate estimate of costs and downtimes in the same amount of time it took them to order their burger and fries at lunch. Unfortunately, many still want that information for free.

In an age of increasing automotive complexity, it may be time to reevaluate the ways we charge for our services, and the services for which we charge. It may be time to start shifting some emphasis away from what we did to the car, and start getting paid better for knowing what to do to per-

"Why does my car stall out after a long drive?"

"Why does my battery keep going dead?"

"Why is my car overheating?"

But there's a lot more to diagnosis than just finding that sticking EGR valve, dead cell in the battery, or closed thermostat.

Diagnosis includes an entire decision-making process that results in a quality, cost-effective repair. Diagnosis looks at the big picture. Diagnosis isn't just the beginning of the repair, it's the beginning of the sale.

Before making a quality repair a technician must:

- Determine what failed.
- Determine the cause of the failure.
- Determine how much damage has been caused by the failure, and whether the primary failure has damaged anything else. (Did that closed thermostat overheat the engine enough to ruin a head gasket?)
- Determine the best plan of attack to make a quality repair.

This last one can be very tough indeed. The technician must do a real juggling act at times as he considers the nature of the repair,



form a cost-effective, quality repair.

What Is Diagnosis?

Let's make a basic assumption before we start, namely that so-called diagnostic machines and equipment do not diagnose vehicle problems. People do. People may use these machines as an aid, but there still hasn't been a better diagnostic tool invented than the human mind.

Diagnosis is the ability of that human mind to gather information, evaluate that information, and then choose a course of action. Not just any information will do. The technician must not only gather enough information—he must also know which information—which facts apply to the problem at hand, and which ones don't.

To do this requires training, experience, patience, and above average smarts. Let's start here and take a closer look at some of the elements involved in diagnosis. Maybe you've never stopped to think about how important and VALUABLE your skills as a diagnostician are. If you haven't, then you may not be selling those skills to the public.

It's Not As Easy As It Looks

We normally associate the term "diagnosis" with troubleshooting. It's man against machine, trying to answer the questions of the day.

the customer's budget and expectations, personal liability when repairing safety related items, and occasionally the value of the vehicle compared to the costs of the repair.

Occasionally, he must also use some discretion and be aware of bad things that can happen as the result of an otherwise good repair. He may, for instance, correct a compression problem caused by burned valves, only to find that the rod bearings or piston pins can't take the additional pounding. We repeat, this is a discretion call and no machine can do it for the technician. It's all a part of diagnosis. It's the result of training, skill, and experience, and you, the technician, had to pay for all three.

Reasons To Charge

There are a lot of good reasons to charge for diagnostic time. In fact, there are far more good reasons than you may think.

- It lets YOU put a value on your skills. If you don't, nobody else will do it for you.
- It forces people to accept the fact that your head is just as valuable as your hands. If you give your diagnostic skills away, people may wrongly assume that they are without worth.
- It helps your attitude. Now someone is paying you for the time needed to properly diagnose a problem.

You're not frustrated because you're tied up in some complicated and time consuming diagnostic procedure for which you're not getting paid. Your attitude is more positive when you start the job. You're more apt to concentrate and actually do a better job in less time.

- It pays off for you and the customer in the long run. A better diagnosis means a better repair. It saves the embarrassment of replacing the wrong part or doing an incomplete or incorrect repair.

- It pays you for the time needed to write a detailed and comprehensive estimate. This improves sales and customer satisfaction.

Establishing A Policy

One of the most important things for you to do when you decide to charge for diagnosis is to establish a policy and then stick to it. Since not all repairs requiring diagnosis are equally difficult, your policy may not be ironclad. It is important, however, to give the impression that your charges for diagnosis are consistent and fair.



It's always a good idea to post a sign, large and prominently displayed, telling your customers that you do charge for diagnosis. It's also a good idea to include a space on your repair orders or estimate sheets that shows your diagnostic charges. That way, when the customer initials the estimate, he approves diagnostic charges as well.

How you charge, how much you charge, and how often you charge for diagnostic time will depend on the type of work you do. If you're the kind of shop that loves the real brain teasers, diagnostic time may already be a way of life.

How To Charge

If you're not already charging for diagnosis, these suggestions may help you establish a pricing policy:

- **Establish a minimum check-out charge.** This informs the customer that when diagnosis is necessary before starting a repair, he will be expected to pay for a predetermined diagnosis time. This way you're always covered for a given amount of time needed to do at least a preliminary diagnosis. If you're sharp enough to go right to the problem and fix it quickly, you've at least placed a value on your skills and time.

Remember, you have a right to be paid for what you know, not just what you do.

- **Establish a price for the preliminary inspection.**

This can be based on a fixed time (one hour, for instance) at your shop's hourly rate. Or you may simply choose a flat fee. In the event that the diagnosis cannot be completed within that period of time, the customer should be informed that additional time and expense will be needed to find the problem.

- **Establish a teardown charge.** If your shop does internal repair on drivetrain components, set a price for teardown, inspection, and writing estimates on engines and transmissions. Inform the customer that this charge will be applied to the cost of the final repair if he allows you to make the proper repairs. If the customer decides not to go ahead with the repair, he can cart away the pieces in a box. But at least you haven't wasted an afternoon getting to the root of his problems.

Selling The Customer

As noted earlier, there will be some customers who won't readily accept the charges for diagnosis. The same people who nor-

mally pay for information from other professional people—doctors, lawyers, and computer wizards—will sometimes balk at paying you for information about their cars.

This is unfortunate.

As always, this brings us back to selling. If you look at diagnostic charges as a symbol of your professionalism, then you'll have to convince some of your customers that you are professional and do so in a professional manner.

You may even want to put together a small promotional pamphlet outlining the reasons you're worth the added expense. Include anything that lends credibility to your diagnostic charges:

- Include a description of the investment you've made in training for yourself and your employees.
- Include a brief history of your experience and the experience of all your technicians.
- Include a list of your areas of particular expertise.
- Include a description of your investment in tools and equipment.
- Include a brief outline of your policy on diagnostic charges, explaining the need for competent diagnosis as a prerequisite to quality repairs.

Charging a fair rate for your diagnostic skills takes some additional work at first, but the long term benefits to be derived are a lot better than working for free.

—By **Ralph Birnbaum**