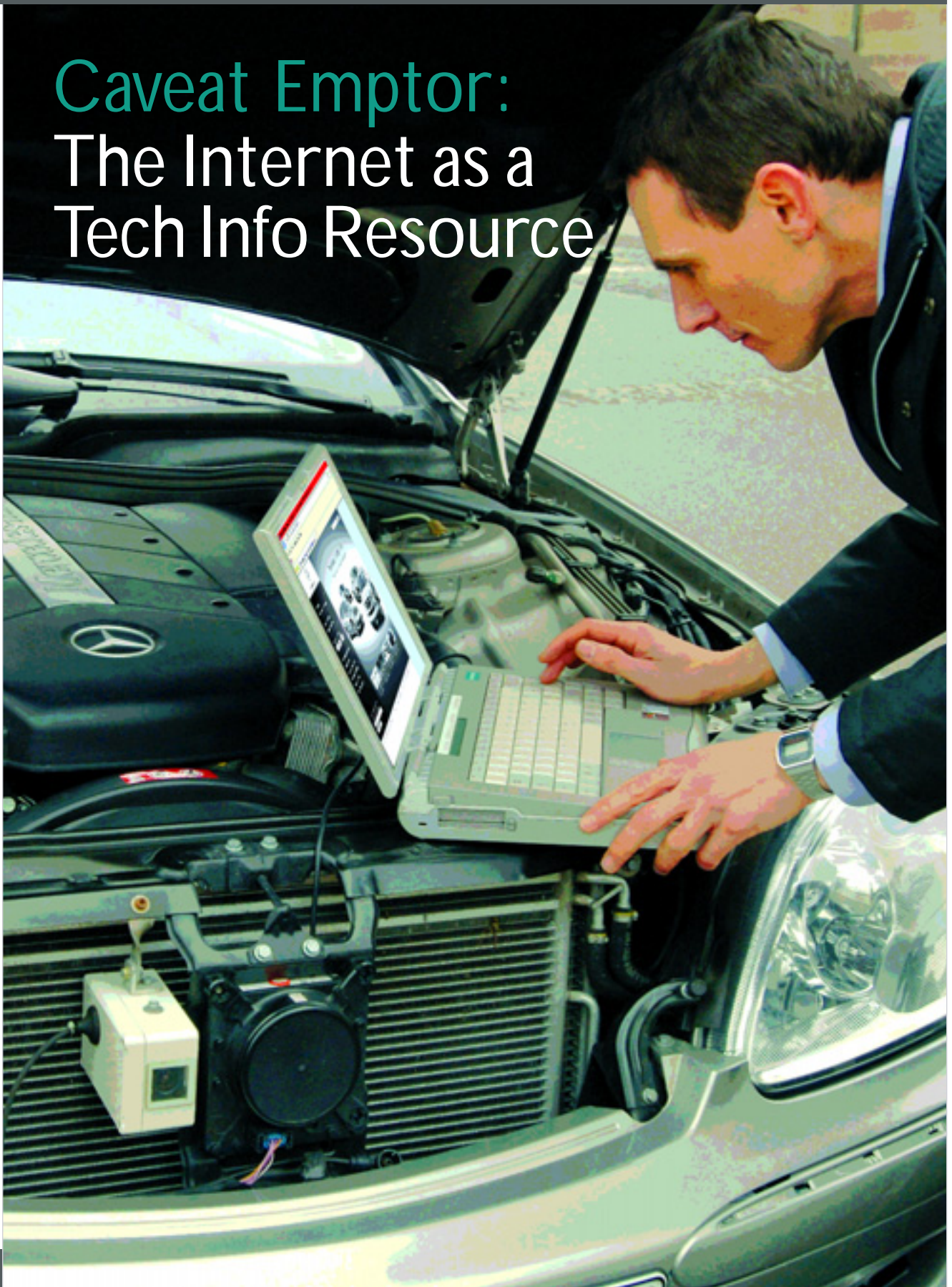


Caveat Emptor: The Internet as a Tech Info Resource



The Internet has empowered many members of our society, especially those of us who work in technical fields. Just because it's on-line doesn't mean it's true, however.

Is the Internet in your toolbox? Should it be? A smart technician, when he or she runs into a hard-to-solve diagnosis or repair problem, turns to someone for help. For generations, that someone was either a more senior tech in the shop or a technician from another local garage who was known for his expertise on a particular car or system. Today, with the Internet, that helpful technician also exists in cyberspace.

History has shown us that breakthroughs in communications technology make major changes in society. Each one eliminated barriers, making it faster and easier to send and receive messages. The telegraph virtually eliminated time and distance as factors in communications. The telephone eliminated the need for Morse Code. All you had to do was talk and listen. Radio communication eliminated the need for hard wire connections – two people with radios could talk virtually anywhere, anytime. Broadcasting, first with radio and then with television, allowed one transmission to be

shared by many millions all at the same time. Fax allowed individuals to transmit images as easily as placing a phone call.

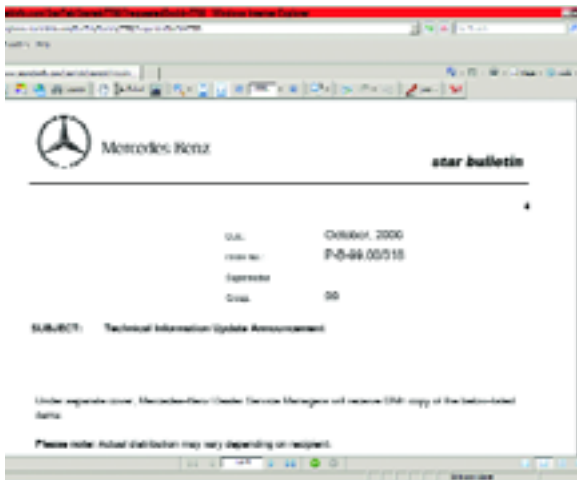
The latest communications breakthrough, the Internet, has outdone the advances of all other breakthroughs. On the “net,” people can communicate one-on-one either via email or by instant messaging. One person can communicate with many using a “blog.” People with similar interests can join a topic-specific forum or chat room. The Internet supports its own versions of voice, image, and data transmission to rival phone, fax, radio, and TV.

Millions of hits

One of the most important advances created by the Internet was an explosion of information. Never before has so much information been available so quickly and with so little effort. Type literally any word, topic, or question you can think of into a search engine like Google and you will usually get a stunning number of



Star TekInfo Home: Everything at www.startekinfo.com is official service and repair information direct from Mercedes-Benz. For a detailed tour of this website, see the March 2005 issue of StarTuned at www.mbwholesaleparts.com



You should check www.startekinfo.com frequently to get the latest service bulletins.

“hits” or websites related to what you are looking for. Even the most obscure topics will have dozens, if not hundreds of sites. And hits totaling into the hundreds of thousands and even millions are typical.

StarTuned did a search of the Internet to see what was available on servicing Mercedes-Benz vehicles. The results were surprising. A search for “Mercedes-Benz technician” got nearly 300,000 hits. Most sites were “help wanted” ads, or technician’s websites promoting their services. A few, however, were related to service and repair work.

Getting 300,000 hits for sites for a relatively limited interest area like “Mercedes-Benz technician” was impressive, but there are a lot more sites in cyberspace related to working on a Mercedes-Benz. In fact, “Mercedes-Benz technician” had the lowest number of hits of our searches.

“Mercedes-Benz repair” returned nearly four million hits! The websites covered just about every model of Mercedes-Benz sold from the late 1950s to present day vehicles. A search for “Mercedes-Benz forum” yielded nearly six million sites, including the official Mercedes-Benz Club of America site (<http://www.mbca.org/>). Some forums were Mercedes-Benz exclusive, others were general automotive forums with a subsection dedicated to Mercedes-Benz.

Diving deeper, most Mercedes-Benz forums have one or more areas related to service work. Some are further divided into literally dozens of

pages, containing a hundred or more different repair discussions for just one model! A few mouse clicks could take you to discussions on just about any service problem for any model Mercedes-Benz you can think of. The discussions ranged from solving difficult intermittent problems to mundane issues like oil change intervals and what brand of coolant is best.

How Good?

Most of the Mercedes-Benz websites are consumer oriented – Mercedes-Benz owners and enthusiasts who enjoy discussing their cars. You will also find a few professional technician sites. The International Automotive Technicians' Network (www.iATN.com) is the best known of the pro sites. iATN boasts some 40,000 members. There are also professional sites among the many discussion groups at msn.com, yahoo.com, etc.

Spending time browsing through a random selection of sites is both interesting and boring. The boredom sets in because almost every site seems to have been set up by the same designer, and very soon all the sites start to look alike. You find an index page listing models and topics. Then you go into the subsection on service, which is further divided by model or system, depending upon the organization of the webpage.

Typically, a question about a Mercedes-Benz repair was posted, followed by anywhere from zero to dozens of responses stretching over several days.

The forums and discussions are interesting because of the incredible range of questions and responses. However, while reading various discussions, we kept recalling the title of an old Clint Eastwood movie, *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. Some responses were good because they solved a problem that had been driving a technician or owner crazy. Other responses were bad because they were wrong or at least weren’t to the point. The ugly set in when discussions of different repair techniques degenerated into personal attacks.

One “ask the expert” site advised a Mercedes-Benz owner who was seeking help servicing an older diesel engine model that the best dealership in the country for Mercedes-Benz repair



www.mbca.org is the official website for the official Mercedes-Benz Club of America.

was in New Jersey. The only independent shop the expert could recommend was in upstate New York. We think that reply is an insult to all the good dealerships and independent repair shops, especially *StarTuned* readers, who work hard to provide their customers with the highest level of service possible.

One thing that struck us reading the consumer sites is how seldom anyone responded that a recommended fix actually worked. The discussion all too often just died out with no report on success or failure. On professional technician sites, there were a lot more “thank you, that worked” responses than on the consumer side, but even among the pros, many discussions simply stopped.

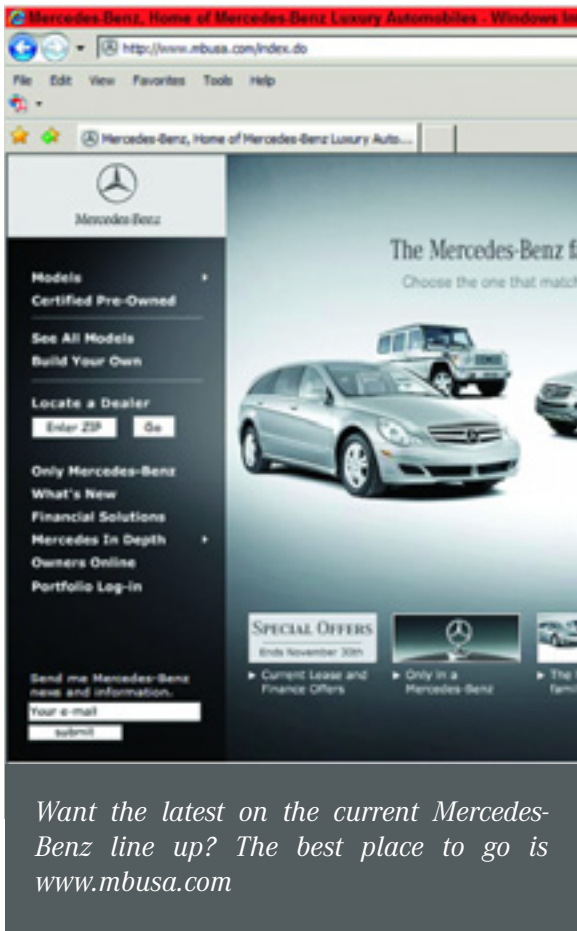
One site you can depend on for accuracy is the official Mercedes-Benz technical website, www.startekinfo.com. There are no discussion or forum areas, just access to a vast library of official Mercedes-Benz service information and bulletins. Accurate product information about new Mercedes-Benz vehicles can be found at the general Mercedes-Benz website, www.mbusa.com. There is no repair or service information, but you’ll find everything you want to know about features of all the new models.

After the official Mercedes-Benz websites, it is “buyer beware” regarding the value of the repair information you’ll find. Even the largest professional site, www.iatn.com makes it clear that you use any information on the site at your own risk. Just part of iATN’s disclaimer reads:

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YOU EXPRESSLY UNDERSTAND
AND AGREE THAT:**

Your use of the service is at your sole risk. The service is provided on an "as is" and "as available" basis. iATN expressly disclaims all warranties of any kind, whether expressed or implied, including, but not limited to, the implied warranties of merchantability, fitness for a particular purpose and non-infringement.

iATN makes no warranty that: This network will meet your requirements, this network will be uninterrupted, timely, secure, or error-free, The results that may be obtained from the use of this network will be accurate or reliable, the quality of any products, services, information, or other material purchased or obtained by



you through this network will meet your expectations, and any errors in this network will be corrected. Any material downloaded or otherwise obtained through the use of this network is done at your own discretion and risk and that you will be solely responsible for any damage to your computer system or loss of data that results from the download of any such material. No advice or information, whether oral or written, obtained by you from iATN or through or from this network shall create any warranty not expressly stated in the terms of use.

LIMITATION OF LIABILITY. *You expressly understand and agree that iATN shall not be liable for any direct, indirect, incidental, special, consequential or exemplary damages, including but not limited to, damages for loss of profits, goodwill, use, data or other intangible losses (even if iATN has been advised of the possibility of such damages), resulting from:*

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How much faith would you put in the advice you get from your buddy at the shop across town if he used the same type of disclaimer?

Don't ignore

You should still use the Internet as a source of service information; just apply some common sense. If you are not on an official Mercedes-Benz website, know who is sponsoring or running the site. Always ask yourself how much you can trust their knowledge and recommendations. Don't just blindly accept anything you read from previous discussions or any responses you get to your questions. Does the answer make sense? How much risk is there in following the advice? Could the recommendation cause harm?

Before you turn to the Internet, have you exhausted other reliable sources for repair information? And are you sure you haven't skipped anything or assumed something in your original troubleshooting and diagnosis?

Although you can obtain an unbelievable amount of information from the web, you still have to factor in your time. You must sort through websites and wade through pages and pages of responses. If you post a question on any of these sites, you have no idea when, if ever, someone will respond.