

Master Technician

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IMHO

(In My Humble Opinion)

by Bob Freudenberger



Observation and Celebration

When I first got into automotive publishing (remember *Mechanix Illustrated*? I was “Tom Tappet”), I read somewhere that in 1955 there were 52 cars per mechanic in the U.S. How far we’ve come. According to the best numbers I’ve been able to find, today there are over 245 million registered vehicles, and something like one million working technicians (400,000 or so hold ASE certifications). Do the math. But there’s more to the story. In 1970, we as a people drove just over a trillion miles, but now we do almost three times that.

That tells me that cars are way better than they used to be. No more plugs, points, and condenser every spring and fall, tires go a lot longer than 10,000 miles, front end parts often last the life of the car, and when did you do your last ring and valve job?

So, does this mean the days of the professional auto service technician are numbered? Will cars become like disposable appliances that just keep on working until the day their owners decide it’s time for something new? I don’t believe so, at least not for a long, long time.

First, vehicles simply won’t last hundreds of thousands of miles without proper maintenance. For years, I’ve been saying that shops can’t sit around waiting for something to break. They’ve got to promote regular maintenance services. Not only LOFs, trans flushes, and coolant exchange, but also brake and power steering fluid changes. Then there’s whatever might be included in the anachronistically-named “tune-up,” from plug changes to intake tract cleaning. This will provide lots of employment far into the future.

Second, there are a few services where cars seem to be needier than they were in the past. Think about brakes, for example. In my recent experience, air conditioning and cooling systems appear to be growth areas, too.

Third, new cars are so expensive, people tend to hang on to their old ones for as long as possible. According to R. L. Polk & Co., the median age of passenger cars in operation increased to 9.4 years in 2008, a record high. No matter how great designs, materials and lubrication have become, something’s got to give sooner or later. Water and fuel pumps come to mind.

Finally, horrible accessibility problems in most modern vehicles and the vastly increased price of parts mean that when a repair is eventually required, the ticket will likely be big enough to pay the skilled tech needed to perform it enough to keep him or her interested in this profession.

This adds up to what may seem a counter-intuitive prediction from the Bureau of Labor Statistics: There’ll be a shortage of technicians through 2010 of at least 35,000 per year. It’s my opinion that this doesn’t mean a shortage of people willing to work on cars, but of true technicians with real skill. Like you.

Now for the celebration part. We’re blessed to have at least a dozen of the best people in automotive tech publishing on our editorial team. Names you know, such as Greg McConiga, Phil Fournier, John Anello, Chip Keen and Tom Nash, and some relatively new ones, such as Kerry Jonnson and Paul Cortes. To a man, we’re all deeply rooted in auto service with a couple of centuries of hand-on experience among us. We know how to provide you with truly helpful, real-world information that’s often actually fun to read. I don’t think any other publication can boast of such a great group of contributors. From the entire staff of Master Technician ONLINE, we thank you for your continued interest. It’s great to be back!

Hooray for me, hooray for you.