

Under the Hood



The newsletter of CATHERINE'S Auto Repair & Service

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SPRING 2005

Catherine's Corner

I've been thinking lately about how we talk to customers, including the information and options we provide. Not too long ago, our air conditioning stopped working at the Northside shop, so I called in a professional to diagnose the problem. After his inspection, he informed me that the compressor fuse kept blowing and I needed a whole new system, which would cost \$5000. Wait, what? There's got to be a bit more of an explanation for me to make the jump from a blown fuse to \$5000, but only with intense probing did I receive any answers. Needless



Photo by Fred Bennett

to say, I sought a second opinion. Although the second guy did agree with the first, I much preferred his approach – he walked me through the system, showing me what was wrong, pointing out other components that he believed would cause future troubles if not replaced, and then he gave me several choices on how we could proceed.

Shortly after that, we discovered major problems with our computer system (when it rains, it pours!), so I called in another professional. He examined our network, and then began speaking Greek to me. I heard something about a terminal server, routers, IP addresses, modems, pinging, disaster recovery, and other such foreign concepts. As my head began to hurt and my eyes glazed over, I stopped him and asked for just the basics – how much will this cost and how long will I be without my computers?

There are circumstances in which we desire lots of information and need various options, but then there are other times when all we want is

the bottom line. There are situations where you would like to understand what a caliper is or how an ignition module functions, but then there are days you might only care if it is broken and whether it absolutely has to be fixed. Let us know how much you want to know, and how we can best assist you in your decision-making process about vehicle repairs and maintenance.

As always, feel free to send comments, questions, compliments, or concerns to cs@catherinesautorepair.com.

Our Mission:

To provide high quality auto repair with integrity, honesty, and excellent customer service, all at a fair price and with a personal touch!

TRADE SECRETS:

HOW AUTOMOTIVE EMPLOYEES ARE PAID

by Catherine Simpson

We frequently receive feedback from customers that we are different from any auto repair shop they have ever been to. They say it's the people, the place, the general atmosphere – something they can't exactly put their finger on, we're just different (in a positive way, of course!). I know several things that make us unique, but there is one in particular that affects every interaction we have with our customers, that I believe is what leaves the "wow, that was different" feeling. It has to do with a behind-the-scenes industry secret – how automotive employees are paid. It wasn't until I began teaching car care classes that I realized most consumers are completely unaware of this issue. And when I started discussing it, I found they were grateful to be informed and wanted to understand more. So here is a brief explanation of the typical pay plans within the automotive field, why I don't like them, and what I do instead.

The overwhelming majority of auto repair shops, including independents, dealerships, tire stores, and other chains, pay their technicians with a system called "flat-rate". Essentially, the technician earns money by the repair job rather than by the hour. There exist several labor guides which list, for every year, make, and model vehicle from the past 20 years, the

number of hours it should reasonably take a skilled technician with good tools to complete various repairs. These guides assist us in providing customers with estimates for needed repairs. Obviously, you don't want us to fix your car and then call you up and tell you what it cost; you want to know a price in advance.

Just as these labor guides are consulted when making estimates, they are also used to figure flat-rate pay. For example, say the guidebook states that a certain brake job should take 2 hours to perform. The technician's wages will be calculated at 2 flat-rate hours regardless of whether he spends 1 hour or 3 hours on the job. Many techs do not consider it a good week unless they have "turned" between 60 and 100 hours in a week. A common goal is to have already "flagged" 8 hours by lunchtime. Although it is true that an experienced, master-level tech on a job where everything goes smoothly can easily beat flat-rate time and still deliver quality, I am wary of those who consistently bill out at 1 ½ to 2 times the actual hours worked.

Another popular method of pay in the automotive trade is commission. Technicians compensated this way, primarily at oil change, tune-up, or tire stores, are given a cut of the total parts and labor sold on a vehicle, sometimes on top of a minimum hourly guarantee. Or they might be given "spiffs", i.e., extra money for selling specific items, like a set of shocks, air filter or coolant flush. Most service advisors (the people who talk to you about your car) are also paid on a commission basis, a fixed percentage of their gross sales. As with the flat-rate above, the more

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TRADE SECRETS: HOW AUTOMOTIVE EMPLOYEES ARE PAID

work that is sold on a car, the more money the employees make, but this incentive also includes parts sales.

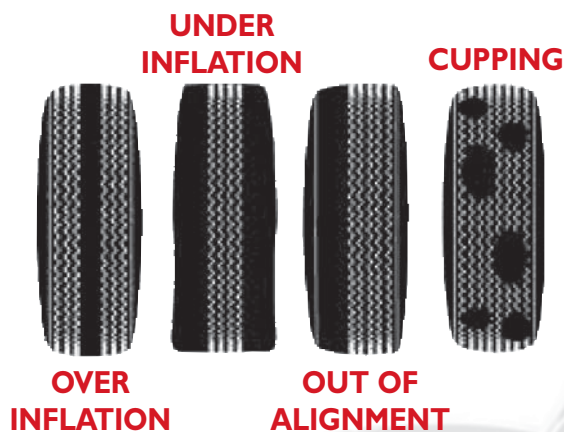
Employers generally choose these pay systems because they believe that the employees will be motivated to work harder, to sell more, and, in theory, to produce higher quality work (because if there is a “come-back” due to a mistake, the tech will have to redo the repair for free). However, based on what I saw at a dealership and another shop where I worked, and based on what I’ve learned through interviews with many techs and service advisors, I find several problems with the flat-rate and/or commission approach. It often encourages techs to work too fast and cut corners. It creates tension in the shop as techs argue over who is getting the “best” jobs. It hinders teamwork because if a tech has to stop what he’s doing to help another tech, he is no longer being paid for his time. It punishes employees with a smaller paycheck when a shop happens to go through a slow period. But my biggest complaint with this type of pay is that it usually leaves the employees focused primarily on time and money, rather than quality and customer service. A car begins to be viewed in terms of what it can do for the employee’s finances; the perspective shifts from “how can I best serve this customer’s needs” to

“how will this transaction best serve my needs”.

That is certainly not to say that every shop paying flat-rate or every employee on commission is bad or dishonest; there are some out there who can use it with integrity and fairness. But on the other hand, I’ve seen normally honest techs bow to temptation on a really slow week, maybe exaggerating the seriousness of a problem or overstating the urgency of a repair. I’ve seen upstanding service advisors resort to high-pressure sales pitches and scare tactics when their numbers were down. When what is best for the customer is potentially at odds with what is best for the employee, there is a conflict of interest and objectivity becomes difficult.

This is why I have always and will always pay my employees on a straight hourly/salary basis. They prefer knowing they have a good, steady paycheck, and that it will stay that way regardless of whether they are performing an oil change or replacing an engine, whether they are selling a light bulb or an alternator. I prefer knowing that I don’t need to question their motives if they do find that a car needs a lot of work and they sell a big ticket. And I believe that you, the customer, prefer knowing that we truly have your best interest in mind.

AND THE WHEELS GO ROUND...



National Tire Safety Week is April 24 – 30, so we thought it would be a good time to talk about tires – tire tread, tire wear, tire pressures, alignments, and balancing. When it comes to tire safety, you absolutely must have good tread and good air pressure. A tire is considered worn out when there is 1/16th inches of tread remaining, but recommended replacement is slightly before that, at 3/32nd inches. So how in the world would you know when you’re there? For one easy tip involving a penny, check out our Fall 2003 issue in the newsletter archive section of our website, www.catherinesautorepair.com. Or you can look for the “wear bars” on your tire. These are narrow strips of rubber built in to the tire, running across the tread at several spots around the tire, which begin to show up as the tread wears down. When the tread becomes flush with the wear bars, or just above them, it is time to replace your tires.

Ideally if the tires remain properly inflated, aligned, rotated, and balanced, the tread should wear evenly across the tire. But that is not always the case, so it’s good to know how to read your tire wear. Heavier wear in the center of the tire indicates the tire has been over inflated, while

more wear on both edges of the tire shows under inflation. If you see the wear on only one edge of the tire, that usually means the wheels are out of alignment. And if you find erratic tread wear with high and low spots all over the tire (also called “cupping”), that is a sign of either unbalanced wheels or bad suspension parts. And finally, if you ever notice a bubble or bulge on the sidewall of your tire, have it checked out immediately. The radial belt inside the tire has probably separated, either due to a defect or hitting a curb, and can be dangerous.



A good habit to get into is checking your tire pressures on a monthly basis, while the tires are cold, and adjusting the pressure as needed. How do you know what the pressure reading should be? The manufacturer’s recommended tire pressure will be printed either on the front door jamb of your vehicle, in the glove compartment, or in the owner’s manual. Do not fill your tires to the number shown on the outside of your tire. That is the maximum tire pressure allowed for that particular tire, not the recommended pressure.

We often hear confusion over the difference between a wheel alignment and a wheel balance, and questions about why and how often the tires should be rotated. The wheels being out of balance usually cause a vibration or shimmy while driving, especially at highway speeds. Balancing the tires involves attaching small weights at various points around the wheel to offset any heavy spots on the tire. The wheels being out of alignment usually cause either a pull to one side while driving, or uneven and premature tire wear. Performing an alignment involves adjusting certain angles, or position of the wheels relative to the road and to the rest of the car, to meet manufacturer specifications. Rotating tires is important because the front and rear tires wear at different rates (the fronts normally much faster) due to their different functions with respect to steering and braking. A good general recommendation is to rotate tires every 6000 or 7000 miles, or an easy guideline is every other oil change.

employee spotlight

Rebecca Gladden



Rebecca is the general office manager for both the Piedmont and Northside shops. She was born and raised in Atlanta and attended Riverwood high school where she and Ansley Hegman (one of our service advisors, currently on maternity leave) were best friends. She went on to major in child and family development at Georgia Southern University and graduated in May 2003. She came to us via Ansley in August 2003 because

she needed some part-time work while taking classes at Kennesaw, pre-requisites for her ultimate goal, nursing school. Becca's strengths – organization, attention to detail, and basically taking care of everything – were exactly what we needed, so we just kept adding duties to her job description until she was helping us full-time.

Now she has been accepted to nursing school, and we are thrilled for her but sad for us that her last day at Catherine's will be in early July. She will be living on St. Simons Island while attending a 2-year program at Coastal Georgia Community College in Brunswick. She is often behind-the-scenes and many of you have never met her, but she is such an important part of both shops that we wanted to be sure and recognize her before she leaves. She will certainly be difficult to replace, but we are currently accepting applications for the position.

car care classes

Have you ever felt helpless when your battery was dead or if you had a flat tire? Have you always wanted to take the mystery out of lifting your car's hood and having a look around? Have you wanted to feel more empowered when discussing your car with a repair shop? Well then, come join us!!

QUOTES FROM PREVIOUS CLASS PARTICIPANTS INCLUDE:

"Excellent!"

"Extremely helpful"

"The handout that Catherine made is the best!"

"This class was great! Very knowledgeable and presented in an easy to understand way, with not making anyone feel that they had a dumb question."

"I learned so much and everyone was so friendly and eager to answer questions!"

The upcoming class is open to men, women, and teenagers, and will be held on Saturday, May 21, from 9:00 am until 12:30 pm at the Northside Drive location. There is no charge for this class, and breakfast/snacks will be provided. We recommend that you wear comfortable clothes that you don't mind getting dirty. Please call 404-817-7640 to sign up as space is limited.

shop talk

CLARK HOWARD WOULD BE PLEASED



A lot of you have been asking about buying another annual maintenance package, which we discontinued. But now we have something that we think is even better – and easier! It's simply an oil change card that we stamp every time you come to us for an oil change, and after 4, you get the 5th one free. You don't have to buy anything up front; it is good at either shop; it is transferable between vehicles and households; it never expires; and it saves you money! Ask us for one the next time you come in.

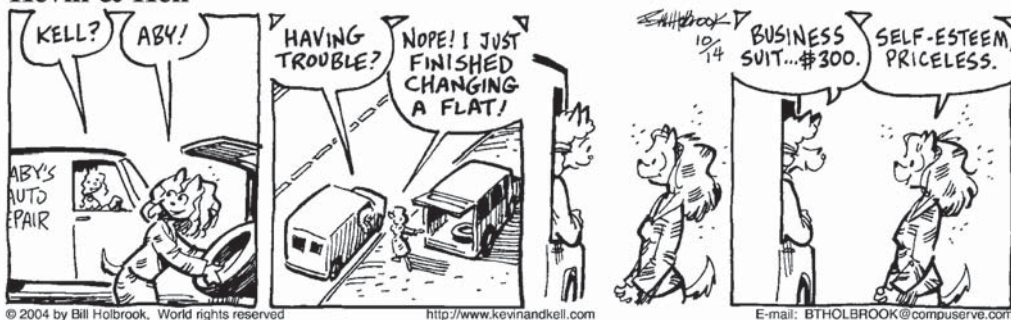
On top of that great deal, we have a wonderful tire deal for you too. Now when you buy a set of tires from us (okay, we'll even count two tires as a set), you'll get FREE tire rotation and balancing every 6000 or 7000 miles for the life of the tires. We'll also be offering road hazard insurance when you buy your tires, ranging from \$5 - \$12 per tire, depending on the cost of the tire. Don't you just hate it when you ruin a brand new tire by running over a nail or hitting a curb? With road hazard warranty, we will repair your tire (when possible) at no charge or replace it with another tire – at no cost if you have at least 75% of usable tire tread remaining, and pro-rated beyond that. Also, this insurance company provides free 24-hour roadside assistance for changing your flat tire so you can make it to the closest participating store (which would hopefully be us) and get your warranty. AND, as if all that was not enough, we're making both of these tire deals retroactive for anyone who has bought tires from us in the past year and would like to be included from now on.

LET'S GO SHOPPING



Many of you have commented on how much you love the Catherine's shirts that our office staff wears and that you would like to buy one too. Well, now here's your chance! Go to www.landsend.com/business and pick any product that you want. Then call Ansley at 404-840-9908 by May 31, 2005 with the item number, style, color, size, and quantity that you would like, and we will place the order. You pay for the product, we will pay for the logo. And don't worry if you miss this round, we will make another order in the fall.

Kevin & Kell



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SPECIALS

APPAREL

car quiz

Question:

If I turn on my AC and warm air blows out of the vents, this could mean any of the following except:

- The compressor clutch is not engaging due to an electrical problem.
- There is a leak somewhere and the system is low on coolant.
- The climate control blend door or cable is broken.
- It is time for a maintenance AC system service.

Answer:

Okay, this was kind of a trick question – all of the above could cause your AC not to work, but only if you substitute the word “refrigerant” for “coolant” in answer (b). This is a very common misunderstanding; coolant (also known as antifreeze) is a fluid used to keep the engine cool and is not part of the AC system. R134 refrigerant (or R12 “freon” for 1993 and older models) is a gas contained inside the AC system that creates cold air when it is transformed into a liquid and back to a gas again. If there is a leak somewhere in the system, possibly as minor as a hose or O-ring, or as major as the compressor, condenser, or evaporator, then the refrigerant will escape into the atmosphere, leaving you with warm air. To find the leak, we usually need to add some refrigerant back into the system, along with a bit of AC dye, and then pinpoint the defective part using both an ultraviolet light detector and an electronic “sniffer”. Sometimes a leak doesn’t show up, which means the refrigerant has probably seeped out slowly over time, and a simple AC service should be enough to get things cool again, as in answer (d). And of course, if upon initial inspection we find the system full of refrigerant, then we look for either an electrical or mechanical problem, like the examples (a) and (c) above. If you discover your AC isn’t giving you a chill this spring, come see us now for a diagnosis before the hot days of summer arrive.

tech tip

Is it time for “spring cleaning” in your home? Don’t forget about your car – it deserves a good cleaning now and then too. Here are a few helpful hints to keep your automobile looking as good as new.

WASH – Start with a good hand wash.

Tip – Using a mild dish soap (no harsh detergents) will do wonders, and works just as well as most store bought brands.

WAX – Always use a liquid wax; it is easier to apply and remove.

Tip – Apply the wax with a slightly damp rag, and then switch to a dry, soft terry cloth towel to buff to a shine.

INTERIOR – Wipe everything down using a bucket of warm water and a half cup of sudsy lemon ammonia.

Tip – Sprinkle the carpet and floor mats with baking soda, and let sit for about an hour before vacuuming. This should help remove stale odors.

These tips are brought to you by our friends at California Auto Buff, a full service auto detail center. You can contact them for more information or to make an appointment at 404-266-0580 or www.californiaautobuff.com.

For more information and to try our Online Appointment Scheduling

www.catherinesautorepair.com

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LOOK
Inside:

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