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The Basics

Steer clear of auto-repair scams

Don't get taken by an unscrupulous shop. Here are tips on how to find superior, certified mechanics, plus steps to take if think you've been ripped off.

By Lucy Lazarony, Bankrate.com

Do you trust your auto mechanic?

If you do, consider yourself lucky. Complaints against auto repair shops fall near the top of consumer complaint lists every year.

"I hear it from everybody, old, young, men and women," says Jeannette Kopko, senior vice president at the Better Business Bureau in Dallas. "They get frustrated and they get scared."

Some folks pay through the nose for shoddy repair work. Others complain about crummy customer service. Still others are victims of outright fraud.

"In the area of auto repair, you see just about everything," says John Dingman, program representative for the Bureau of Automotive Repair in California.

Here's a closer look at some common auto repair rip-offs and what you can do to avoid them.

Beware the bait-and-switch

Many auto scams begin with a super-low price on a specific repair job. The shop reels in a customer with an advertised special, say, on brakes, and then pads the work order with several other repairs.

"They advertise a certain job at a certain price and you go in and they say you need this, this and this," Kopko says. "It's almost like bait and switch."

These lowball, not-to-be trusted specials happen with engine and transmission repairs as well. Dingman has seen cases where a \$699 repair grew to almost \$3,000.

"The work is not good. They up the price. They find all kinds of things," Dingman says. "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

Some repair shops charge customers for parts and never place them in the car. Other shops make the repair but do such a poor job that the customer has to bring the car back three or four times.

If you think you've been a victim of an auto repair scam, report the shop to your state attorney general's office and local consumer protection agency. File a complaint with the Better Business Bureau.

Gather up all paperwork, receipts, work orders, written estimates and warranty information from the repair shop. The more documentation you have, the better.

Danger! Crooked mechanic ahead

Not sure if a repair shop is on the up and up? Look for these warning signs:

- An unprofessional atmosphere. Are the service technicians impatient or condescending? Are they reluctant to answer your questions? Do they try to pressure or scare you into making decisions? If so, you're better off leaving. This is not the kind of repair shop that you can trust.
- A sloppy, chaotic work area. "Look at the appearance of the shop," Dingman says. "Good, responsible shops should be neat and organized with modern equipment."
- An ever-growing repair bill. Does a simple, routine repair become complicated and expensive? "All of a sudden the work is three or four times the advertised price," Kopko says. "That might be a sign of caution."
- Nothing comes in writing. Is the shop willing to give you a work order or estimate in writing? Are its labor rates clearly posted? What kind of warranty does the shop place on its repairs? Ask for a written copy. "If somebody is not willing to stand behind their work that puts up a big, red flag," says John Nielsen, director of AAA's Approved Auto Repair Network.

Now that you know how to spot some of the signs of a shady repair shop, how do you go about finding a good shop that's right for you and right for your car?

Finding a good wrench

Start by asking friends, family, co-workers and neighbors about auto repair shops they'd recommend. How long have they gone there and for what repairs? Did they ever have to go back for the same problem twice? And most importantly, how does the shop treat its customers?

A lot of folks have a bad experience with a repair shop because of poor communication. The customer wasn't clear in describing the problem, or the mechanic wasn't clear in explaining the need and cost of the repairs or both.

"How much initiative do they take? Do they offer to give you an estimate? Do they let you talk directly to the mechanic?" asks Robert Krughoff, president of Consumers' Checkbook, a nonprofit consumer information service. "Do they give you an invoice saying what they did and what parts they used?"

Choose a repair shop with certified technicians. Look for mechanics that are certified by the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence. ASE certified mechanics must pass comprehensive exams and must be recertified every five years.

Want a repair staff with tip-top training? Consider a shop with an ASE Blue Seal of Excellence. To qualify as an ASE Blue Seal repair shop, at least 75% of the technicians must be ASE-certified and at least one technician must be ASE-certified for each repair service offered by the shop.

You can also track down a reliable repair shop through AAA's Approved Auto Repair. AAA screens each shop for reliability, honesty, fair pricing and training of mechanics. ASE-certified technicians perform repairs. AAA members receive guaranteed written estimates, a free, 24-point safety inspection with any paid repair and a minimum 12-month or 12,000-

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mile warranty on any repair.

Just because a garage is certified doesn't mean it's free of problems or you have nothing to worry about. Before taking your car in, check out the shop with the Better Business Bureau. Be sure to ask about any consumer complaints.

Another way to narrow down your mechanic search is to choose a garage that specializes in your kind of car. Got a Honda? Why not take your car to a repair shop that only repairs Hondas?

"Make sure the shop you go to is familiar with your car," Dingman says. "A lot of shops now specialize in European, Asian or domestic cars."

Shop for service before you're in hot water

The best time to shop around for a good mechanic is when you don't need one.

"Don't wait until you're in an emergency situation to find a good place to take your car," Nielsen says.

Why not test out a different repair shop each time you change your oil until you find one that you really like? Liking the staff is important. You've got to feel comfortable talking to the mechanic and it's got to be somebody that you feel you can trust. "If you can't trust somebody it's a recipe for disaster," Nielsen says.

That's why it's so important to search until you find a repair shop with a qualified mechanic that you feel you can trust. It will save you a whole lot of stress the next time a major repair comes up.

"Find a shop before you're in trouble and establish a relationship with them," Nielsen says. "And that will go so far."