

Today's Auto Repair

with Chip Stewart

-Incompetence or Fraud?- Part 2

In part one, I reported on a two-year study undertaken by the FTC on the causes of auto repair complaints. The FTC concludes that "incompetent mechanics" are to blame while the "lack of consumer knowledge" contributes. I, as well as most of my associates, have spent a lifetime of study and practice to avoid just that kind of stigma yet it prevails. A sad commentary on the industry, indeed. However, it is *my* industry and I will continue to defend it, so I would like to discuss the matter in more depth.

First of all, let's put everything in its proper perspective. Everyone makes mistakes. The trade that's probably the most highly regarded on the planet has *malpractice insurance!* And, a lot of lawyers lose their case when they shouldn't. (The O.J. Simpson prosecutors *lost* and got a *bonus* - duh? - nice job if you can get it!) Well, I don't know much about these professions but I *do* know about *mine*.

Did you ever buy a new car or know someone that did? - probably. Was it ever necessary to use the new car warranty or was there ever a recall on the vehicle? - probably. Have you ever heard the comments "poor design" or "we can't do anything about it - they're all like that"? - of course you have. So, right off the bat, we have "incompetent" vehicles. Now, let's take these vehicles and expose them to the elements; heat, cold, wet, dirt, salt, pollutants of all kinds. Drive them at sixty miles an hour over "incompetent" road surfaces for 80 or 100 thousand miles. Bounce in and out of potholes and ditches. Slam doors and hoods. Bang into other vehicles every once in a while. What do you suppose is going to happen to the stuff those vehicles are made of? Miles of wiring, hundreds of electrical and ground connections, thousands of semi-conductors, bushings, bearings, clutches, brakes, steering linkages, gears, motors, engines - tens of thousands of individual parts are going to wear. Some will break - "incompetent" materials, you see. Problems are created. Sometimes these problems are easy to find and fix. Sometimes they are difficult. Sometimes they are impossible.

Automotive technicians are trained to take care of these problems - even the "impossible" ones. They're a prideful lot and they hate to have a problem elude them so they often go to extremes to effect a repair. Now, *there's* the rub. Are you, the owner of a "broken" vehicle, willing to *pay* the *competent* mechanic/facility for their expertise? Remember now - you're going to have to pay for their education, tools, training, insurance, library, technical support, overhead, equipment, inventory, office staff, and every other cost involved in professional automotive repair, be it a dealership, a chain or an independent. Are you willing to take the time required to *search* for that *competent* mechanic/facility? Remember now - you'll have to look for their certifications and affiliations, find out about their insurance and warranties, check out their appearance and library, and ask around for recommendations. Or, will you let the news media scare you into thinking that you'll not get your car fixed correctly no matter what and then call every repair facility in the phone book until you get the lowest price? The thinking here is something like, "Since I'm going to get ripped off anyway, I might as well get ripped off for as little as possible." Well, guess what? That's where "Mr. Incompetent" lives! How

many times have you heard that you get what you pay for? It's easy to repair a car cheap when you do it wrong.

Of course, now you run into another problem - how much should a quality repair cost? That depends - and that's another area where mechanics get blamed for incompetence. More on this subject in "part 3".