

PRO SHOP

## You have to be able to trust your mechanic

By James Whitters, Globe Correspondent | June 11, 2006

When John Paul began fixing cars three decades ago, the mechanic known as AAA's Car Doctor says all it took was a repair manual, a well-stocked toolbox, and some elbow grease to diagnose most mechanical problems.

Thanks to today's high-tech cars, those do-it-yourself days are over.

"Cars now have enough computer technology to fly a 747," says Paul, 51, an Abington resident who hosts the "Car Doctor" radio program on WTTT-AM 1150 and is AAA Southern New England's manager of public affairs. "You need to download a million pages of information and have all sorts of sophisticated tools and computers to work on them."

Americans spent about \$140 billion on car repair last year, according to the Automotive Aftermarket Industry Association, a Bethesda, Md., trade group. Add tires and aftermarket equipment and the figure climbs to \$200 billion.

Paul says today's complex cars make finding a capable, trustworthy, and affordable mechanic a must.

"There's a saying: The two most important relationships in life are with your doctor and your auto mechanic," he says. "I'm sure spouse is in there somewhere, too."

Paul suggests starting a search for a mechanic by asking friends and family where they take their cars for service.

"The best recommendations always come by word of mouth," he says. "If you've just moved to a new neighborhood, go over to the guy next door and ask where he brings his car. That's where you usually get the best information."

Paul says it's always a good idea to inspect a shop before taking your car in for its first visit. Check to make sure it is clean, well organized, and has a professional air about it. He suggests visiting at the end of the day so you can talk to customers and gauge their attitude when they pick up their cars.

"Is it, Mr. Jones, your car is all set, and we'll see you back here in 8,000 miles for the brakes? Or is it, 'What do you mean the bill is \$1,000? No one called me about that problem.'"

When you select a mechanic, Paul recommends starting off with a minor service such as an oil change or a wheel alignment. That way, he says, you can get a feel for the shop before committing to a major repair.

"Go with your gut reaction," he says. "If they start giving you a laundry list of things that need work right away, or it just doesn't sound right, hold off. Have them write up a list and take it someplace else for a second opinion. Rely on your common sense and intuition."

Paul has one more important piece of advice for car owners: When you take your car in for service, be as descriptive as you can about what's wrong without trying to diagnose the problem.

“The better you can describe what's wrong, the better service you're going to get,” Paul says. “If you try to diagnose it yourself, you could open the door for some unneeded work or lead the mechanic in the wrong direction.

“A good mechanic is a sleuth, but needs the right clues to solve the problem.” ■