

Business

How to keep a mechanic out of the cookie jar

By PASHA CARROLL
SUN REPORTER

You are cruising down U.S. Highway 98 when your car starts to creak, clank, sputter and shut down.

Besides praying to stay alive as cars buzz by at 60 mph, fixing the car's ailment is the next thing that comes to mind. If you are a new driver, on vacation or recently relocated, finding the right mechanic can be a draining task, both on your pocket book and your nerves.

Local Walton County automotive businesses offered some tips to stay sane while finding the right mechanic.

Listen to your friends

The experts agree that chatting with a neighbor, friend or even the tow truck driver will usually lead you to a good mechanic.

"The best thing is word of mouth-friends and neighbors," Darrel Johnson, the manager of field operations at AAA said.

"(Some) mechanics have been waiting on some people for years," Ralph Infinger, the assistant manager at Taylor Parts Inc., DeFuniak Springs, said. Both men agree that it is those people who will know which shops do the best work and are most reliable and honest.

Not all shops are the same

"When you get sick and get different opinions from different kinds of doctors, it is the same thing in different mechanics," Bill Clark, the owner

of Freeport Auto Parts said. "Some are better at exhaust and some are better at electrical work."

Infinger agreed that specialists are a good choice if the problem has been pinpointed.

For example a specialist in transmission work would be more efficient to work on a vehicle that has transmission problems.

The writing is on the wall and in the parking lot

"You can get a sense of who they are by what is on the wall," Martin Lawson, the director of Public Relations at the National Institute for Automotive Services Excellence (ASE) said. If a garage has been involved in the community, has received customer service awards and training it will probably be framed, he said. Also look for the garage policies, fees, labor rate and guarantees on the walls, Lawson said.

While a garage will not be "hospital clean," Lawson noted that a good business will be neat and well organized. AAA looks at the customer waiting area and surveys customer experience before getting AAA approved, Johnson said.

"Check out the parking lot too," he said. If it is empty, they don't do much business, but if it is full and busy, lots of people rely on that shop.

Look specifically for ASE certification

Most of those interviewed for this article agreed that perhaps the most important thing to



Some hourly labor rates around town

Scotty's Auto Repair	\$60.00
Freeport Auto Center	\$41.87
Prescott's Automotive	\$40.00
John John Automotive	\$70.00
L&H Automotive and Collision	\$49.50
Better Business Bureau of Northwest Florida	1-800-729-9226
Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services	1-800-435-7352

spot in a garage is an ASE certification. ASE certifies individual mechanics, not shops, but if an employer requires a mechanic to be ASE certified, it is a sign that they take pride in their business, Lawson said.

AAA does not give the stamp of approval to a shop unless its technicians

are ASE certified, Johnson said.

Allen Eichenberg, the manager at Advanced Auto Parts, DeFuniak Springs, said that ASE certification means a mechanic has been through the proper training.

Clark said that certification is good but not absolutely necessary.

Good customer service means good work

"If you feel ignored, rushed or condescended it is wise to find a different facility," Lawson said.

He said that taking time with a mechanic and communicating the problem sounds and the car's symptoms are important. Lawson also recommends finding alternate transportation so that you don't choose a garage based solely on location or the amount of time it will take to fix your car.

"Call the Better Business Bureau, check for complaints and the mechanic's record," Chuck Marino, the manager and mechanic at Precision Automotive Services, DeFuniak Springs said.

"No matter how big or small (the shop is), you should be looking where customers get treated right," Johnson said.

Know what you are getting into

"Check guarantees, warranties, labor rates and their capability to work on your kind of car," Johnson suggests.

"Know the exact time and money the job will take," Clarke said. "Then count your pennies."

"There are no standard shop (or labor) fees, there are different prices," Infinger said. Ask a garage what their labor cost is, how much the part being fixed or replaced is and how much time the job will take. That way, you can roughly estimate the cost of repair.

Infinger said that shops are required to write an estimate for the work that they will do. He suggests looking over the estimate carefully.

Check them out after you choose them

"We suggests that consumers check with the Better Business Bureau to find out if (the shop) has a reliability report," Mary Gallaher, a bureau operations specialist at the BBB suggests.

She also recommends that consumers check with the State Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, motor vehicle registration division to check if the garage has a proper license.

Johnson also recommended checking a shop's history online at BBB and AAA websites.

Continuity increases satisfaction

A good shop is hard to find, but when you do find one, remember to use it next time.

And remember, "When you find a good shop, stick with it. They know the vehicle's history and the work that has been done. It gets more like a personal relationship. You become a good customer," Johnson advised.



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