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## **Do You Have A Great Mechanic?** **By Chris Bjorklund, The Savvy Consumer for Diamond Certified**

One of the most important parts of our daily lives is being able to commute to work, school and other activities in a safe, reliable, well-maintained car. When your car breaks down, your life can literally come to a screeching halt until you find a mechanic you can trust to take care of the problem. But finding that jewel of a mechanic can be very discouraging – especially if you, like most of us, have had a negative car repair experience.

I'm often asked what you should look for in a repair shop and, based on interviews with mechanics and customers, have developed the following checklist.

- **Does the shop specialize in your model of car?** We all know that going to the dealer to get your car serviced is going to be more expensive – after all, that's where they make the lion's share of their profits. Finding an independent shop that specializes in your make of vehicle can save you money, but you might also find that they'll try harder to keep you as a customer. A friend of mine had become accustomed to taking his car to the dealer for repairs because he'd been disappointed with other shops' work. But, when he showed a dealer technician a rattling side mirror that he thought they could just tighten, he was told the mirror would have to be replaced to the tune of about \$200. My friend decided he could live with the rattle. Sometime later he happened to be walking by an auto repair shop full of cars like his. Turns out they specialized in the make. When his car needed brakes, he took it there instead and mentioned the mirror. They were able to tighten it at no charge and the brake job was cheaper by \$100 or so, too. Needless to say, this is where he takes his car for service now.

- **Are the employees courteous and responsive?** Historically, all aspects of the automotive industry have suffered from a macho attitude and repair shops are no exception. This can result in minimal communication about what exactly they plan to do to your car. Don't accept this. If the manager is unwilling to explain verbally and in writing on your work order what services they'll perform and how much it will cost beforehand, put your ride in reverse and find another shop. In addition, state law requires that they call you before any major repairs are made to get your approval first. When you pick up your car there should be no surprises.

- **Does your mechanic keep you from having unnecessary work done?** It's all well and good to be proactive about car maintenance, but often times diagnosing your car's problems is better left to professionals. I remember once being absolutely sure I needed new brakes and brought my car to my mechanic. After an inspection, he said I didn't need the work for another 5,000 miles. We also asked for advice on painting our 1969 VW bug. Since the car was so old he recommended getting just a basic paint job to prevent rust from developing and so we did. Of course, it's easy to become attached to old cars (just ask my husband), but eventually it's not worth making repairs, as they'll outweigh the value of the car. Even though he's losing out

on the repair bill, my mechanic has let us know when it's not worth it to keep a clunker on life support.

- **Trust your instincts.** If you pull into a repair shop and it takes seemingly forever for someone to greet you, the place is a mess and there's loud music blaring, keep driving. Chances are you wouldn't purchase any other goods and services from a place run like a barnyard, why lower your standards just because it's an auto repair shop? Believe it or not, there are plenty of mechanics capable of making the experience a pleasant one. A simple way to judge a repair shop is as easy as looking at its parking lot – are the cars in it similar in value to what you're driving or is it full of rusting Studebakers? Another telltale sign? Clearly posted hourly labor rates, guarantees, and payment method options – look for them.

- **Be willing to put the time in to get a second opinion.** Another acquaintance of mine has a car with a trunk lid that wouldn't close flush. He took it to a repair shop that told him they couldn't fix it and would probably require bodywork. The shop didn't offer a referral and, turned off by the service, the car owner did nothing and continued to drive around with a trunk that wouldn't shut. Fed up with the inconvenience and insecurity, he finally decided to get a second opinion and took the car to another shop that was more than happy to fix the problem, simply adjusting the sensors in the trunk latch for a mere \$200

- **Look for the Diamond Certified Symbol and Other Certifications.** Just as various shops specialize in different models, they also specialize in performing various services. Look for Diamond Certified shops, because you'll know that they have been independently rated highest in quality for customer satisfaction. And, they are backed by Diamond Certified's performance guarantee and a local list can be found at [HYPERLINK "http://www.diamondcertified.org"](http://www.diamondcertified.org) [www.diamondcertified.org](http://www.diamondcertified.org). We all know about the major chain repair companies that focus on mufflers, brakes or tune-ups, but independent shops often specialize as well. Before pulling into a repair shop, call and find out what services they perform. Also, keep an eye out for signs indicating that the shop is AAA-approved and that its technicians are certified by organizations such as the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE). If a shop has these stamps of approval they won't be shy about it – be on the look-out for prominently placed plaques.

- **Start small.** If you're new to a shop, don't start off the relationship with a complete engine overhaul or valve job. Let them do a routine tune-up or flush out the radiator first and see how they do. If you're pleased with the service, chances are you'll be back for more complex and demanding work. But, if they can't handle a simple oil change, you'll know not to come back.

- **Be willing to go the extra mile.** Like the over-priced "convenience" store just around the corner, oftentimes the repair shop closest to you is not always your best choice. If you can't get someone to follow you and give you a ride back from a shop further away that specializes in your make or problem, take the bus or catch a cab back home or to work. Remember, most auto repair shops think they can handle your problem no matter what it is, so it's doubtful they'll turn you away – that's like a restaurant refusing you a table because they don't think they'll be able satisfy your hunger. So, don't put convenience at the top of your list in looking for a mechanic. Even if it means going across town, it'll be worth it in the end to get the job done right the first time.