

Better owner-mechanic dialog essential

AIC says complexity of cars can lead to misunderstanding over actual need for car maintenance

More households own cars than own television sets, washers, dryers or air conditioners, and there are more than twice as many cars as houses in this country, according to the Automotive Information Council (AIC).

No other consumer product is as complicated or as misunderstood as the family car, a misunderstanding that sometimes leads to frustration when automotive service is involved.

A popular belief is that auto service is simply a matter of "take out the old part and put in a new one," much like replacing a tube in a television set. In truth, the possible combinations of problem causes and solutions are so infinite that no two may be exactly the same.

Three important factors
Auto service involves three very important factors, according to AIC: vehicle complexity, necessary judgment decisions by the service technician and communications between the service technician and the vehicle owner.

Today's vehicles are extremely complex. The automobile has about 15,000 parts and more than five miles of electrical wiring. Many of its components and systems depend on interrelated parts to function properly, like the steering and suspension system, for example.

Further complicating auto service today are increasingly more sophisticated government-required emission control devices and safety equipment, plus popular consumer options like air conditioning, power steering and power brakes.

Note special skills
This doesn't include the special skills and knowledge required to service today's cars. For one technician to service your entire car, he would have to be an electrician, glass cutter, welder, air conditioning technician and radio repairman.

In addition to basic mechanical ability, he would require a knowledge of physics, chemistry, mathematics, hydraulics, as well as the knowledge he must have to use precision measuring tools to locate,

diagnose and apply correct technical information to problem solving.

The second factor is judgment.

About shock absorbers
There is no practical way in the shop to simulate the way shock absorbers actually work under driving conditions, so technicians must use a certain amount of judgment. Most shocks lose their effectiveness after about 20 or 25 thousand miles—sometimes sooner.

It's easy to make clean-cut repair or replacement decisions that don't involve judgment—a broken spring or a bald tire. But it's more difficult—and subject to more second guessing—when the repair or replacement decision calls for a value judgment based on experience.

Judgment decisions usually are more difficult in the case of older, high mileage cars. As the car ages, repair costs invariably go up and trade-in value goes down. At some point the car owner may have to face a repair job that'll cost more than his car's worth.

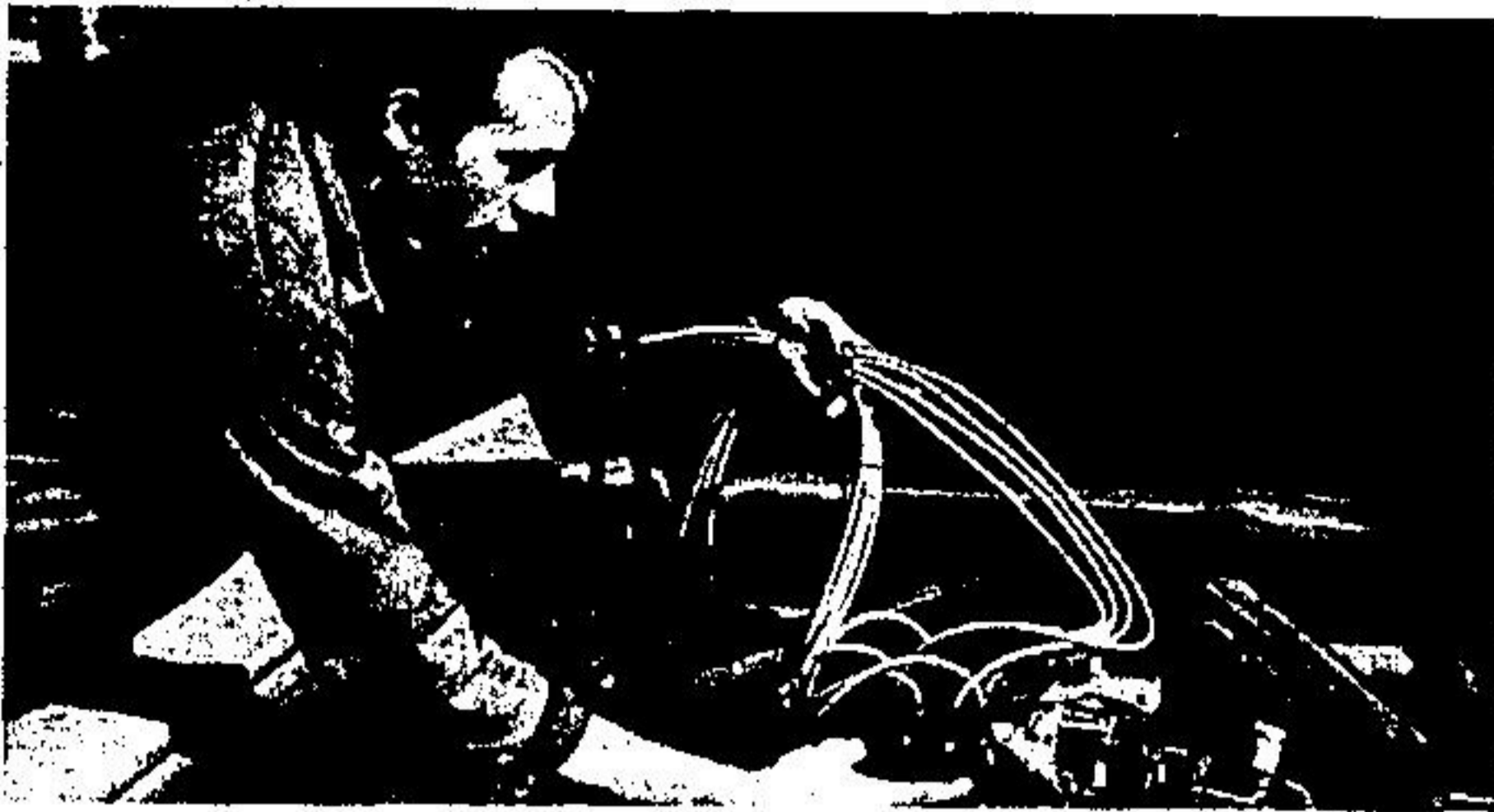
Consider the technician
But if a sympathetic technician recommends too little service to keep the cost down on an older car, he may not solve the problem. If, on the other hand, he recommends a complete overhaul to solve the problem, the car owner may think he is being sold more repair work than he thinks he needs.

The third factor in auto service is communications.

To diagnose and solve vehicle problems or to satisfy specific customer service requests, the technician must be given as much information as possible. Conversely, the car owner has to understand exactly what work must—or may have to—be done to satisfy the need.

Poor communication often results in consumer dissatisfaction.

This is an example of a breakdown in communications: A motorist takes his car to a service shop, says he's taking a long trip and wants a complete tune-up. In his mind, a complete tune-up means replacing the points, plugs and condenser, and adjusting the



Not spaghetti—spark plug wiring is among the most overlooked replacement items in a car's ignition system. Since wiring can deteriorate, most competent auto service people will check it routinely as part of a tune-up. In the interest of better communication between car owners and service personnel, the Automotive Information Council urges that both parties thoroughly discuss all possible service needs such as wiring before the job is done.

carburetor.

May need parts
To a top-notch service technician, a complete tune-up includes everything under the hood related to normal engine operation, and might require — if necessary — replacing the distributor cap and rotor, spark plug wires, overhauling the carburetor, adjusting valves and replacing worn belts. The car may run better than ever, but because of a communications problem, the car owner is unhappy when the bill is higher than he expected.

The more you know about your car and how it operates, the better you will understand its complexity and appreciate the judgment decisions that the service technician has to make. Good communications between you and the technician also will result in greater service satisfaction.

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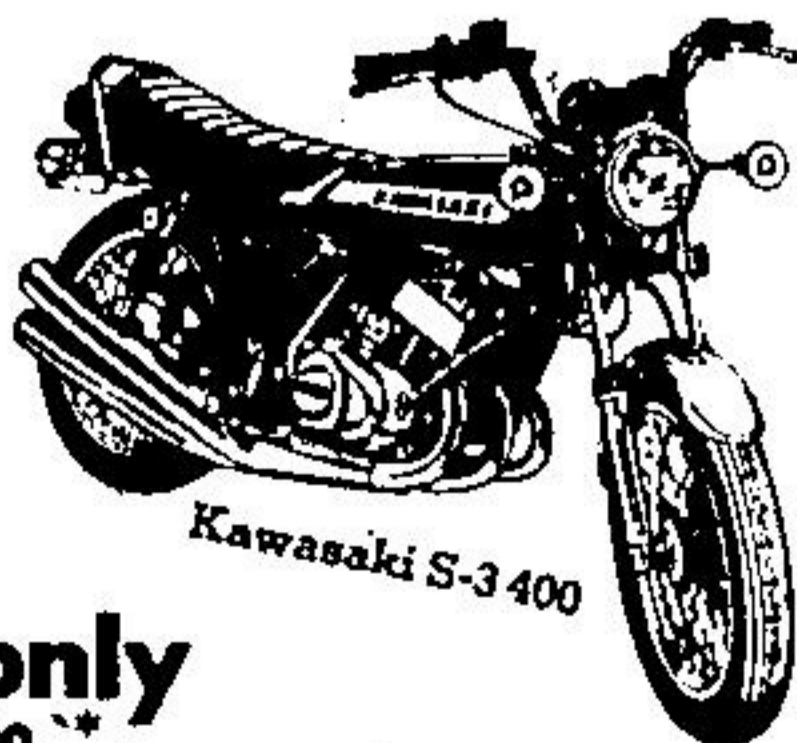
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