

# LEMMIE JUST CHECK UNDER THE HOOD

By Kenneth E. Seaton



**F**OR MANY OF US THIS MAY SOON BECOME JUST A FLEETING MEMORY OF DAYS GONE BY. WE'LL SAY, DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN A MECHANIC WAS A MECHANIC AND NOT AN AUTO TECHNICIAN.

Perhaps we'll think of that time when we heard that strange sound coming out from under the hood. Maybe it was when we experienced a sudden surge/drop in power, or it was that time when we had that feeling that something was amiss with "Betsy".

We'll recall how we pulled into our local garage and listened to the oil stained, overall wearing mechanic utter that once or so familiar phrase, Lemmie, just check under the hood!

Still, that was then and this is now. Today, instead of a greasy overall wearing mechanic, it's more than likely that a technician type person, in a spotless white lab coat will want to check under the dash. They'll be looking for a plug-in port so that they can connect a laptop computer or some other form of scanning device to your vehicle. This'll enable them to perform a quick vehicle assessment, merely by interfacing with the new on-board technology.

Now, you may be wondering, just how much new technology there is actually up and running in your new family vehicle? Well,

according to London's Institute of Physics virtually every modern vehicle is outfitted with more computing power than the system that was used to fly the Apollo spacecraft to the moon in 1969.

While new technology is designed to make our car driving experiences easier, and so much safer, someone has to pay for it! Auto repair shop owners have seen their operating costs rise in sync with the release of new technology. So, they must adapt or close their doors. The same goes for mechanics – oops sorry – auto repair technicians, who must now constantly having to upgrade their skill sets or find a new line of work.

## NEW CAR SALES SOAR

In 2015 auto makers in both Canada and the United States celebrated a banner year in new vehicle sales. According to The Globe and Mail Canadian auto makers delivered 1.898 million vehicles last year, the third-straight record performance. This was attributed to a stable economy with low interest rates, cheap gas and pent-up demand.

While south of our border Americans drove off dealers' lots with 17.42 million new sets of wheels, surpassing the high set in 2000. U.S. vehicle sales also benefited from widespread credit availability and an increase in leasing and employment gains. Overall, Americans spent about \$570 billion on new vehicles.

## MEANWHILE SOUTH OF THE BORDERS

New-vehicle sales in Mexico reached historic highs in 2015. Mexico posted a sales record of 1.35 million vehicles, a 19 percent gain over 2014. The previous record, set in 2006, was 1.14 million. About half of all new cars sold in Mexico are made domestically and the rest are imported, mainly bound for Asia and North America.

Coincidentally, according to a report released in July by Reporte Indigo, more than 150,000 vehicles were stolen in Mexico last year and over 78,000 have been stolen so far in 2016. Usually this type of theft goes hand in hand with other activities carried out by criminal groups. Fairly often the stolen vehicles are used by these groups in Mexico; with the remaining vehicles shipped aboard for sale in the U.S., Central America or even Europe.

And also coincidentally



– or perhaps – not so coincidentally Jesus “Chucho” Hernandez (see Fixing Cars the “Mexican Way” – May 2014 Auto & Trucking Atlantic) has experienced a rise in the number of new vehicles coming to his shop for service. However, he is often faced a rather unique challenge that his Canadian and American counterparts probably don’t have to deal with.

Sometimes Chucho, when he needs to contact a dealership for service on a particular vehicle, is unable to use the vehicle identification number (VIN) to gain information or parts for his repair work. This has called for some creative “Mexican way repairing,” he says, “I’ve had to really work my amigo network for info and stuff.” The internet, along with You Tube has also provided much needed valuable assistance to him.

Of-course this being Mexico, he can and does buy pirated copies of new vehicle software programs.

They are readily available from other repair shops and some market stalls for a cheap price. If he gets bogged down by some of the newer terminology he explains that, “My teenage kids are usually able to understand the tech babble and can explain it to me.”

He says that he and his mechanics have spent lots of time routing around in used and junk car lots searching for parts, etc. Luckily for Chucho, every town in Mexico seems to have an overabundance of these businesses spread around. “Some of my customers,” he laughingly explains, “just want their vehicles up and running, for a cheap price and they don’t care where I get the parts.”

## KEEPING PACE WITH RISING TECHNOLOGY

As repairing newer vehicles become more Star Trekkie, some dealerships are now offering advanced training courses to auto technicians. Manufactures are producing state of the art training videos, conducting web-based classes, and sometimes even holding live training sessions at dealerships. Automotive training schools are also jumping on the band wagon by offering special skills up-grade courses.

Vehicle manufactures are working hard at designing high-tech tools that will make it easier to service their vehicles. Ford, for example, allows mechanics to access vehicle repair information over the telephone via their mainframe computer in Detroit. Using a hand-held keyboard the vehicle’s on-board computer is linked to Ford’s mainframe. The computer will then try to diagnose the vehicle’s problem and provide repair solutions.

In the near future, vehicle manufacturers are expecting to increase the memory space available to on-board computers. Their goal is to further enhance the computers’ ability to conduct its own mechanical diagnose as it searches for problems. It could then produce a detailed report of repair issues – like airplane black boxes – that would provide a road map of malfunctions.

Still, many small auto repair shops and independent mechanics are now faced with a serious quandary. Do they send customers to large auto dealers where they can get their new computer-controlled vehicles repaired? Or, do they

somehow find and spend thousands of dollars on specialized training, tools, testing equipment and online manuals? Also, will they be able to keep making enough money to continually upgrade their shops to keep pace with newer technology?

Even if they have the equipment and skill sets to repair modern vehicles; many shop owners and independent mechanics are now finding out that they may experience problems gaining access to the new service information. They’re discovering that some manufacturers don’t want to share this information and are trying to monopolize it solely for the benefit of their own dealership shops.

In fact, it has become such an issue that both the Canadian and American governments have or are launching Automotive Right to Repair legislation. The legislation stipulates that automakers must share their service and repair information with shop owners and independent mechanics on a level equivalent to that of their authorized dealers. Access must also be allowed to specialized training and repair tools through licensed suppliers at “fair and reasonable terms.”

Even some insurance companies are having issues with the cost of new technology. It has been reported that a number of companies are forcing body and repair shops – in order to be reimbursed for the parts – to use junkyard salvaged replacement parts or inferior parts that were ordered and imported from developing countries. If they or their customers want to use original manufactured parts they, the body and repair shop, will have to pay the difference to upgrade to original parts.





## AIN'T IT THE TRUTH?

Now here's the rub, despite the technological advances of smart technology in new vehicles – not to mention the additional cost for said technology – a J.D. Power 2015 Driver Interactive Vehicle Experience (DrIVE) Report found that 20% of new-vehicle owners had never used 16 out of the 33 technology features assessed in the report.

The 2015 DrIVE Report measured driver experiences with in-vehicle technology features during the first 90 days of ownership. Some of the major technology features that were never used by larger percentages of new-vehicle owners were: in-vehicle concierge (43%); mobile routers for wireless Internet connectivity (38%); automatic parking systems (35%); head-up display (33%); and built-in apps (32%).

Possible explanations for the lack of technological usage are varied; some of the technologies measured in the report may not have been turned on when new vehicles were delivered to the dealership, some new-vehicle owners said they didn't know if they had the features in their vehicles, and still other owners say that they didn't have the technology features explained to them when they took delivery.

Conversely, the technological advances that owners most often want to have available for use in their new vehicles, are ones that improve their driving experience while enhancing vehicle safety. Owners steadfastly maintain that the in-vehicle technologies that are most desirable; include vehicle health diagnostics, blind-spot warning and detection, and adaptive cruise control.

Ultimately who is kidding who, as to who is really benefiting from all this new technology? Not long ago a slight fender bender meant a quick pound or two with a hammer, or perhaps a little duct tape with a dab of paint was applied.

Or at most, a visit to the local junk yard for a replacement bumper or fender was called for. However, due to the wide proliferation of digital electronics, backup sensors, navigation systems, and on-board computers, damaged fenders, bumpers etc., must now be replaced rather than repaired.

So we should be asking ourselves, just who really is benefiting the most from all this new technology!

Finally, regardless of who is profiting the most from our ever increasing reliance on new technology, mechanics must endeavour to evolve into auto technicians or fall by the wayside. As Chucho so aptly puts it, "I have no choice. I love what I'm doing and I have to feed my family!" 🚗

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