



Automatic Transmission Rebuilders Association (ATRA)

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Changing the Fluid: It's the Customer's Gamble, Not the Shop's

It's no great surprise that a consumer might want to try a service when his or her transmission's fluid is severely burnt or varnished, or the transmission is slipping just a bit. A fluid change costs a lot less than a rebuild.

And a service might actually correct the problem, because transmission fluid does more than just lubricate and cool the transmission. It also holds the friction surfaces together, actually driving the vehicle. But as the fluid wears, a process called shear reduces the holding capacity of the fluid, so the transmission begins to slip and burns the fluid. In that case, changing the fluid might buy some time before a rebuild is necessary.

The problem is, things could go the other way. In fact, changing the fluid on an older, worn transmission can actually cause the transmission to fail. There are a few reasons this can happen:

- New fluid acts as a solvent, cleaning away built up dirt and varnish from worn valves and passages. The newly cleaned surfaces begin to leak, causing additional damage and, ultimately, transmission failure.
- This cleaning process can also displace the dirt in the transmission, and move it to a different location ... one where it's more likely to cause the transmission to fail. It can even clog the filter, preventing the transmission from moving at all.
- New fluid is usually less viscous - thinner - than the worn fluid. So the new fluid is more likely to leak past worn sealing rings and valve passages than the old fluid.

How can the technician or shop owner tell whether a transmission fluid exchange will help an older, worn transmission, or cause it to fail? He can't... no one can. It's a gamble... a crapshoot. Either the transmission will work better... or it'll fail miserably.

The important point to remember is it's the customer's gamble, not the shop's. If the customer wants to try changing the fluid to pick up a little more time out of a transmission, the customer has to accept the risk. Not the shop. Because the customer is the one who's going to reap the benefits if it works.

ATRA's position is that a fluid change is part of regular transmission maintenance. It's only useful for increasing transmission life if it's done every year - or even every other year - as part of a regular maintenance routine. Performing a fluid exchange on an older unit that's never been serviced, or as a heroic attempt to salvage a transmission that's beginning to fail, isn't something ATRA recommends.

So if a customer requests a transmission fluid exchange for the first time on a transmission with more than 75,000 miles, or one that's already showing symptoms of an imminent failure, the customer has to accept the risk; not the shop.