

Consumer Guide:

5-Things to know before getting an Auto Detail



Introduction

When having your vehicle detailed, you likely want to get the most bang for your buck. Secondly, you want to maintain the look and value of your vehicle. The best way to ensure this, is by being a smart consumer!

Quickly scan over the following tips, and you'll be able to choose the best auto detailer!

1.) Ask if they use an “Extractor” or a “Steamer”



VS.



Extractor

A “Carpet Extractor” (also sometimes called just a “shampooer”) is a device that injects very hot water into the carpet, and then tries to simultaneously vacuum it out into a tank. They’ve been used in the auto detailing industry since the early 1980’s and while they did a good job at the time, they have several shortcomings, the biggest of which is **wicking!** Because the carpets get so wet during this process, you often still have damp carpets when you pick up the vehicle. Even though they look clean when you picked up the car, as the carpets continue drying, a lot of the residual staining from deep in the fibers will “**WICK**” back up to the top. This leaves you with dingy looking carpets! Also, some service providers will try to cut time by putting cleaning agents in the hot water injection. This will leave the carpets with a “crusty” or stiff feel to them, and will attract dirt and stains faster. Very occasionally you’ll have a service provider who uses a carpet extractor effectively (uses only water, or a PH neutralizer instead of a cleaner in the injection stream, and allows carpets to dry 100%, re-cleaning them before delivering the car), but this is admittedly rare, and adds A LOT of time to the detail.

Steamer

A Steam cleaner shoots hot vapor steam at the surface it’s cleaning to not only help dislodge dirt, melt grease and dissolve stains, but it also has the added benefit of helping to disinfect the area it’s cleaning! In addition, when cleaning carpets, it also “relaxes” the carpet fibers which helps them to loosen and straighten out, making the carpet soft again. Because the hot vapor dries so quickly, there’s very little risk of wicking. The added benefit of steaming is that it can be used on most surfaces in the interior, including the headliner, visors, seats (even leather), floor mats, carpets, door panels, etc, where as the carpet extractor can only be used on the carpets and (where applicable) upholstery seats. Steam cleaners are a pretty hefty investment to make, and take some training to use properly. It’s worth the effort to ask when shopping for a detail, “Do you use steam cleaners or carpet extractors for the interior?”

2.) Why is one guy \$99 and another guy \$499 for “a detail”?!

Value

I know what we're all tired of hearing it, but the age old adage of, “You get what you pay for” applies to shopping for an auto detail as well. As with most businesses in an economy like ours, we have to know the numbers! The business owner that only charges \$99 knows how much his rent, insurance, taxes, utilities, variable costs and labor expenses all are, and he knows he needs to work within that range to make sure that \$99 covers all that. He's going to do so by buying less expensive (lower quality) chemical, likely have less trained technicians performing the work, and most of all, each car has to be OUT THE DOOR in “x” number of minutes. Likely the detail was going to consist of a tunnel car wash (causing scratches), a quick carpet extractor of the floor mats (read above), a LOT of greasy dressing on the interior panels (more on that later), and GET IT OUT THE DOOR.

And you know what? There's nothing wrong with that. Some people have 8 screaming kids hanging off of them, don't care about the ins and outs of car care, just want to get it done, and get out of there with a car that is “clean” and smells like bananas inside. There's a market for that and that's great!

Others want to really restore, protect and maintain all the different surfaces of their vehicle. They want to receive a hand-wash to minimize paint scratches, a Ph balanced paint shampoo, a clay-bar service to the finish, and to protect it with a high quality, long lasting sealant. They want the interior CLEANED rather than COVERED UP with fragrances and dressings. They want the leather to be soft and the smell to remind them of when their car was brand new. Quite simply, this all takes time and expertise. Both of those cost money. There's just no way around it. Both businesses can be very successful. Both businesses are doing it “right” for what their customer needs. It's just up to you to decide, as a shopper, what kind of experience you want. If you own a Chevy Suburban, you have ballet, soccer, and violin practice to get to this afternoon, the car is a lease that is getting turned in at the end of the year, and the “Ph balance” of a car wash soap doesn't mean anything to you, then HEY, the \$99 detail works! It's a great option! Go get it! If you a very demanding job, where the time in your car at the beginning and end of your day is the only chance to relax and unwind, you turn around to look back at it as you walk away in a parking lot, and your car is a symbol of the hard work you've performed in your life, then hey, maybe investing a little more in maintaining it will provide you with more of those great feelings.

There is no wrong answer! Simply decide what works for you :)

3.) The terrors of greasy Armor-All style interior dressings



Cleaning vs. Cover-up

Armor-All, and other interior dressings became very popular in the 80's. They often use silicones and other chemicals to add intense amounts of gloss or "sheen" to interior surfaces. There are a number of inherent problems with many of these products.

- Silicone based dressings can actually accelerate the effects of cracking and fading of interior plastics because they cause UV to be magnified and reflected back and forth within the dressing into the surface of the plastics.
- Interior dressings cause a surface to become slippery. This causes difficulty in controlling the car when it's on the seat surfaces. When you touch door panels, dashboards, or center consoles that are dressed, you transfer that to the steering wheel, which can become slippery and dangerous as well.
- Interior dressings also are a MAGNET for dust and dirt. Drive with the window down and your interior will have dirt stuck to EVERY surface with a dressing on it.
- Silicone based dressings are incredibly hard to remove. Removing a silicon based dressing can become nearly impossible and we charge significantly more during a detail if extensive dressing removal needs to be done.
- And the biggest pet peeve with silicone dressings? They COVER UP dirt and staining on interior surfaces rather than cleaning them from the surface itself. Some "detailers" will do this because dressing an entire dash, door panel and center console takes dramatically less time than actually evaluating the source of dirt and staining, determining what combination of chemical and agitation is best for that particular stain and the surface it is on, test that combination, and the execute it across the rest of the panel.

*Cavet: Some customers prefer the look of dressing on their interior plastics. Also, there are some older cars with faded interior surfaces that would benefit from a dressing. For this, there are high quality water-based products (i.e. 303 Aerospace protectant) that add a ton of UV protectant with minimal "sheen" of greasy look

4.) Tell your detailer what “bugs you” about your car, not just what “service” you want



“Huh? What are you talking about? I’m just here cause I want a detail!” The problem stems with that word “detail” (and so many other words in this industry). There is no standard definition for it. A “detail” to one person may mean vacuuming the carpets and wiping down the dash, but a “detail” to another person means an 8-hour service where trained technicians use an arsenal of tools and techniques to make the vehicle look and feel as new as possible. The same goes for all kinds of terms such as when someone says they want their car “buffed”. Does “buffed” mean a light polish, an extensive paint correction, a wet-sanding service? Instead, mention things that really bother you about your car, and that will help a trained detail service to determine what best fits your needs.

For example:

“Hey! I just bought a used car, and I want to REALLY clean the interior so that it feels new to me, and doesn't have someone else’s mess in it, what do you recommend?”

Perfect! I know that a FULL Interior deep reconditioning detail is going to be just the ticket for this customer. It’s going to kill any germs floating around (via steam cleaning) and make it feel as new and fresh as possible for them.

“Hey! You did a FULL Detail on my car a few months ago, and it looked AWESOME! I just got done with a 2-week road trip with the kids to see the grandparents, what would you recommend to get it looking great again?”

In this case, I know the car started out clean, and the Cheetos and Goldfish crackers have only had a week or two to be beaten into the carpets. An Express in/out detail will be a great option. It’ll save the customer some money, but still be intensive enough to get all the bugs off the car, the snacks out of the nooks and crannies, and get it back into pre-road trip condition.

“Hey, I have a black car. I notice when I look at it in the sunlight I have all these spider-web like scratches or swirl marks in the paint. Is that something you can fix?”

This is a great example where a “detail” isn’t going to address this customer’s issue. Instead they need a ‘Paint Correction Service’ to level the clear coat and eliminate the paint defects they’re seeing. If they just said they needed a “Full Detail”, a lot of time would have been spent cleaning the interior and “cleaning and protecting” the exterior, without addressing the original issue of leveling the clear coat through Paint Correction to address what really bothers them most about their car.

5.) Ask around!

Customer reviews and referrals from friends

Remember what we talked about above when we mentioned the \$99 vs. \$499 detail? How they’re both fine options and how you can be a customer for either? Well guess what, if the \$99 shop is doing a \$499 job, then it (unfortunately) won’t be in business long, and if the \$499 shop is doing a \$99 job ...YOU’LL KNOW THROUGH REVIEWS.

See what people are saying about a particular shop online. Detailing is harder than it looks, and making every customer happy is EVEN MORE challenging. Because of the variety of expectations for the same word “detail” (as discussed above), and the different combinations of vehicle types, surfaces, and stains, making customers happy consistently is TOUGH. And if a shop is doing a good job of it, you’ll see that reflected in the online reviews. That being said, you’re never going to make everyone happy. Whenever I shop for any service, a small handful of outlier 1-stars for 50 other 5-stars is nothing to worry about. A mix of 2, 3 and some 4 stars is a red flag. Check online reviews from different sites such as Google, Yelp and Square. This will give you a keen idea of what type of experience that shop provides.

Additionally, ask your car friends! Have a buddy who is at every car show? Ask him! Can’t think of anyone? Ask for car-people in your network on Facebook! The same way a foodie will know the best little-known places to get a great meal in town, there’s a good chance your car nerd friends have vetted who is a trustworthy service provider for your detail needs as well.

And as a closing thought to the statement above, (bonus round!)

6.) When you do find someone you like, BUILD A RELATIONSHIP with that service provider.

As a detail shop ourselves, we know that when we see a customer a couple of times, we can tailor our service specifically to them. We know that Mr. Hanson takes his Corvette to Cars & Coffee every Saturday morning, so while he booked a quick Wash/Vac/Wipe, I find I have a few extra minutes so I'm going to give him a complimentary express wax across the paint. I know he comes in a lot, and more so, I know he is going to be wow'd and really appreciate it.

We know that Ms. Myers is a crazy busy real estate executive. She's always in a rush. She's always on the phone when she's dropping off her car, she's always whisking away in the courtesy car to another appointment. Even though she dropped it off for a quick Wash/Vac/Wipe, we notice a coffee spill in the back seat! It wasn't there last week, so we know it's fresh! It must have been one of her clients, she probably doesn't even know it's there! We know Ms. Myers is a great customer, so let's whip out the steamer really quick and see if we can get some of that out before it has more time to set it. Are we going to call her and ask if we're authorized to upgrade her interior package to cover the time for the stain removal? No. She's a great customer, it will mean a lot to her, we all win.

Building a relationship with your service provider (when you find one you like) is a mutually beneficial relationship. I recommend it in any industry, not just detailing!

Have any other questions? Let us know! That's what we're here for!



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