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How Long Should It Take to Detail a Car?

Published in "DealerMarketing Magazine"

A question that I'm often asked is; how long should it take to properly detail a car?" Remember, all vehicles differ in size, color combination, and overall cleanliness. To cosmetically restore a car to showroom "new" condition, the time may vary widely from car to car.

Mechanical Labor vs. Detailing Labor

In the service department there are set times for every labor operation for a particular make and model of vehicle. A brake job will pay (X) hours, a tune up will pay (X) hours, and so forth. In detailing, there are too many variables to lock into one set time. However, many dealers place a set labor figure on detailing a car. To add to the problem, some used car managers do not want to pay a dollar more for a detail than what the set time allows. They know that any added cost associated with one of their cars, will lower the gross. There should be a baseline time, but it should also be flexible depending on what the car needs and its overall condition.

Worry more about quality

If the goal is to produce flawless looking used vehicles that will yield higher grosses, forget the time for now. Focus on quality and what each car will need as part of its detail.

Completing the tasks may vary in time due to the condition of the car. Almost any detailer knows shortcuts to get a car done in a certain time frame. The problem is that his shortcuts are hurting your profits! Rushing on any job will mean the overall quality will be compromised. Is he rushing to meet an unfair labor time? Is he rushing because he is on flat rate and just wants to pad his hours? Or, is he over the time because the car is just in such poor condition? I also get calls about detailers not rushing at all. Some take all day to complete a single car. All of these scenarios cause problems, proving that time is a key element in getting a flawless detail from your detailers.

An average time?

Before I mention any labor times, I must stress that each situation is different. Depending on what is being performed on the vehicle, it may vary by an hour or more. A skilled detailer, who is working hard but not rushing, can probably complete a car in about 4 to 4.5 hours and make it look great. This average car would be only a few years old, be a mid-size, and be in average cosmetic condition with no major scratches or blemishes, and no major stains or excessive dirt on the interior.

Add time for higher gross?

Asking a detailer to fully complete a vehicle in less than 3 hours is a rush job. It can be done, but probably not very well. Again, the goal is to have flawless vehicles on your front line that can be sold quickly and for as much money as possible. If you demand flawless looking vehicles, give the detailer more time—if the car warrants it. If a detailer is skilled, but needs more time for more labor intensive operations such as wet-sanding a scratch, give it to him!

This will save you money. Any time a detailer can keep a car out of the paint shop or prevent expensive parts from being replaced, he is both saving you money and making you money at the same time.

Labor rates

Let's say your detail department labor rate is \$40 per hour internally. Is it worth adding another hour or two on a difficult car to bring it back to new? The added \$80 cost for a difficult detail job could potentially result in an added gross of hundreds more. Think outside the box on this one. Let a skilled detailer perform his job to perfection each and every time. Don't make him rush because he is running out of time!

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