

Interior car care during troubled times

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Industries throughout America are concerned about whether the current problems on Wall Street will impact their own bottom lines. Because car detailing is often viewed as a luxury service rather than a necessity, professional automobile detailers may be especially hard hit by financial downturns. During difficult periods such as the one we are currently experiencing, customers may delay the purchasing of luxury services until the outlook becomes more stable.

However, as logical as this seems, not all detailers share this pessimistic view. Some detailers actually report that they expect business to *improve* in the coming months, even if things may be slow for the short term. Why? “When people feel they have to hold on to their cars longer, they tend to take better care of them,” says Stephen Romero, Head of the Professional Car Care Products Line at U.S. Products, manufacturers of professional carpet, floor and restoration cleaning equipment. “This includes not only the way a car runs, but the way it looks.”

Only time can tell whether the nation’s current economic woes will harm professional auto detailers; the fate of individual businesses may depend on a variety of factors, including reputation, marketing, location and even luck. “Either way, if people hold on to their cars longer, they still want to be proud of them,” adds Romero. “And this may be more important on the inside [of the car] than the outside.”

Of course, there are some customers who simply will not be impacted by a downturn or who believe their cars are so valuable that they consider detailing to be a necessity rather than a luxury. “It makes no sense to spend \$150,000 or \$250,000 on a car if you're not going to take care of it,” said Mark Landoli, executive director of the Larz Anderson Auto Museum in Brookline, MA. “It’s like buying an expensive suit or watch; you want to [take care of it] and make sure it lasts.”

Pride Starts Inside

Auto detailers strive to put a “showroom finish” on the exteriors of their customer’s vehicles, and indeed, exterior detailing is extremely important. But generally, the outside of a car only gets a passing glance. It’s the inside of the vehicle, where the driver spends the majority of his or her time that really instills pride of ownership — if the car is clean and well maintained.

Car interiors experience all kinds of abuse, regardless of how well the owner maintains the vehicle. Dust, dirt, moisture, mud, oil, pet dander, food and a whole range of pollutants are spilled on car upholstery and carpet. Even if a customer may want to delay detailing a vehicle due to concerns about the economy, pollutants may build up to the point where something has to be done. After all, a dirty car interior isn’t just an issue of pride: a soiled interior can breed all kinds of contaminants, making it a health issue as well.

Easy Cleaning

Leather and vinyl interiors can actually be the easiest surfaces to maintain in an automobile. A variety of products are now available that do an excellent job of cleaning and polishing leather and vinyl; rubbing compounds, which can remove minor scratches, dings, stains and more, are also available in a variety of formulas. There are even products that can help restore heavily worn leather and vinyl, or improve its appearance significantly. It is important to note, however, that leather upholstery inside vintage automobiles often needs to be “fed” linseed oil and saddle soap in order to keep it supple.

Quality upholstery cleaner products can be used to clean and remove stains and soils from interior automobile fabrics. Because most car owners have floor mats installed, interior carpeting stays cleaner, longer, than other interior automobile fabrics. Although the mats may need to be cleaned with shampoo or an extractor, many times, just a thorough vacuuming will do the job of cleaning a car’s carpets without the use of additional cleaners.

Restoration Detailing

Due to excessive use or delayed maintenance, some cars may need a much more thorough cleaning, especially when it comes to their carpets. This type of car cleaning is often referred to as restoration detailing.

Romero suggests that auto detailers should clean an automobile’s carpets the same way carpet cleaning technicians clean carpets in homes and offices. “A professional extractor is necessary, and it should be a low-moisture, hot water machine,” he explains. “The heat improves the effectiveness of the cleaning chemicals so carpets come out cleaner, and a low-moisture machine uses less

water, so carpets dry faster. Also, machines with variable psi allow the detailer to use more pressure to deep clean certain areas and less pressure for more delicate fabrics.”

Romero also says that detailers should pre-spray carpets with cleaning agents and not necessarily mix chemicals and water in the extractor’s tank. That way less chemical is used, which results in less wear and tear on the extractor, saves money, and is often healthier for the car owner and the environment.

Restoration detailing usually also involves eradicating odors from a car’s interior. This is because many of the soils and contaminants that find their way into car interiors contain bacteria. As these bacteria increase in number, odors develop that can be difficult to remove if the proper tools and equipment are not used.

“Odors can be a bigger problem [than carpet cleaning],” says Romero. “Eradicating odors from a car interior is a bit like hide and seek. You first have to find it [the source of the problem] to get rid of it. Some detailers may try to mask the odor with interior fragrances. This will only work for so long. Within a month or so, the odor will return, and so will an unhappy customer.”

Often a car’s owner will know where “Rover” had an “accident” in the car or where something was spilled that is now causing an odor. If the source of the odor can not be detected by sniffing, it may be necessary to use a black light to detect it. Black and ultraviolet lights are especially effective at locating urine.

“Once the odor source is detected, the area must be thoroughly cleaned with an extractor, using effective cleaning agents,” says Romero. “In some cases an antibacterial solution may need to be applied to the carpet in order to eliminate the odor.”

Although this procedure will help, some odors may still linger in the car. This is because they may have been absorbed into other areas of the car’s interior. In this case, the most effective, quickest and most dependable way to eliminate the odor is through the use of ozone equipment.

Electronic ozone machines have been used for years in restoration cleaning after floods, fires and similar disasters. In homes, hotels and offices, ozone is often used to eliminate odors caused by sources including smoke, tobacco, etc. However, until the introduction of ozone kits specially made for use in

automobile cleaning, such machines were rarely used by auto detailers.

According to Romero, ozone kits are now available that are specifically designed for use in cars. Using the kit, the generator is placed on top of the car. This is important because ozone is heavier than oxygen and this allows the ozone to reach all areas of the vehicles interior, from top to bottom. A hose extends from the generator through the car's window. A foam block seals the window area. Usually the procedure requires only about 20 to 30 minutes to permanently eliminate all odors from the vehicle. "Ozone is perfectly safe and a tried-and-true odor-eliminating system," says Romero. "The most important thing is to use the machine as instructed and to never be in the car while it is being used."

Service Can Lead to Success

Since evolving in the 1970s, auto detailing has established itself as a strong and growing industry. And just like all industries, it may or may not be impacted by economic downturns. However, according to Romero, "The strong will survive, and typically those are the ones that give their customers the best of service using the most advanced tools and equipment." The use of innovative, state of the art technology such as ozone generators is essential to providing customers with the level of service that they expect -- something that is definitely a must for auto detailing businesses trying to survive during tough financial times.

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