

Today's Auto Repair

with Chip Stewart

-Who's at fault?-

Don't rely solely on the Better Business Bureau or other consumer agencies to find out if a shop is honest (or qualified). The only information you'll receive is how many unsettled complaints they have on the shop in question. A dishonest shop owner knows that if he gets caught cheating, he had better make a settlement immediately if he wants to continue cheating. Sound a little strange? Let me explain.

Ninety-nine percent of the people who get cheated aren't even aware of it. The smart cheater knows that. He knows that the percentages are in his favor. If he's caught, he'll return the money or settle the complaint immediately; therefore, no unsettled complaint on file. Let's carry it a step further. Ninety-nine percent of the people who think they got cheated, really didn't. There is a big difference between fraud and incompetence. If you look it up in your dictionary, you'll find 'fraud' is *willfully cheating or deceiving others* while

'incompetent' is *lacking in ability or skills*. Totally different, right? But, not to most consumers. They're aware of only one thing - they didn't get what they paid for. I can assure you that very few garages are actually fraudulent, and willfully cheat or deceive. Incompetent? Well, I'll admit there are some in the automotive field lacking in knowledge and skills as there are in all fields. Sometimes, when the consumer doesn't get what he paid for, or rather, *thinks* he didn't get what he paid for, it's actually the consumer's fault.

Trying to buy auto repair over the telephone is a good example. You can end up buying something you don't need. No one can diagnose a problem on the telephone. Let's look at a typical shop and a typical customer with a typical telephone call:

A customer hears an exhaust noise and calls a muffler shop and asks, "How much to install a new muffler on my 1992 Ford?" The shop owner says, "\$136." Customer: "When can you do it?" The owner says, "At two this afternoon." So, at 2 o'clock the customer drives into the muffler shop. The customer says, "Hi, I called about the muffler for the '92 Ford." The owner says, "Okay, we'll get it right in." The owner calls one of his mechanics. "Hey, Charlie, put a new muffler on this '92 Ford next." Charlie gets the car in the air and the exhaust pipe has pulled out of the muffler (that's where all the noise was coming from). Charlie disconnects the other end and puts a new muffler on. There may not be a thing wrong with the old one, but you bought a new one. The shop owner didn't *sell* you a new one, you *bought* a new one. You told him what you wanted and that was *your* mistake. Had that same customer *driven* into that shop and said, "I have an exhaust noise - will you check it out and tell me how much it will cost to fix it?", a totally different transaction would have occurred. The owner would have said, "Hey, Charlie, get this '92 Ford on the hoist and see what needs to be done to correct that exhaust noise." Charlie would have put it on the lift, checked it, gone to the shop owner and said, "The exhaust pipe is pulled out of the muffler." Owner says, "What will it take to fix it?" Charlie says, "I can weld it or just put on a new clamp." See the difference? If the owner had said you needed a new muffler, that would have been fraud. But that owner will sell

you anything you want to buy, and he cannot be accused of cheating you. Have you ever gone into an appliance store and stated that you wanted to buy a new TV or refrigerator and have the salesman say, "What's wrong with your old one?" I never have. Auto repair shops are no different. If you want to buy a transmission, they'll sell you one. If you want to buy a tune-up, they'll sell you one. I recommend that you give the responsibility of diagnosing your problem to the repair facility and if you don't think they diagnosed it right, get a second opinion.

Personally, I think that the facility should discuss any and all repair options with the consumer no matter what. That way, the consumer becomes educated, the vehicle gets repaired right the first time, and fraud, incompetence, and fault become non issues.