

Why the Service Information Agreement Is Good for Independent Shops, Consumers



Mark Saxonberg

Automakers are committed to customer satisfaction and a positive ownership experience for our customers. We understand that more than 50 percent of our out-of-warranty customers frequent independent repair facilities. We believe it is important that independent technicians have the information and tools necessary to

repair increasingly complex systems on today's vehicles. We want satisfied customers who come back to our dealer showrooms and we know this won't happen if independents can't repair our vehicles or give them a bad rap. To varying degrees, this is true for every automaker.

So what guarantee is there that the less committed car companies won't renege on the commitment made to ASA and the independent repair community? The answer lies in the politics of the Motor Vehicle Owners' Right to Repair Act, H.R. 2735. The Automotive Service Association (ASA) has placed the interests of the independent shop owner ahead of the political interests driving H.R. 2735; the independent repair community can only win.

H.R. 2735 is parts information legislation masquerading behind a service information facade. Although there has been lots of rhetoric to the contrary, automakers have always made most service information and diagnostic tools available to independent repairers. Granted, in the past there have been some exceptions and automakers haven't gone out of their way to publicize where to find these resources. This is where California Air Resources Board (CARB) and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) service information rules, the National Automotive Service Task Force (NASTF) and ASA's Agreement have converged for the common good of consumers and our industry.

CARB and the EPA provided the framework for service information delivery via the Internet. NASTF provided the framework for mutual cooperation on the service, training and scan tool information that CARB and EPA had no jurisdiction over. The ensuing Agreement among ASA, the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers (Alliance) and the Association of International Automobile Manufacturers (AIAM) provided the independent repair community with the same emission and non-emission-related diagnostic tools, service and training information that is made

available to franchised dealerships — at a reasonable price consistent with the guidelines provided in CARB regulations. This means that on an "as needed basis," any independent shop has access to the entire service support libraries of every OEM franchised dealer; in most cases, for \$20 or less per repair. And if you are a frequent user, you can subscribe by the month or the full year. Between conventional third-party service information, the OEM Web sites and associated training and diagnostic resources, independent shops now have access to everything needed to support our mutual customers.

It is in automakers' best interests to work cooperatively with ASA and other repair industry trade associations to provide you with the tools and information you need. ASA leadership had the wisdom and foresight to see that cooperation with automakers could help you gain everything you have been seeking. And, they managed to get it now — not years from now, assuming a parts and service information compromise bill ever comes to pass.

By bringing automakers to the negotiating table, ASA gained a willing partner. We now have a strong incentive to negotiate in good faith so that independent repairers have ready access to increasingly complex resources necessary to support an increasingly complex automotive fleet. From a repair industry perspective, there is little more to gain from legislation. The parts industry, on the other hand, has much to gain. Legislation will put automakers on the defensive for parts design information that automakers spend collective billions of dollars engineering and certifying. Should big parts money get its way, they gain a competitive advantage in parts design. Automakers, legislatively bound to provide the same repair information we already provide under our current ASA agreement, will have greater incentive to turn resources toward defending parts information. Sadly for the independent shop, we will have less incentive and fewer resources to continue the cooperative process that has already gained the independent repair community far more than any regulation could ever prescribe. ■

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