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Highlights: Auto Repair

Even the most reliable ride needs to go to the shop at some point and, whether it's for routine maintenance or a larger repair, the key to saving money and avoiding hassle is to choose a good shop.

Puget Sound Consumers' CHECKBOOK magazine and www.checkbook.org have evaluated 429 local repair shops, based on more than 13,000 consumer reviews, the results of 1,500 undercover price checks, complaint counts, and other price and quality indicators.

Key findings from the report in CHECKBOOK's include:

- The Puget Sound area is home to many top quality auto repair shops. In fact, 80 of the 429 shops evaluated were rated "superior" overall by 95 percent or more of their surveyed customers.
- But there are plenty of shops that left consumers wishing they'd steered in a different direction: 88 of the shops CHECKBOOK evaluated got such favorable ratings from only 60 percent or fewer of their surveyed customers.
- CHECKBOOK found a rather surprising relationship between the prices shops charge and the quality of their work. Based on the price data researchers gathered, CHECKBOOK actually found a *negative* relationship between the price index scores and the measures of quality. In other words, the surveyed subscribers were more satisfied with the overall quality provided by the cheaper repair shops. For example, shops with price index scores of less than \$87 were rated "superior" for "doing work properly on the first try" by 85 percent of their surveyed customers, while shops with price index scores above \$113 got such favorable ratings from only 65 percent of their surveyed customers.
- Shops operated by non-dealers are more likely to satisfy customers than new-car-dealer shops. For "overall performance," non-dealers were rated "superior" on average by 82 percent of their surveyed customers while dealers received such favorable ratings from only 62 percent of their surveyed customers.
- Prices at non-dealer shops average about 12 percent lower than those at dealer-run shops.

CHECKBOOK also uncovered dramatic cost differences. For example:

- To replace the front wheel brake pads and rotors on a 2004 Ford Taurus SE, prices ranged from \$250 to \$600, with an average price of \$412.
- To replace right front axle assembly on a 2006 Honda CR-V, prices ranged from \$213 to \$1,040, with an average price of \$723.
- To replace the water pump and timing belt on a 2004 Toyota Camry XLE, prices ranged from \$454 to \$829, with an average price of \$636.

- Hourly labor rates ranged from \$59 per hour to \$154 per hour.

CHECKBOOK recommends consumers do the following to help improve auto repair results:

- Write down a detailed description of the car's symptoms, give a copy to the shop, and keep a copy.
- If possible, talk directly to the repair technician who will be working on the car.
- Either get a written estimate in advance or write on the repair ticket that no work is to be done without the customer's approval based on a written estimate. Be sure a list of symptoms is attached to the estimate and referred to in the estimate.
- Before paying, request an invoice detailing the parts and labor the shop has provided.
- Pay by credit card.
- If the car is still not right after it is picked up, notify the shop in writing immediately.

The media may cite selected examples of top-rated auto repair shops, as shown in the new issue of Puget Sound Consumers' CHECKBOOK, and CHECKBOOK's editors are available for interviews. Please call Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 to schedule.

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