

# Sales, Training And Servicing Gear Boxes

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Contributing Editor



Transmission repair in the '90s has reached new levels of complexity. The technical challenges are many and the variety of designs seems never ending. For guys like me who are old enough to remember World War II, the fabulous fifties and gas at 17 cents a gallon, the world certainly is a different place. Our customers are paying prices for transmission repair that we used to pay for new cars, and new cars cost what we used to pay for houses. This market can be very profitable for shops that are highly trained, properly equipped and well managed. These times are and will continue to be fatal to those shops that are behind on education and that are trying to do business as they did in 1975. All across the country shops are folding up under the pressures of today's reality. For a variety of reasons new people are not entering this field as a career choice.

The first step in solving a problem is to identify the problem. We just discussed what's wrong and now we have to look for solutions. Obviously with the dilemma of many parts, the small space allotted here won't be enough for a thorough discussion, but we will address the main causes.

When law enforcement wants to get to the bottom of something fishy like Whitewater, they "fol-

low the money." The first order of business for any shop is to charge the right prices. When you price a job correctly, giving the shop the right margin of profit, the puzzle starts to come together. The largest single cause of failure in shops today is the inability to price their work profitably. Low or no margin of profit creates the following problems:

1. The shop is unable to use quality parts in repair.
2. The shop cannot afford to provide adequate and honorable warranty support to its customers if it doesn't make money on the original job.
3. The shop cannot afford to hire and offer a secure future to the best technicians available.
4. The shop cannot invest in the training of shop personnel and the constant ongoing need for service manuals, seminars and tools needed to produce quality repair work in a constantly changing market.
5. Unable to generate enough money to pay operating expenses and have a decent standard of living for the time invested and the risks inherent in ownership, the shop owner becomes so distracted trying to make ends meet that any form of management, planning and future growth is lost.

## The Answer Is Education

Training should involve every employee and should be ongoing.

The shop owner should make an investment in himself and attend every management course he can take. We all are pretty good mechanics who have a lot to learn about managing a business profitably.

ALL personnel should attend every possible technical seminar, have access to training manuals on new units and have access to specifications on all units that the shops will see. Now why on earth would we train everybody? Isn't the rebuilder the only guy who has to be up on things? You decide after the following example.

## Case In Point

A customer arrives at a shop with a 1992 Chevy Lumina equipped with a 3.4L engine and 5-speed Getrag 284 transaxle. The salesperson (front man) discusses the customer's problem. The owner complains that his clutch is slipping and there is a noise in the transmission. The car is road tested, the complaint is verified and the talk turns to the cost of repairs. We know that the salesperson cannot quote a price for repairs accurately without an internal inspection of the transmission, but the customer needs a "ballpark" price before he will commit to having the transmission inspected. The salesperson prepares an estimate for parts and labor to replace the clutch assem-

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bly, resurface the flywheel and labor to repair the transaxle. Parts prices will be provided when the unit is opened up for inspection. The customer authorizes the internal inspection and leaves the vehicle. The unit is removed and torn down. The rebuilder tells the salesperson that it needs new bearings but the geartrain is okay. The salesperson now begins to prepare an estimate. As he looks in the parts and labor guide, a strange thing happens. He discovers that, for whatever brilliant reason, GM does NOT support this unit with any internal parts. A call to the local Chevy dealer reveals that the only thing you can buy for this unit is a factory-exchange replacement unit with a list price of \$2,495. What do you think this little bit of news does to the "ball-park" figure the customer has in mind? A clutch job and a simple bearing replacement now have a price tag of more than \$3,500 (and I'm sure that the customer is going to run right out and buy another GM product after this experience). Proper training and information for the sales personnel help to avoid these types of problems.

After a traumatic session with the customer, the salesperson succeeds in closing the sale for an exchange unit and new clutch. The unit arrives, and the installer proceeds to bolt up the new clutch components but can't figure out how to get the release bearing into the fingers of the pressure plate and onto the clutch fork. The shop has no service manuals for this vehicle. After 20 phone calls and three hours of wasted time, it is discovered that this unit has a pull-type clutch and that the release bearing is installed on the clutch fork, the unit bolted to the block and the first actuation of the

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clutch fork will seat the release bearing permanently in the pressure plate. The installation is complete, and the unit is filled with gear lube and test driven. The factory-exchange unit does not shift properly. It hangs up on the upshift and balks or grinds on downshifts. More phone calls and time wasted deciding whether to pull and return the unit until a call to a gear company's tech hotline reveals that the 284 transaxle is spec'd to run on GM Synchronesh fluid. The oil is changed and the job leaves the shop. Because the lack of training for the installation technicians has created so much wasted time, there is no chance of seeing a profit on labor for this repair.

That story is true in all details. It really happened. Scenes like this are being repeated throughout the country every day. Men who wouldn't try to put together a Christmas toy without an instruction sheet are attempting to repair the most-complex technology without any reference material. If it were against the law to put junkyard units in vehicles, a lot of transmission shops would go out of business tomorrow. Every job in a transmission shop from sales

people to installer requires a high degree of knowledge and training. There are no unimportant employees in your shop. Ignorance and mistakes are too expensive in today's pressure cooker marketplace. The investment you make in training for management and repair skills not only is necessary to improve your business but also is the only way for your business to survive. The only thing slightly more important to your well-being than training is oxygen. **TD**

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