

Thinking About Sending One of Your People to PDR School?

By Garrett Griffith

I recently spoke with the fixed operations manager at a high-line dealership who shared with me the ugly results of sending one of his technicians to a school to learn how to do Paintless Dent Removal (PDR). PDR is a popular repair technique that removes dents and dings without sanding, filling, painting or using traditional auto body repair techniques. Working from behind the panel, trained technicians use specially designed tools to massage the metal back to its original shape.

You can probably understand this particular fixed operations manager's temptation: PDR can bring in loads of incremental, profitable income to the dealership's fixed ops department; it can increase customer value and retention; and help improve the dealership's CSI. So, he reasoned, if one can achieve those results with outsourced PDR, surely then training and using one of his own technicians to do PDR will provide the same results at a reduced cost.

Sadly, it didn't work out that way. After graduating from a three-week PDR training program, the rookie in-house PDR tech did more damage to the first three high-line cars he worked on than how they came to him originally. On one car he failed to access the door dent properly, which resulted in additional dents around the target dent. On another he pushed too hard on the dent and



cracked the paint. And the third resulted in screwdriver-like push marks (dents) forced on the quarter panel. Wisely, the fixed operations manager had him work only on dealership-owned cars and not on customer vehicles. (Imagine those phone calls!)

Dispelling the myths

In my 20 years in the auto body reconditioning business, I've regularly heard untruths about PDR from those who don't understand the art and science. These myths have misled many fixed operations managers into believing that training their own PDR technician is a

good business decision. Allow me to dispel some of the more common myths.

Myth #1: "PDR is all in the tools and training is just a matter of reading the book or watching a video." Actually, from my experience, the opposite is true. Quality, thorough training is the key to making a good PDR tech. At my company, for example, students go through a rigorous 2-month program, at our training center where they will have classroom and hands-on training. Upon graduation, they're placed into service routes under the watchful eye of a senior technician.

It's usually about six months in that arrangement before we can confidently let a new technician work solo.

Myth #2: "The right temperature of the metal surface will make it easier to repair." I've heard people talk about applying dry ice or using a propane torch or even a heat gun to remove the dent or make it easier to push out. This won't work. The only thing it will do is greatly increase the chances of damaging the paint surface. The only exception is when performing PDR in extreme cold temperatures, in which case carefully warming the metal will make it more malleable, thus allowing the tech to follow normal PDR procedures.

Myth #3: "There are better mousetraps." These days even the famous, bearded TV pitchman is peddling suction cup mechanisms for removing dents. Don't be fooled. One of our tech teams recently experimented with such a device and while it removed some of the dent, it also removed some of the paint. Other experiments resulted in additional damage to the surface surrounding the dent.

Myth #4: "Sheet metal is sheet metal, regardless of make and model." Quickie dent tech schools are famous for graduating technicians who have been trained only on a few different model and brand types, or even worse, on car doors or hoods that have been unhinged from the car and placed onto saw horses. This is hardly the level of training you want them to have prior to unleashing them on your customers' cars or dealership's inventory. Look for a company that has access to manufacturers' schematics. Some PDR companies and independent technicians also have schematics. Such intimate knowledge of their bracing and access holes is one of the keys to performing high-quality PDR repairs. Minus schematics, a PDR technician may not discover the proper access to the dent, or worse yet, may damage or disable something vital, such as a side airbag. If your technician damages an air

bag and the airbag fails to deploy properly during an accident, the consequences can be disastrous.

Holster that drill, partner!

Some PDR tech schools approve the use of drills to make access holes. This is not a good practice. By drilling a single hole in a vehicle's frame, you change its integral structure. This is particularly true with high-line and luxury vehicles, where manufacturer tolerances are within microns. Furthermore, if an access hole is drilled in steel, it is likely to rust.

As covered earlier in Myth #4, manufacturer schematics are important for learning about existing access holes. Larger PDR companies also use intranets and cell phone dispatching to provide their technicians with the latest manufacturer updates, access points and shared vehicle knowledge on practically all vehicle makes and models.

Making an outsourced PDR program work for you

Today's challenging market for dealerships means that outsourcing PDR makes more sense. With the ups and downs of workload, you'll be staffed properly, resulting in an improved bottom line.

Assuming you recognize the tremendous profit opportunity that comes with a well-run PDR program, and assuming I've convinced you that training your own PDR technician is not in the best interest of you and your dealership, let's look at the best practices for outsourcing PDR:

- Appoint a champion. You'll need someone on your staff – maybe it's you – to spot opportunities. A PDR service drive program can provide you with a chance to up-sell ding and dent repairs on your customers' vehicles while they're in for service. But it requires attention, vigilance and the

proper resources for it to be successful. The champion may also serve as your liaison with the chosen PDR service provider.

- Research local PDR service providers and interview their representatives. Questions you should ask include:
 - Do they have liability insurance?
 - Do they provide a warranty on their work/repairs?
 - For whom in the area are they working now?
 - How much experience do they have repairing dings and dents on your particular manufacturer models?
 - What is their drilling policy?
 - What is their back-up procedure if their regular PDR technician is unavailable?
 - Can they explain and show examples of their invoices?
- Do they have a tracking and reporting system – one that allows you to track the monthly profits generated by your PDR program?

Attending automotive business trade shows across the country, I'm regularly approached by dealership representatives – fixed operation managers, parts and service directors, service directors, service managers and GMs – asking if we offer PDR training programs to train the dealership's personnel and what the costs are. Simply put, no we don't, and we can't put a price on training. It's not what a prospective technician learns in school so much as it is the ongoing support required to ensure they'll be successful in their practice.

There is no cheap shortcut for implementing a quality PDR program at a dealership. But, properly implemented with a proven outside service provider, you can put your PDR profits at the head of the class.



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